

A NEW WORKING CLASS

Students for a Democratic Society and
the United Auto Workers in the Sixties

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A NEW WORKING CLASS:
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the United Auto Workers in the Sixties

by

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INTRODUCTION

STUDENTS, MIDDLE AMERICANS, AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

In the summer of 1962, members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) met at the United Auto Workers (UAW) campground in Port Huron, Michigan to discuss a provocative document drafted by SDS leader Tom Hayden.¹ The ensuing, intense debate produced *The Port Huron Statement*, a “living document” which served as the organization’s manifesto and an “agenda for a generation.” The manuscript expressed the students’ anxiety about growing up in the midst of the Cold War and their indignation towards the hypocrisy of discrimination in the United States. Though *The Port Huron Statement* presented an ambiguous ideal of “participatory democracy,” its critique of the labor movement is direct and decisive. The students labeled the labor movement “too quiescent” and “indifferent.”² They accused organized labor of being self-interested, its traditional radicalism sacrificed to institutionalization. The critique accused labor leaders of “elitism,” and claimed “rank-and-

¹ The terms used to examine this topic—SDS, New Left, student movement, labor, UAW, working class, middle class—are contestable. SDS refers to that specific organization, and UAW is also used specifically. New Left and student movement refer to the general leftist campus rebellion of the 1960s (which included the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the South, the Northern Student Movement (NSM), and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, among others) and are used when applicable beyond SDS specifically. Similarly, labor unions/the labor movement is used when referring to trends that extend beyond the UAW in particular. Note that “labor” refers to organized labor. Working class and middle class are perhaps the most complicated terms within this list, and are used to extend beyond unions or students, respectively, in particular. These terms can be a point of contention, and their use will be as purposeful as possible.

² Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), cited indicates appendix of James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 343-344.

file apathy to the tradition of unionism” that produced an institutionalized and thus compromised organization, the victim of “accommodation and limited effectiveness.”³

SDS represented one of the most influential organizations of the larger New Left movement, the loosely defined title for the progressive student movement or rebellion of the 1960s. Historians and cultural memory frequently reduce the general relationship between organized labor and the New Left to certain individual moments of the decade.⁴ As SDS member Todd Gitlin observed when his student equated SDS and the Weathermen: “the passing of time shrouds the ‘60s; the end is confounded with the beginning, the consequences with the causes; the all-important sequence of events is obscured. Our collective memory, such as it is, rests on a few disjointed images snatched out of order.”⁵ Events such as the violence accompanying the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the New York City Hard Hat Riots of May 1970 are often cited as exemplars of the tension between students and workers. On May 8, 1970, construction workers attacked a group of students peacefully demonstrating in response to the fatal shooting of four students at Kent State University in Ohio. The “hard hats” marched to Wall Street, where they beat the demonstrators and forced the flag at city hall returned to full-mast—it had been flying at half-mast for a day of reflection in honor of the murdered students. The worker attack was pre-meditated, and was reported to police ahead of time.⁶ Multiple histories of SDS and the

³ SDS, *The Port Huron Statement*, 373.

⁴ Historian Bruce Schulman studied the way that the New Left and the counterculture are taught in American classrooms. He found that, “the New Left and the counterculture ‘receive almost no sympathetic treatment’ in the classroom. Instead, campus protestors are frequently cast as childish and starry-eyed, and the New Left is depicted as a short-lived episode of white protest, a mere intermediary between the civil rights movement and ‘the emerging movements for women’s rights, gay rights, and multiculturalism.’” Usually only *The Port Huron Statement* and the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement are mentioned.

Schulman quoted in John McMillan, “‘You Didn’t Have to Be There’: Revisiting the New Left Consensus,” *The New Left Revisited*, eds. John McMillan and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 2.

⁵ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Book, 1987), 184.

⁶ Martin Arnold, “Police Were Told of Plan,” *The New York Times*, 9 May 1970, 1.

New Left use this incident as the definitive example of conflict between students and workers in the sixties.⁷

Although undeniable tension existed between the middle-class students and the working-class unionists, numerous instances of cooperation between students and unions also occurred throughout the sixties. Not only did the UAW camp serve as the setting for the debate over *The Port Huron Statement*, but SDS and the UAW consistently articulated their goal of a worker-student alliance. One of the most significant cooperative efforts occurred in 1964, when the UAW provided the initial funding for one of SDS's most important endeavors, the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP). Although SDS issued papers with titles or sections specifically addressing students and labor and often called for a "worker-student alliance," they simultaneously voiced explicit criticism of the labor movement. SDS, an undoubtedly middle-class organization, declared students the "new working class," positioning them as the vanguard to replace the labor movement as the progressive left. The radicalization of SDS over the course of the sixties made keeping UAW support increasingly difficult.

SDS prematurely abandoned ERAP in favor of the more imperative organizing opportunity provided by the burgeoning Vietnam anti-war movement. Although history often portrays the anti-war movement and its associated backlash as emblematic of the sixties, this tendency creates too simplistic a dichotomy for the decade as a whole, and consequently for the relationship between students and workers within that decade. In the biography of UAW President Walter P. Reuther, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*, labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein claims

⁷ These include Irwin Unger's *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1974) and Irving Howe's *Beyond the New Left* (New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1970).

that a split between the working and middle class within the labor movement injured the broader postwar liberal consensus: “Unions are weak in the United States because of a larger fragmentation in the character of American liberalism.”⁸ Lichtenstein’s choice of words is critical. Fragmentation can only occur if there is a solid entity that can be broken. However complicated, a relationship *did* exist. The complex and uneasy coalition between SDS and the UAW reflected the conflicts within the postwar liberal consensus that would be challenged by the political debate surrounding the Vietnam War.

As student organizations took the lead in both the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left—the two most direct internal challenges to postwar American liberalism—many working-class Americans expressed anger with the young protestors. In 1968 a *Newsweek* cover piece on “The Troubled American” reported that a definite mandate of the whitewashed “middle class” surveyed disapproved of the students’ actions. These troubled Americans perceived an “anti-middle class bias” among the college radicals.⁹ The friction between the “privileged” students and the “ignorant” working class, as they purportedly saw each other, obscured what the two groups had in common: the belief that government had failed. Though they blamed each other at least in part for the crisis, by 1968 both students and Middle Americans believed, in some way, that the “whole system has gone wrong.”¹⁰

DEMOCRATIC DISSENT

Both SDS and the UAW were intrinsically tied to the growing American middle class: the UAW provided the primary agency for blue-collar autoworkers’ upward mobility

⁸ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (Chicago: BasicBooks, 1995), 441.

⁹ “The Troubled American: A Special Report on the White Majority,” *Newsweek* (6 October 1969), 31, 33.

¹⁰ Richard Lemon, *The Troubled American* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 35.

from working to middle class and SDS articulated a constant cognizance of the middle-class origins of its collegiate membership.¹¹ Both groups were intimately bound to the American Dream, and to insuring that the promises inherent in that Dream—work, a home, and overall security—were accessible. What they recognized as perversion and disruption of the Dream, and not necessarily its categorical existence, motivated each group. Justly fearful of red-baiting, in truth neither organized labor nor the student movement sought to fundamentally change American government. Instead they tried to uphold that government to its own ideals and promises. Though still a vital and powerful constituency of the Democratic vote, the increasingly institutionalized labor movement faced new challenges in the postwar United States, and the impetus for progressive liberalism swung to the emerging student movement.

SDS's ideology, expressed in *The Port Huron Statement*, is more a reflection of the students' upbringing in the 1950s than of the political climate that emerged in the 1960s and would later define the decade. As Todd Gitlin said of the fifties: "The surprises of the Sixties were planted there."¹² *The Port Huron Statement's* prevailing anxiety is clearly a result of Cold War tension. Michael Harrington—socialist, labor activist, author of the seminal anti-poverty exposé *The Other America*, and a constant and complicated presence in the life of the New Left—reflected on the development of the student movement in a 1969 essay, "The Mystical Militants." In the essay, Harrington provided an insightful analysis of the younger generation's fifties childhood. Their upbringing inculcated an idealized portrait of the United States. The belief in those principles resulted in the feelings of betrayal that provoked

¹¹ In the 1960s, the postwar baby boom and the exponential growth of the American middle class created an unprecedented population of college students in the United States. The G.I. Bill, Federal Housing Administration loans, and a booming economy allowed an increasing number of middle class Americans to give their children a higher education. SDS recognized the organizing potential of this new American social class, however transient.

¹² Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 22.

political activism in the small minority of baby boomers constituting SDS. They challenged American ideals because they believed in them. The members of SDS did not become radicalized in order to destroy the American system; they were radical in the sense that they sought to uphold that system to the values that it instilled in their generation: “They seemed to have believed what they were told about freedom, equality, justice, world peace, and the like. They became activists in order to affirm these traditional values.”¹³ Harrington attributed the ideology of the New Left to their unique historical moment: “It is, I suspect, this unique fifties-sixties experience which gives the New Left its distinctive flavor: a sense of outrage, of having been betrayed by all the father figures, which derives from an original innocence. And it is also the source of the young radicals’ insistence on sincerity and community.”¹⁴ Harrington later called himself a “father figure” to SDS, several of whom were “red-diaper babies” with genetic links to socialist and communist politics, including the labor movement. In his assessment, Harrington emphasized the anti-Communist standard of the student movement, pointing out that SDS derived “from a sense of the immediate contradiction between democratic posturing and the undemocratic reality. They descend from the abolitionists and Wobblies, not from Marx.”¹⁵ The radicalism of the New Left represented a return to original American values and ideals, not an intent to turn the United States towards communist, socialist, or other subversive revolution.

Their shared ideological foundation implied a common ground between labor and the New Left. At the 1962 National Student Association conference in Ohio, SDS distributed a pamphlet entitled “Campus Parties: An Illiberal Projection” that addressed the student

¹³ Michael Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” *Beyond the New Left*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1970), 34.

¹⁴ Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

movement's role as a buttress to American liberalism and a watchdog for democracy, even down to the level of campus politics. Members Rennard (Rennie) Davis and Bruce Payne, writing for SDS, undoubtedly included the labor movement in their description of the American radical tradition when they wrote, "The goals of almost every American reform movement, including those of students, have been derived from that tradition – from the Bill of Rights, from the ideal of equality before the law, from the hope that liberty and equality under the law would by themselves usher in the good society."¹⁶

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Although most histories of the New Left and certain labor histories touch on the relationship between the student and labor movements, few texts specifically examine that relationship—Peter Levy's *Labor and the New Left in the 1960s* being the prominent exception. There is a historiographical space for an explicit, concentrated study of the relationship between the labor movement and the student movement in the sixties. Furthermore, exploration of the specific relationship between SDS and the UAW provides insight into the larger connections between the New Left and labor unions, between students and the workers, and between the middle and working class.

Organizational heritage linked SDS to the labor movement. In his biography of Reuther, historian and former SDS member Nelson Lichtenstein claims that the student movement and the labor movement were only united for a brief period of time:

Reuther's quest for an opening to the left in American politics not only led to the podium of his union's 1964 convention in Atlantic City, [...] but could be found in the balcony, where virtually all of the leadership of the Students for a

¹⁶ Rennard Davis and Bruce Payne, "Campus Political Parties, an Illiberal Projection," Student Activists Collection, Box 7, Folder 14, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Democratic Society sat in attendance. They were there because Reuther invited them, but more important, because for this brief moment in the history of American liberalism the UAW and SDS shared an equally radical agenda.¹⁷

In his perhaps idealized portrait of this moment of compatibility, Lichtenstein emphasizes the common political goals of the two organizations without elaborating on their divergent political positions. Conversely, in her biography, *Reuther: A Daughter Strikes*, Elisabeth Reuther Dickmeyer presented a very different perspective of the relationship between the UAW and SDS: “But father found the ‘SDS kids,’ as he called them, very hard to reach. A product of the 1960s, the Students for a Democratic Society were known for their radical politics and violent measures for achieving their goals. Their favorite stratagem was to storm a university’s administration building, take it over, smash equipment, destroy documents, and demand that the administrators be fired.”¹⁸ Dickmeyer’s statement demonstrates a fundamental misconception of the student movement, a result of both media manipulation and internal factionalization within SDS. The phrase “SDS kids,” which enjoyed widespread use in contemporary mass media, is inherently condescending. Furthermore, SDS, as *The Port Huron Statement* reveals, emerged out of the Cold War culture of the 1950s. This is clear in *The Port Huron Statement*, which illustrated an underlying Cold War anxiety. SDS formed in the early sixties, years which are more culturally congruent with the fifties than with the late sixties. The “violent measures” and “favorite stratagem” Dickmeyer cited only applied to later SDS, when the organization shared merely a name with its earlier self.

Dickmeyer’s statement exemplifies the misconception of SDS, which often extends to all of the sixties. Accurate in part for the final, turbulent years, her statement is for both the

¹⁷ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 390-391.

¹⁸ Elisabeth Reuther Dickmeyer, *Reuther: A Daughter Strikes* (Southfield: Spelman Publishers Division, Spelman, Inc., 1989), 323.

sixties and SDS a false definition.¹⁹ Despite skepticism about the labor movement from the outset, SDS frequently sought common ground on which to forge a worker-student alliance. Despite their criticism of the later methods of militant factions, the UAW and Reuther in particular supported SDS. The truth of the relationship between students and workers in the sixties lies somewhere in the middle of Lichtenstein's and Dickmeyer's claims. They did not exactly share specific agendas, but SDS and the UAW did share political goals; but the two groups disagreed on how best to accomplish those goals. On the other hand, SDS and the UAW, especially Reuther, were not as disconnected as Dickmeyer suggested. As Lichtenstein points out, "Reuther saw these young people as a bridge through which the labor movement could rewin the loyalty and appreciation of young intellectuals and energize its white-collar organizing campaign."²⁰ Reuther actively cultivated a relationship between his union and the students, and although problematic, that liaison sustained itself until the escalation of the Vietnam War. By that time, however, SDS had ceased to be the same organization that convened at Port Huron. Unable to sustain its rapid growth propelled by the anti-war movement, SDS suffered from a lack of leadership and decentralization and radical anarchist and Marxist-Leninist factions dominated the student movement in the late sixties. Unfortunately, historical focus on moments of confrontation from that time, like the Hard Hat Riots, obscure the previous years of the decade.²¹

¹⁹ Thomas Frank points out in *The Conquest of Cool* that the conservative historical vision of the decade "is undermined by their insistence on understanding 'the sixties' as a causal force in and of itself and their curious blurring of the lines between various historical actors: counter-culture equals Great Society equals left equals 'sixties generation,' all of them driven by some mysterious impulse to tear down Western Civilization." Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 3.

²⁰ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 391.

²¹ A substantial body of historical literature specifically examines the turbulence in 1968. This includes Walter LaFeber's *Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election*, David Caute's *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968*, David Farber's *Chicago '68*, and Mark J. Davis' film *1968, Young blood*.

Though incidents from the sixties like the Hard Hat Riots are sometimes used as examples of a liberal-labor divide, placing labor unions and student radicals on opposing sides, much more reciprocity existed, especially in the earlier years of the decade. A synthesis of existing historical analysis of the working and middle classes, of SDS and the New Left, of Reuther and the UAW, and of the breakdown of postwar liberalism, combined with contemporary publications and archived documents will illuminate the multi-faceted relationship between SDS and the UAW in the 1960s and ultimately provide a deeper understanding of some of the trends that have defined postwar American politics.

SDS wrote prolifically. They issued countless working papers, circulated several newsletters, and published articles in various outlets. An early publication, the article “American Student Requires Value Stimulation,” appeared in the August 6, 1960 edition of the University of Michigan’s campus newspaper *The Michigan Daily*. In it, *Daily* editor and author Tom Hayden, who would later author of *The Port Huron Statement*, argued that there are two types of students: the majority interested in “private welfare” over the public good, whereas the minority “holds an inverse set of values, belief in social action,” and a commitment to idealism. Hayden concluded, “The spirit of self-determination in America receded with the frontier. It has bowed to the vast industrial and organizational expansion of the last 75 years. As a result, the majority of students feel helpless to chart their society’s direction. The purpose of the student movements, then, is at once simple and profound: to prove human beings are still the measure. Hopefully, this will be proven.”²² Hayden’s argument reflected parallels between the goals of the labor movement and the student movement. Both were trying to “prove human beings are still the measure,” but each

²² Tom Hayden, “American Student Requires Value Stimulation,” *The Michigan Daily* (6 August 1960).

certainly misunderstood the other in the 1960s, and simplified histories often misrepresent each now.

Several comprehensive historical accounts of the postwar working class are useful material for a study of SDS and the UAW.²³ These historians provide a revealing portrayal of the working-class position in postwar American politics, but they do not focus on the relationship between unions and the student movement—nor do they purport or attempt to do so. These analyses of the working class are useful for their insight into the nuanced, complex opinions and reactions of the labor movement, and its role as a vital and sometimes definitive component of the working class.²⁴ Several historians have published thorough accounts of the history of the New Left and of SDS specifically, including members of the group like Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin.²⁵ Despite this wealth of literature, the only work of New Left scholarship to examine in detail the specific relationship between students and workers is Peter Levy's *Labor and the New Left in the 1960s*. Levy's approach is much broader than

²³ For excellent analyses of the American working class: Jefferson Cowie, "'Vigorously Left, Right, and Center': The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s," in *America in the Seventies*, edited by Barbara Bailey and David Farber; Stanley Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority*; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*; Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economics in the History of the U.S. Working Class*; Joel Rogers and Ruy Teixeira, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*.

²⁴ In addition to Lichtenstein's biography *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*, there are a multitude of histories of the UAW that briefly touch on the union's relationship with SDS, including John Barnard's *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935-1970*, Dudley W. Buffa's *Union Power and American Democracy: The UAW and the Democratic Party*, Martin Halpern's *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era*, and Irving Howe's *UAW and Walter Reuther*.

²⁵ Furthermore, outstanding and revealing portraits of the New Left and of SDS specifically are abundant among the mass of literature about the sixties. One of the most useful and engaging is James Miller's biographical portrait of SDS, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*. Several SDS members published their own accounts of the movement, including Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage* and *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, and Tom Hayden's *Rebellion in Newark: Official Violence and Ghetto Response*, account of the prosecution of the Chicago Seven in *Trial*, and *Reunion: A Memoir*. Several other general histories of SDS are available, including Kirkpatrick Sale's succinctly titled *SDS*. G. Louis Heath provides a both a brief overall history and a compilation of mostly late sixties SDS literature in *Vandals in the Bomb Factory: The History and Literature of Students for a Democratic Society*. Several anthologies of contemporary literature are available, including *The New Left: An Anthology* edited by Mitchell Cohen and *Beyond the New Left* edited by Irving Howe. One of the most exceptional anthologies is necessarily retrospective: *The New Left Revisited*, edited by John McMillan and Paul Buhle, is a compilation of scholarship that focuses on the work of a new generation of historians not actually witness to the student movement.

the one here, which focuses on SDS and the UAW specifically. Levy likewise argues for a more dialectic approach to the relationship between labor and the New Left. He emphasizes that the conflicts between labor and the New Left “emerged not because of *inherent* middle-class or antiworker bias, but rather due to much more historically specific factors.”²⁶

Namely, the escalation of three external events: the Vietnam War, Black Power, and the counterculture. This thesis focuses on the Vietnam War combined with internal challenges to the coalition. Although Black Power and the counterculture did affect the final downfall, they are a more prominent factor for Levy because of his broader approach.

The goal of this thesis will be to examine the intersections between the student and labor movement in the sixties by studying the relationship between SDS and the UAW. The two organizations, which represent the middle and working class, respectively, often found themselves working toward parallel goals. Chapter One recounts the origins of SDS, which connect it to the labor movement, and explains their self-conception as a liberal-labor liaison. Chapter Two presents the Economic Research and Action Project, a brief but remarkable effort at community organizing in poor communities and a direct collaboration between SDS and the UAW. Chapter Three centers on the relationship of each SDS and the UAW to the Democratic Party, and the way that the explosive events of 1968 exposed the fundamental and unavoidably divisive differences between the strategies of the two organizations. Even in 1968, SDS still sought alliance with unions, and the UAW leadership still supported the basic thrust of the student movement. However, each suffered from rank-and-file deviation: militant and Marxist factions eventually overtook SDS, and the UAW leadership was shocked by the anger within union locals.

²⁶ Peter Levy, *Labor and the New Left in the 1960s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 6.

Two dominant, related threads emerge. The first, reinforced by historians like Peter Levy and Jefferson Cowie, argues that elevating events like the 1970 Hard Hat Riots as an icon of a liberal-labor schism creates too simple a dichotomy. Although palpable tension between labor unions and the student protestors fed into these events, images of extreme manifestations hurt both sides of the alleged divide. Labor unionists were not all racist “hard hats,” and students were not all anarchist hippies. The second arterial argument defining the relationship between SDS and the UAW extends deeper than an image problem, down to decisions each group made about its relationship to mainstream liberalism. Beyond the symbolic events, even in issues that the UAW and SDS agreed upon—like a shared investment in the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor population in the programs of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty—the way that each group related to the American political structure made some conflict inevitable. The UAW strategically positioned itself as a pressure group within the Democratic Party. On the other hand, from *The Port Huron Statement* SDS had announced that it would work from the grassroots level in order to pressure liberalism from the grassroots. Working from outside the Democratic Party allowed SDS to break with and even challenge party platform. Although labor leaders like Reuther hoped that the students would be a “bridge” for the labor movement, and the students wrote about a “natural alliance,” active decisions about each group’s relationship to the Democratic establishment complicated the way they related to each other, creating a basic divide that became insurmountable once the Vietnam War escalated. SDS could not support a presidential candidate who supported the war, the UAW had to support the Democratic Party although it pushed the Party to adopt a peace platform, and the refusal of the Democrats to do so meant that the UAW and SDS could no longer occupy the same political

coalition. Thus, the failure of liberalism resulted not as much from the misunderstanding of hippies and hardhats, but represents a political tragedy stemming from liberal-labor structural opposition. The Vietnam War exposed the “liberal-labor divide,” but it was not the divide symbolized by the Hard Hat Riots.

CHAPTER ONE

NATURAL ALLIES?

Students for a Democratic Society repeatedly redefined itself throughout its lifetime, resulting in contention even within the organization as to the exact date of its birth. SDS's identity crisis involved its relationship with the League for Industrial Democracy, between the students and the "Old" Left, and between the students and liberal allies such as the labor unions. Two competing descriptions of the group provided in literature about the SDS Economic Research and Action Project, their first real concentrated activist effort, provide evidence of SDS's identity crisis. One pamphlet, "Economic Research and Action Project — An Introduction," claimed that SDS was "founded in 1905 by Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Clarence Darrow, and others as an organization dedicated to democratic values, civil liberties, liberal education and a peaceful world."¹ Throughout its lifespan, SDS struggled with the nature of its relationship with its parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy (LID). More immediate than whether to equate SDS with the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS), the 1905 organization this description referred to, is whether to equate SDS of 1969 with SDS of 1962.

Another pamphlet for ERAP described SDS as "an association of young people on the left who seek alternatives to poverty, racism, corporate or military rule in public affairs and government which people no longer control. Its members work for a democracy which gives people a say in the decisions which affect their lives [...] SDS as it is now constituted

¹ Students for a Democratic Society, "Economic Research and Action Project – An Introduction," Youth and Student Protest - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

was organized in 1960.”² Fifty-five years is a substantial discrepancy; however, even in the latter example, the phrase “as it is now constituted” still suggests some link to SDS’s past. A more general introduction stated simply, “SDS was born in 1960 with the student movement itself.”³ A still different introduction proclaimed SDS to have been founded with *The Port Huron Statement* in 1962, and named the conditions “giving birth to our present movement”: the Cold War, Joseph McCarthy, and “the silent generation filing into heavily-mortgaged Ozzie and Harriet suburbia.”⁴ SDS examined, contested, and challenged all of these relationships as it began to galvanize the student movement in the first half of the sixties.

This confusion over the origins of SDS demonstrated the fluid relationship between the student organization and its predecessors. The relationship between SDS and prior student movements, as well as between SDS and traditional liberal allies, was a consistent topic of discussion throughout the evolution of the organization. Historian G. Louis Heath pointed out: “Knowing what SDS was *not* in its formative years is as important as knowing what it was.”⁵ Over a single decade SDS’s goals and strategy transformed significantly. What SDS was, in the beginning, not is important to the later development of the student movement, especially in its relation to the labor movement. Heath clarified that SDS was not revolutionary, but “anxious to use the democratic process to bring about changes in a society which SDS felt needed to develop new priorities and reform,” that it possessed a socialist tendency but was not communist, and that SDS “was often critical of the way in which

² Students for a Democratic Society, “A movement of many voices ...,” Youth and Student Protest - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

³ Students for a Democratic Society, “Students for a Democratic Society,” Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 4, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁴ Students for a Democratic Society, “SDS: An Introduction,” 3, Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 4, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁵ G. Louis Heath, ed., *Vandals in the Bomb Factory: The History and Literature of the Students for a Democratic Society* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), 17.

government, business, and the decision-makers in America operated, but it was not—at the outset—anti-Establishment.”⁶ As SDS emerged, the organization continued to define its relation to the larger society and to liberalism and its different elements, including a constant consideration of the prospects of a worker-student alliance.

THE LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

The history of SDS began—at least according to some—with the founding of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS) in 1905. The name of the organization changed to the League for Industrial Democracy (LID) in 1921, and it organized a student corollary, known as SLID. Labor union contributions helped finance the LID, a national organization headquartered in New York. Interestingly, the Reuther brothers were involved with the LID at Detroit City College in the 1930s. As young activists, they participated in demonstrations against the establishment of an ROTC on campus and in 1932 against the segregation policy of a Detroit apartment building swimming pool.⁷ The relationship of the university with the Defense Department and discrimination both remained central causes to SLID as it morphed into SDS. SLID merged briefly with the National Student League⁸ in 1935 to form the American Student Union, until in 1946 the group revived the name SLID in the wake of World War II. Campus activity experienced a post-war slump in the “silent fifties;” but the

⁶ Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 17.

⁷ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 29.

⁸ “In January 1932 the National Student League was organized on a platform which contended that capitalism and representative government had failed the American working man and concluded that the USSR and its state-planned economy were the only solution. The NSL, described as the only militant student movement ever to exist in America prior to the emergence of the New Left, exploited anti-war sentiment, held demonstrations and marches, and attempted physical disruption of campus activities which led to arrest, suspensions and expulsions of its members from colleges.” Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 4.

Civil Rights Movement arrived in the final years of that decade, and the atmosphere on campus began to change.⁹

The budding student organization advanced towards autonomy in 1958, when they decided to rename the unfortunately pronounced SLID. Robert Alan Haber pointed out in a letter to Charles Van Tassel that, “SLID is not a name which easily meets the public.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, Haber clearly wanted to maintain an explicit connection to the LID, pointing out that, “we do not wish by a name change to sever the historical continuity of the organization. [...] SLID, by that name, has a very definite meaning to a certain group of people and it has a place in the history of American liberal activity. That is something we can be proud of.”¹¹ Evidently, SDS’s pride in its heritage and place in a continuing liberal tradition outweighed any deviance from LID policies. In the letter, Haber continued to exhaustively discuss the intricacies of a name change for the newly energized student organization for more than a full single-spaced typewritten page. Obviously, the nomenclature would help to define the direction of the emerging organization. The Ann Arbor SLID, the principle force behind the transition from SLID to SDS, ultimately agreed upon the title Students for a Democratic Society in 1960. The moniker embodied the key aspects of the organization that Haber wished to project “1) we are students, 2) we have an action orientation, 3) we are concerned with a broad range of problems, 4) our aim is one of democratic change and progress. [...] the paramount value of the group is the necessity for the Individual to act, to participate in the democratic process. We wish to inculcate this value

⁹ Summary of the development of SLID based on chronology given in: Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, vii-xi.

¹⁰ Robert Alan Haber to Charles Van Tassel, 1 September 1958, Student Activists Collection, Box 5, Folder 38, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹¹ Haber to Charles Van Tassel, 1 September 1958.

and stimulate students to accept their responsibility of citizenship.”¹² The student movement had officially made a name for itself, though at this point SDS was still in all but name connected to the LID. By the beginning of the sixties, both students and labor were seeking a new political voice that was certainly not Republican, but also not quite Democratic in the contemporary party-line sense.

THE PORT HURON STATEMENT: “AN AGENDA FOR A GENERATION”

James Miller pronounced *The Port Huron Statement* “one of the most pivotal documents in post-war American history.”¹³ The manuscript earned its title from the discussion held at the UAW camp in Port Huron, Michigan, in the summer of 1962. Tom Hayden wrote the draft, it was distributed amongst the SDS leadership, and sixty people from SDS and select interested parties met in Port Huron to debate the document. From the time of its writing in 1962 through the subsequent five years, SDS distributed over 100,000 copies of *The Port Huron Statement*, which stands as the first manifesto of the movement which would come to be called the New Left.¹⁴ At its core, *The Port Huron Statement* expressed a sincere belief in the fundamental American values of democracy; however, it also pointed out where those values had been degraded and tarnished. The document began, “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.”¹⁵ This statement reflected some of the primary

¹² Haber to Van Tassel, 1 September 1958.

¹³ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 13.

¹⁴ Statistic from Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 11.

¹⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962) in appendix of James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 329.

defining aspects of SDS: the generational consciousness of the students, their cognizance of their middle-class status, their demographic identification as students, and their anxiety.

As SDS member Bob Rose remembered of the sessions at Port Huron, “The issue was: could students change society without labor?”¹⁶ Members of the “silent generation,” a group widely criticized for its apathy, SDS recognized the hypocrisy and paradoxes of American postwar liberalism that boiled over in the riots and protests of the later part of the decade. In *The Port Huron Statement*, SDS acknowledged that the members of SDS were in the minority on the college campus, and that despite recent activity, “The real campus, the familiar campus, is a place of private people [...] of commitment to business-as-usual, getting ahead, playing it cool [...] [and] mass reluctance toward the controversial public stance.”¹⁷ However, SDS did not blame the students for their inaction: “But apathy is not simply an attitude; it is a product of social institutions, and of the structure and organization of higher education itself.”¹⁸ This structure, built around *in loco parentis* and “a radical separation of the student from the material of study,” encouraged detachment and inaction, and “the student learns by his isolation to accept elite rule within the university, which prepares him to accept later forms of minority control.”¹⁹ Thus, the student left the university intellectually unchallenged, but instead prepared to enter the society at large and continue a life of “modest comfort.”

In 1962, SDS retained faith that the American system could be reformed and need not be abandoned completely. *The Port Huron Statement* claimed that, “The significance is in the fact that students are breaking the crust of apathy and overcoming the inner alienation

¹⁶ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 199.

¹⁷ SDS, *The Port Huron Statement*, 334.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 334.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

that remain the defining characteristics of American college life.”²⁰ Growing up believing whole-heartedly in the promises of the American Dream, this minority group of baby boomers began to realize the restrictions and hypocrisy of that dream when they reached the university and “began to see complicated and disturbing paradoxes in our surrounding America.” Namely, the “proclaimed peaceful intentions of the United States contradicted its economic and military investments in the Cold War status quo.”²¹ The inequality in the South, exposed in widespread television coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, contradicted the idea that in the United States “all men are created equal.” Their upbringing had instilled in them a generational consciousness which manifested in a sense of responsibility for the American values that they had grown up believing in, and upon maturation had found to be contradictory to their reality.

In *The Port Huron Statement*, SDS offered the diagnosis: “what we had originally seen as the American Golden Age was actually the decline of an era.”²² In many respects, SDS sought to provoke the United States into fulfilling the broken promises of that previous era. SDS offered a particular utopian vision of “participatory democracy” and an agenda that strove to hold the United States responsible for the promises of liberalism—work, a home, and overall security. *The Port Huron Statement* extended its criticism of apathy on the campus to a larger “national doldrums” and “malaise” dominating the society at large. This resulted from “the actual structural separation of people from power, from relevant knowledge, from pinnacles of decision-making.” The document proposed, “But the civil rights, peace, and student movements are too poor and socially sighted, and the labor

²⁰ SDS, *The Port Huron Statement*, 334.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

²² *Ibid.*, 330.

movement too quiescent, to be counted with enthusiasm. From where else can power and vision be summoned? We believe that the universities are an overlooked seat of influence.”²³

The Port Huron Statement was remarkably direct in its assault on the labor movement, when SDS was still the student organization of the LID. The document went so far as to equate labor with its traditional opponent: “To the average American, [...] big labor is a growing cancer equal in impact to Big Business – nothing could be more distorted, even granting a sizable union bureaucracy.”²⁴ The students saw the labor movement as self-interested and no longer radical, having submitted to institutionalization, its idealism fading as labor itself becomes a business. This institutionalization resulted in “labor-leader elitism”—“Even the House of Labor has bay windows”—as well as “rank-and-file apathy to the tradition of unionism,” resulting in overall “accommodation and limited effectiveness by the labor movement.”²⁵ SDS thus set the student movement up to accept the mantle of progressive democratic liberalism which labor had let fall.

The LID was adamantly against *The Port Huron Statement* because of the document’s treatment of labor issues and “anti-anti-Communism.” The LID embraced “Cold Warrior” brand liberalism and demanded a hard line approach to anti-Communism from its student wing; however, the young activists were disinclined to exclude the participation of communists from the organization, although they in no way suggested SDS espoused communist ideology.²⁶ As historian James Miller stated, “At some point, though, the debate had ceased to be about principles, and had become instead a struggle over the autonomy of

²³ SDS, *The Port Huron Statement*, 373.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 343.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

²⁶ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 130.

the younger generation.”²⁷ The accusations of *The Port Huron Statement* regarding the labor movement alarmed and angered many members of what was now becoming the “Old” Left, including Michael Harrington, who conceived of himself as a bridge from the Old Left to the New.

THE “OLD” LEFT

The creation of a New Left implied that it replaced a pre-existing Left, which therefore was re-christened as Old. It also implied a difference in position. Much of the New Left was, upon closer examination, quite “Old.” Their critique of the university system characterized the New-ness of the sixties student movement most remarkably, where “‘The University’ came to be regarded as part of the Establishment, and as the point of immediate contact, the most oppressive part.”²⁸ In the 1966 article “Origins of the Movement,” labor journalist Paul Jacobs and New Left member Saul Landau discussed the relationship between the student movements of the previous decades. They wrote that although many within the New Left had “parents who had been the radicals and left liberals of the thirties and the forties [...] this new group of young activists knew little about the debates of the thirties. [...] Outside the classroom they referred with a sneer to the ‘old days’—the thirties, forties, and now the fifties. Like the rest of American society, the old left, they believed, had in some way ‘betrayed’ them: they had ‘sold out’ or else were ‘hung up’ on old and dead battles.”²⁹ The authors elaborate on the generation gap: “They had learned a new set of ideals from their parents and now, much to their parents’ discomfiture, they were trying to put those ideals

²⁷ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 138.

²⁸ Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, “Origins of the Movement,” *Student Activism*, ed. Irving Howe (The Bobbs-Merrill Series in Composition and Rhetoric, 1967), 31. Republished from *The New Radicals* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1966), 8-14.

²⁹ Jacobs and Landau, “Origins of the Movement,” *Student Activism*, 31.

into practice.”³⁰ The article has an overriding tone of condescension in its emphasis on rejecting the old, and frequent use of the words “they” and “them” imply a conflicting “us.”

Michael Harrington sustained a relationship with SDS throughout the better part of the sixties. In 1962, at the birth of *The Port Huron Statement*, Harrington was in his early thirties, a member of both the LID, and an elder statesman the Young People’s Socialist Party (YPSL). Harrington actually planned a YPSL takeover of SDS in the very early sixties. It is a testament to the appeal of SDS ideology that they maintained control of the organization.³¹ (Ironically, the Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party took the name SDS in 1969.) Harrington and Donald Slaiman of the AFL-CIO attended the Port Huron discussion on behalf of the interests of the League for Industrial Democracy.

Harrington personally agreed with the idea of participatory democracy, but not with the document’s criticisms of the labor movement, anti-communism, and of “older radicals.” The latter criticism felt like a personal attack for Harrington, who had been a mentor to SDS; he spoke at the 1960 Conference on Human Rights, one of the first major SDS events. Hayden, the author of the document, affirmed that the attack on “older radicals” had a personal bent. SDS was trying to create a movement of students, and therefore Harrington represented “the perfect guy for everybody to overthrow.” When SDS did not implement the suggestions that Harrington made, he informed the LID of SDS’s refusal. Harrington later summarized the experience of Port Huron: “Here I was: I was thirty-four. I’d been a youth leader for so long that people were joking that I was ‘the oldest young socialist in America.’ [...] Up comes this younger generation. I think that they are ignoring my honest, sincere and absolutely profound advice. And this struck at my self-image. I think that part of my

³⁰ Jacobs and Landau, “Origins of the Movement,” *Student Activism*, 33.

³¹ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 37, 75.

emotional overresponse was there: I interpreted this as an Oedipal assault on the father-figure.”³²

The debate between SDS and the LID over *The Port Huron Statement* solidified the growing distinction between Old and New Left. In 1959, Harrington had declared: “A major political change is beginning in the United States, and if it continues to develop it will reshape American politics. It will result in a New Left.”³³ A decade later, Harrington summed up his feelings about the New Left in the essay “The Mystical Militants”: “I have differences with the young radicals and have on occasion been puzzled, exasperated, and even saddened by them. Yet the happy fact remains that the emergence of a personally committed generation seeking basic social change is momentous. They are a minority of their age group, to be sure, but a creative, activist minority who should place their stamp upon the times.”³⁴ Despite the disagreement at Port Huron, Harrington remained connected to SDS over the course of the 1960s.

Another member of the Old Left, Walter P. Reuther of the United Auto Workers, supported SDS and sought connections between his organization and the student movement. An article critical of the labor movement as a “one-party state” after the “days of vigorous union faction and a democratic internal life ended in the forties,” it conceded, “The United Auto Workers, however, is generally believed to be the most democratic and progressive of the large American unions.”³⁵ Reuther participated in the SLID at Detroit City College, and

³² Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 115.

³³ Michael Harrington, “The New Left: The Relevance of Democratic Socialism in Contemporary America” (Young People’s Socialist Party pamphlet, 1959), Student Activists Collection, Box 5, Folder 32, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

³⁴ Michael Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” *Beyond the New Left*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1970), 33.

³⁵ Martin Glaberman, “‘Be His Payment High or Low’: The American Working Class of the Sixties,” *International Socialism* (Summer 1965), reprinted in pamphlet “*Be His Payment High or Low*”: *The American*

he remained an important patron of the LID. Reuther followed the emerging student movement with great interest. The UAW leadership, writes labor historian John Barnard, “originally saw the New Left, along with the mobilized masses of the civil rights movement, as an integral part of a new progressive reform coalition and welcomed its advent.”³⁶ SDS took pride in Reuther's support, and a number of SDS pamphlets proclaim: “The SDS program is supported by prominent Americans. Walter Reuther has said of SDS, ‘it is in the vanguard of student organizations dedicated to the forces of progress in America.’”³⁷ Several members of the Ann Arbor core of SDS came from UAW families, including Barry Bluestone and ERAP leader Sharon Jeffrey, and as Lichtenstein wrote: “The UAW connection with SDS, whose most dynamic chapter was in Ann Arbor, was practically maternal.”³⁸

Barnard also observes that *The Port Huron Statement* paraphrased many UAW goals, and that Reuther actually shared some of the students’ criticisms regarding the labor movement’s accused “quiescence.” Barnard writes, “By the end of the 1950s, UAW leaders, like many observers within and outside the labor movement, were concerned about the ebbing vigor and commitment of labor. The movement, including the UAW, needed an infusion of youthful idealism, something akin to the energy, vision, and determination the Reuther brothers and so many other had brought to the autoworker organizing in the 1930s.”³⁹ Reuther and SDS therefore had similar hopes for the potential of the growing

Working Class of the Sixties (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1966), 2, Pamphlet Collection, Socialism Series, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

³⁶ John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935-1970* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2004), 420.

³⁷ Students for a Democratic Society, “Economic Research and Action Project – Introduction,” Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

³⁸ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 391.

³⁹ Barnard, *American Vanguard*, 420.

student movement and its relation to the labor unions. Although SDS supported strikes and worked with unions, including the UAW, on specific projects, a consistent and organized alliance between SDS and even progressive unions such as the UAW never materialized.

THE NEW LEFT: THE NATURAL ALLIANCE OF THE LABOR AND CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS?

The president of SDS in 1967, Nick Egleson, explained the stimulating effect of the Southern Civil Rights Movement on the development of a national campus protest movement in an article in the SDS publication *New Left Notes*. Egleson wrote, “The idea, the possibility of protests in the south as well as the experience of it, was an important part of sparking campus protests. Dissent in one place created the possibility for dissent elsewhere, and dissent materialized on the campus.”⁴⁰ SDS constantly acknowledged and celebrated the inspiration it found in the Civil Rights Movement, particularly the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Several SDS members had spent time working with SNCC in the South, and SDS as an organization borrowed much of their structure from SNCC. The relationship between SDS and SNCC was only one facet of the student movement’s role in the Civil Rights Movement, which SDS perceived as a way to connect the different divisions of liberalism, especially labor. A typed sheet of preparatory materials for a 1960 SDS newsletter included a report on a national AFL-CIO boycott of Sears and Roebuck in response to Sears’ attempt to undermine the clerks union. The report mentions Sears’ discriminatory practices at its lunch counters as well, hoping that “Here is a focus that

⁴⁰ Nick Egleson, *New Left Notes* (January 6, 1967), quoted in Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 10.

may well bring to the fore the natural alliance of the labor and civil rights movements.”⁴¹

SDS literature of the early sixties frequently mentioned the phrase “the natural alliance of the labor and civil rights movements,” an important indication of the direction of the emerging student movement hoped to move.

SDS leader Alan Haber articulated this “natural alliance” in a detailed note that reflected on a meeting with Donald Slaiman and Boris Schiskin of the League for Industrial Democracy.⁴² Haber mentioned that the ALF-CIO donated \$5,000 to a recent SNCC conference in Atlanta, but there was no one present “to give any indication of labors interest in the sit-in movement” or to explore labor organizing in the union-deficient South. Haber suggested that SDS could serve as a mediator, “pointing out the importance, significance radica[l] [student] action can have for the labor” movement. SDS “are the one student org that is close to labor,” and thus “feel particularly responsible to keep it informed on development on the student [scene].” Haber suggested that SDS emphasize to labor that the radical potential offered by the sit-ins, the link between civil rights and “questions of the Negroes economic position,” which made the “natural allia[n]ce [between] the civil rights and labor movements” apparent.⁴³ Haber recognized the labor movement’s failure to seize the opportunity for organization in the South offered by the student-led sit-in movement, as well as the Southern students’ “ignorance” about the labor movement in general. Haber

⁴¹ “A New Target,” SDS Newsletter #2 Materials, Student Activists Collection, Box 5, Folder 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

⁴² Robert Alan Haber notes, no date, Student Activists Collection, Box 5, Folder 11, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

There is no indication of author or recipient on the note, but Robert Alan Haber conceded to being named the author of the note in an e-mail sent January 24, 2006 based on a transcription sent to Mr. Haber on January 25, 2006 via e-mail. Haber wrote: “all things considered, without exactly remembering. i would say, ‘i wrote those notes.’ sometime between 1960 and 1962.”

Interestingly, the note is very poorly punctuated, and written entirely in lower-case—neglect due to excitement, casualness, or simply poor editing?

⁴³ Haber notes, no date. Haber’s ideas preview the “Triple Revolution” of *America in the New Era*-type rhetoric later.

skirted the historic relationship between Southern blacks and the labor movement, as he suggested “the issues of jim crow unions is not central here and should not be allowed to become the issue of discussion,” although “this will take some diplomacy.”⁴⁴ Haber also tried to circumvent the relationship with mainstream liberalism. He suggested that “political alignment should not become an issue,” as “Labor has its eggs in the democratic basket” and the Civil Rights Movement was still trying to gain a solid political ally.⁴⁵ Haber recognized that SDS must overlook any compromise in organized labor’s political decision in the interest of the student movement’s need for a certain level of mainstream legitimacy.

The Civil Rights Movement remained a leading inspiration for the New Left over the course of the decade. SDS ideology often followed the southern student movement: it was when SNCC began to turn towards the militancy of Black Power and the Black Panther Party that SDS also become more militant. With Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), organized in April 1960, defined the Civil Rights Movement of the late fifties and the sixties. One article, “Origins of the Movement,” emphasized the moral appeal of SNCC’s organization on the emerging New Left: “SNCC wasn’t political; it was concerned with right and wrong, with people. The SNCC ideal of morality in action also provided the spur for the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and its community and campus programs.”⁴⁶ The Civil Rights Movement was perhaps the most significant inspiration for SDS, and in that context the development of SNCC is particularly significant because it was a radical *student*

⁴⁴ Haber notes, no date. Although SDS emerged directly from SLID, its self-perception was as a northern SNCC. It is significant that instead of creating a new group that more accurately embodied that perception, SDS *did* emerge from the more labor-oriented SLID. They do acknowledge this heritage in much of their literature along with their reverence for SNCC. Perhaps they squandered an opportunity for a student movement/New Left umbrella organization, a development that might have allowed for more cohesion once the movement fractured.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jacobs and Landau, “Origins of the Movement,” 33.

organization. From the beginning, SNCC shared close ties to SDS, although the two organizations never established an official alliance. Many members of SDS worked on the Freedom Ride program in the South in the early sixties. SDS organized first and pioneered New Left ideology and involvement in Cold War issues, but SNCC inspired and led a significant amount of SDS thinking. For many of those who would become New Leftists, groups like the NAACP, CORE, and even the SCLC represented a middle-class, mainstream liberalism that had thus far failed to enact real reform. SNCC excited and inspired campus activists because—while its membership was still largely middle class—it employed direct action.

STUDENTS AND LABOR

In his 1969 article, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” former SDS leader Carl Oglesby posed the question, “Behind how many of these so-called ‘bourgeois’ children, one or two generations back, stands a father in a blue collar, a mother in an apron?” Oglesby side-stepped class and connected the Old and the New Left racially: “The revolutionary aspiration of whites in the 1930’s manifested itself most sharply in factory struggles. In the 1960’s, that aspiration has materialized most sharply on the campuses.”⁴⁷ Although Oglesby suggested that the “revolutionary aspiration of whites” was no longer present in the factories, students of the New Left consistently sought, or at the very least paid lip-service to their desire for, an alliance with the sixties’ labor movement. Only months after the drafting of the student’s criticisms of labor in *The Port Huron Statement* in 1962, Alan Haber issued a substantial paper assessing *Students and Labor*, which proposed, “It is well past time for a

⁴⁷ Carl Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” *Liberation* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1969), Pamphlet Collection, Socialism Series, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

reappraisal of the relationship between labor and the student.” Haber dissected the reasons why the growing student movement would be separated from the labor movement, and proposed points of commonality. He viewed the coalition of students and labor to be integral to the building of an effective New Left: “If the university is to provide an institutional base for the liberal movement, however, its resources must be systematically evaluated and rationally connected to the other progressive forces operating in the country.” Haber observed that, “labor today is the most liberal of the main stream institutions,” yet “it is shunned or treated as at best a distant ally by the major part of the student political community.” Haber bemoaned labor for its “lack of interest” in college students and the issues of the university.⁴⁸

Tom Kahn, executive secretary of the LID, attributed the student-labor separation to middle-class insularity in a 1966 article “On the Problem of the New Left.” Kahn dated the split to the dissatisfaction of fifties intellectuals with labor, which made it “predictable” that the next generation of radicals “would view labor as simply another big institution—and the New Left is very much a revolt against bigness.” Kahn argued that the social-political climate of the Cold War directly resulted in the separation of labor and liberalism: “But it is important to remember that the indifference or hostility to labor grew out of a conservative period, when middle-class prosperity was reshaping the ethos of the university, and the McClelland hearings were convincing millions of Americans that Dave Beck of the Teamsters was the prototype of the labor leader.” Kahn continued: “Thus, while much student criticism of labor comes from the Left, it also contains strands of middle-class prejudice—a lack of appreciation for, or identification with, the historic and *continuing* role

⁴⁸ Alan Haber, *Students and Labor* (1962), 1, Pamphlet Collection, Protest and Reform Series, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

of the unions in the day-to-day lives of literally millions of working people.”⁴⁹ He therefore attributes the student’s disconnect with the labor movement to a class conflict, without crediting the unions for any divisiveness.

On the other hand, Haber’s paper acknowledged the obstacles blocking this allied movement for students and labor. Self-image was identified as an important issue for the student: “The student has a professional orientation whereas labor remains identified with the ‘working class’ and the wage system. The student does not see himself as a potential union member.” College students come out of an upper or middle-class background, preventing identification with the labor movement and resulting in a value of individual over collective action. Furthermore, their middle-class education “underplayed or criticized [the labor movement] as a progressive force in American development.” To the student radical, labor’s record seemed ineffective and in areas like civil rights labor even stood out as a counter-force to the student movement’s interests. There were obstacles for the unions as well. The labor movement was on the defensive in the postwar economy, which was automated and defense-driven, and industry was declining in the face of increased competition and legislation. The situation spoke to the common need of students and labor to organize white-collar workers and to move away from a war economy. Although the labor unionist might feel little connection with the college student, “with the mounting crisis in financing higher education, labor is the one organized constituency with a strong interest in public federally-funded education.”⁵⁰

Kahn pointed out the traditional and consistent role of the labor movement in liberal politics. He claimed, “The single new ideological feature of the ‘New Left’—all that seems

⁴⁹ Tom Kahn, “On the Problem of the New Left,” *Student Activism*, ed. Irving Howe (The Bobbs-Merrill Series in Composition and Rhetoric, 1967), 50. Originally published in *Commentary* (July 1966).

⁵⁰ Haber, *Students and Labor*, 2-5.

to me really new about it—is the rejection, implicit or explicit, of this fundamental assumption.” He speculated that the students middle-class biases diminished their perception of the radical potential of the working class: “The reasoning behind this rejection is not that the labor leadership or bureaucracy represses the workers’ instinctive radicalism or that the workers have been atomized or culturally degraded by mass society (the ex-radical’s formula), but that the organized working class has achieved its goals and has itself consequently become part of the power structure.”⁵¹

In *Students and Labor*, Haber presented a more nuanced and balanced assessment of the relationship between the labor movement and the “power structure.” He asserted that one of the primary obstacles for a worker-student alliance was the impression that although the labor movement was forged as an opposition group, that by 1962:

It appears not as an opposition group but as a reform club within the “establishment.” It does not call for militant rank and file action, it does not basically challenge the structure of the Democratic Party, it doesn’t challenge the economic privilege of corporate elites. Even more disheartening to students, its failure to banish discrimination from within its own house makes it a party to the racism that pervades almost every institution of American life. And after surrendering the possibility of independent social power in favor of the more respectable role of lobby and critic, it appears to acquiesce as well before the icon of bipartisan unity, in a tacit, if not active, support of the Cold War.⁵²

The students were less inclined to work within the system, and instead hoped to challenge the problems they saw with the established political institutions in order “to impose democratic principle on the distribution of power and privilege.”⁵³ Because of labor’s institutionalization, they accused the labor movement of a “failure of vision.” Haber wrote, “if labor is to come off the economic defensive, it must go on the political offensive. [...]

⁵¹ Kahn, “On the Problem of the New Left,” 50.

⁵² Haber, *Students and Labor*, 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

labor must begin to construct a movement adequate to the prob[lems] and obstacles of the 1960's—in this it can build an alliance with students and the university.”⁵⁴ Haber argued clearly that students and labor had symbiotic potential. For example, students represented a potential influx of much-needed leadership for the labor movement; traditionally, student radicals would graduate into union organization, but this progression had faded.

Furthermore, students and labor had a shared interest in the pertinent need to organize the white-collar workforce; many students were likely to enter administrative jobs after graduation, and the changing economy meant that white-collar workers would be an integral addition if the labor movement were to remain relevant.

Perhaps most importantly for SDS, the labor movement had the most potential to provide the necessary “social base of support” which the student movement lacked. Haber wrote that the movement on campus “is without financial resources or a backlog of organizational experience and desperately needs a working connection with the mainstream of liberal political activity. The labor movement has the facilities and certainly the experience that can be decisive in the building of an allied movement in the universities.”⁵⁵ Haber placed the burden of coalescence on his peers: “if an alliance is going to develop, students will have to do more than show their own passive willingness. They will have to convince labor that it is necessary.” An alliance of students and labor is “not merely a matter of convenience; it is a matter of mutual survival.”⁵⁶ It seemed, as Kahn wrote, “If not the labor movement, then what social force can be expected to lead the way in transforming society, and how are the students to relate to that force?”⁵⁷ Haber argued that although

⁵⁴ Haber, *Students and Labor*, 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁷ Kahn, “On the Problem of the New Left,” 50.

students might see labor as merely a “cog” in the machine of Big Government, any compromise of labor union power represented a failure of the entire liberal community.⁵⁸

Both Kahn and Haber failed to address in their assessment of students and labor the possible connection in young factory workers. Although *America and the New Era*, the sort of sequel to *The Port Huron Statement* that defined the ideology behind ERAP and enumerated the “Triple Revolution,” criticized the failure of the labor movement to organize the increasing ranks of the young unemployed and the growing white-collar workforce, but makes no mention of young workers.⁵⁹ By 1969, one third of union members were under the age of thirty.⁶⁰ Brendan Sexton in a 1969 essay pointed out:

Young workers outnumber all college students, and there are perhaps fifteen or twenty of them for every one disaffected youth upon whom various advocates of a New Politics are counting. The big three in auto alone employ about 250,000 workers who are thirty or under. Total UAW membership of that age group may reach 600,000, with perhaps half of these under twenty-five.⁶¹

He continued, arguing for the political potential of the young workers: “Young workers seem to be tougher and to have more staying power than students. Their stake in social change may turn out to be greater and more compelling. Most will never experience the softening effect of well-paid, high-status jobs in the professional, academic, artistic, or business worlds—jobs to which most student rebels are on their way.”⁶² They often wrote about the political potential of the traditional labor movement, but SDS never concentrated on the growing base

⁵⁸ Haber, *Students and Labor*, 13.

⁵⁹ Students for a Democratic Society, *America and the New Era* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1963), 12, The American Radicalism Collection, Special Collections, Michigan State University. On the young unemployed, although no mention is made of SDS’s role in organizing young workers: “A whole generation of young adults, potentially new blood for unionism, are now a growing pool of alienated and frustrated people, whose political direction could as easily be hostile as it could be friendly to the unions and their members.”

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Reuther Dickmeyer, *Reuther: A Daughter Strikes* (Southfield, MI: Spelman Publishers Division, Spelman, Inc., 1989), 323.

⁶¹ Brendan Sexton, “‘Middle-Class’ Workers and the New Politics,” *Beyond the New Left*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: McCall Publishing Co., 1970), 201.

⁶² Sexton, “‘Middle-Class’ Workers and the New Politics,” 201.

of the young working class. Doing so might have allowed the students to avoid the common perception of the working class as the “Old” Left. Furthermore, it might have been easier for the students to identify with young workers without fear of racism and paternalism. As the contemporary young worker pointed out, “Knowing they’re unlikely to escape individually, workers can grow desperate when denied political hope.”⁶³

AUTONOMY

Alan Haber speculated in a later interview whether the controversy surrounding *The Port Huron Statement* produced latent antagonism that permanently wounded the relationship between SDS and LID:

We shouldn’t have been put under siege. The LID could have had a more generous attitude towards their offspring. Just as we were riding the crest of our new strength and making political connections in Washington, we were pulled up short. And it’s hard to tell whether that was fortuitous in really galvanizing the organization that took shape at Port Huron, or whether it really turned us around in some negative way that didn’t become apparent until some years later.⁶⁴

Following Port Huron, the groups amicably coexisted for the next few years. SDS broached the topic of separation sporadically; in a 1963 Key List⁶⁵ mailing, SDS acknowledged, “It is no secret to most of you that there have been problems in the relationship between SDS and LID, especially since last summer [Port Huron]. The situation has been made difficult by the lack of trust—whether justified or not is not the issue—on the part of both. Yet at the present

⁶³ Sexton, “‘Middle-Class’ Workers and the New Politics,” 201.

⁶⁴ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 139.

⁶⁵ The anti-elitism that would dominate SDS later in the decade, contributing to the decentralization that fatally wounded the organization, appeared as early as 1963. Members of SDS engaged in a passionate debate over whether the name “Key List” was elitist. Even when SDS retitled the mailing “Working List,” it remained controversial. Debates about what to call the mailing were reprinted within its pages, which can be read in Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 2, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

we must live together, and things are progressing slowly, if at all.” The note suggested, “either we move toward a sharing of work and purposes and program, or we must move towards separation.”⁶⁶ Over the next few years, the alarming growth of SDS conjoined with the escalation of the Vietnam War and the corresponding protest movement challenged the relationship between SDS and the LID. Students for a Democratic Society separated from the League for Industrial Democracy in 1965, after years of discussion about the relationship between the runaway student organization and its parent. The separation was directly stimulated by a couple of incidents: Arthur McDowell’s accusations of Communist activity and “sophomoric Leninist slick talk,”⁶⁷ and SDS’s failure to adhere to regulations ensuring the LID remain tax-exempt. Partisan political activism would revoke the LID’s tax-exempt status.

The ubiquitous Michael Harrington, in his new role as Chairman of the Board with LID, wrote a memorandum in July 1965 defending SDS against McDowell’s accusations. McDowell, a member of the Council Against Communist Aggression, had suggested to the LID Board that they resign because: “The Communist apparatus has swung behind your Students for a Democratic Society and pulled out all the stops of machinery and resources it had been holding in reserve and under cover for years.”⁶⁸ In his note, Harrington clarified the position of the LID towards SDS in light of the accusations. Harrington supported SDS, although he acknowledged the presence of unrelated tension: “I do not want to imply that there are no problems between the LID and SDS. There are (as indicated in the enclosed resolution of the LID Board). But they certainly do *not* come about because our youth

⁶⁶ Students for a Democratic Society, Key List Mailing (18 January 1963), Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 2, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁶⁷ Arthur McDowell, Memorandum to LID, 1965, Student Activists Collection, Box 7, Folder 23, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

⁶⁸ McDowell, Memorandum to LID, 1965.

affiliate is pro-Communist or infiltrated by Communists. And I can think of no way to accentuate the dangerous generational schism which does exist in the liberal and radical movements today than by resorting to Mr. McDowell's McCarthyite methods." Harrington planned to maintain a connection between the LID and SDS and denounced the accusations.⁶⁹

The incident allowed Harrington to address real issues regarding the relationship between LID and SDS, which was increasingly difficult, although not hostile. Harrington admitted, "We face, rather, young people who genuinely and honestly and openly disagree with us." He proposed that the LID seek to engage a dialogue with the younger activists, and conceded that, "For our part, the LID will have to learn to live with an irreverent youth organization which will take stands that may well sadden, and even anger, us." Harrington argued that those stands were sincere, despite any disagreement with the LID platform, and because SDS ideology was not in fact a result of infiltration, "we owe it to the youth to adopt such an attitude."⁷⁰ Although Harrington seemed to value organizational association with SDS, the traditional New/Old Left tension is evident. The word "irreverent" suggests a lack of respect; the older activists wanted their younger associates to abide by their rules, but they recognized and conceded to the impatience of SDS. Harrington attempted to negate these paternalistic connotations, writing: "In saying these things, I am not proposing that we 'tolerate' the young people. That is an arrogant way of looking at the matter. Rather, I believe that the SDS is, for all of our problems with it, a potentially hopeful and positive development on the American scene. It represents personal commitment and political

⁶⁹ Michael Harrington, Memorandum to LID Board, 20 July 1965, Student Activists Collection, Box 7, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

⁷⁰ Harrington, Memorandum to LID Board, 20 July 1965.

devotion.”⁷¹ However, this statement did not validate the ideological and intellectual credibility of SDS, merely its vigor. It remained condescending.

Harrington sought to maintain the coalition with SDS in the interest of a “revitalized LID” which would “function as a meeting place of the two generations of the American democratic Left, a center where there can be candid, open discussion on all sides.”⁷² Tom Kahn, serving as Executive Secretary of the LID, also mentioned his organization’s self-appointed role as student-liberal-labor liaison: “the League finds itself the chief organizational link between the new student movement and the liberal-labor community.” Furthermore, Kahn also took a paternalistic approach to the LID’s relationship with their young associates, for whom the League accepted the “opportunities and burdens of attempting to educate the students and to influence their activities in a healthy direction.” Kahn continued, “We consider this responsibility a challenging aspect of the League’s work. If we are able to discharge it effectively we will have made an important contribution to the future of the liberal movement in America.”⁷³ The LID passed a resolution at the June 1965 Board of Directors Meetings which put “on record the League’s dissatisfaction” with the new amendment to the SDS constitution which “removed the reference to Communism as an authoritarian movement.”⁷⁴ Tom Kahn wrote to the AFL-CIO’s Donald Slaiman that tensions had arisen because of particular currents within SDS, including “hostility toward the labor movement,” which represented the “ideological confusion” of SDS. Kahn emphasized that there was no Communist infiltration or pro-Communism present in SDS, and that “the

⁷¹ Harrington, Memorandum to LID Board, 20 July 1965.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Tom Kahn, Memorandum to Donald Slaiman, 17 August 1965, Student Activists Collection, Box 7, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

⁷⁴ League for Industrial Democracy, “Resolution Adopted Unanimously at June 22, 1965 Meeting of LID Board of Directors,” Student Activists Collection, Box 7, Folder 22, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

negative tendencies in the new student movement are not irreversible.” He deemed it in the best interest of the LID to remain involved with the student movement.⁷⁵

The LID tried to find a way to integrate the rebellious younger organization. When SDS leader Todd Gitlin complained that it was not made clear on the agenda that SDS would be the main topic of discussion at the Board of Directors’ meeting, Kahn pointed out the unanimous passage of the “resolution committing the League to wider and stronger contact with SDS. This is our policy; I am personally committed to it.”⁷⁶ Kahn followed this assertion by blaming SDS for the tension: “I am also aware that there are those within SDS who have decided that a split with the LID is inevitable and desirable. They are encouraged by others on the periphery of SDS who spend a great deal of energy attacking the LID and individual Board members as enemies and sell-outs.”⁷⁷ However, SDS was unwilling to compromise their politics in the interest of the LID tax exemption. It was in the best interest of each group for the LID and SDS to divorce. The split corresponded with the escalation of the Vietnam War and a corresponding increased emphasis in SDS on draft resistance. The LID and SDS announced their separation on October 4, 1965, to take effect beginning in January of the upcoming year. The LID Annual Report of the Executive Director stated: “It simply happened that the conflict over the tax issue, where legal restrictions left little room for policy alternatives, came to a head before the political issue did.”⁷⁸

In “How New Was the New Left?,” Andrew Hunt argues that the sixties Left goes beyond a simple Old/New dichotomy, and in fact there was much more give and take

⁷⁵ Tom Kahn, Memorandum to Donald Slaiman, 17 August 1965.

⁷⁶ Tom Kahn, Letter to Todd Gitlin, 19 June 1965, 2, Box 7, Folder 23, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

⁷⁷ Tom Kahn, Letter to Todd Gitlin, 19 June 1965, 2-3.

⁷⁸ League for Industrial Democracy, Annual Report of the Executive Director 1965, 5, Box 7, Folder 23, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

between the two. In the late years of the decade, further division resulted in the second generation of SDS pushing itself out of the New Left and actually falling back on what had been determined as Old Left sources and ideologies. Hunt writes, “At their best, the 1960s insurgents furnished a moral appeal to action that still resonates today. They were the first generation of radicals to criticize the poverty of abundance, rather than the abundance of poverty.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Andrew Hunt, “How New Was the New Left?,” *The New Left Revisited*, eds. John McMillan and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 142, 151.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WAR ON POVERTY AND THE NEW INSURGENCY

Historically, one of the dangers for the American ruling class involved in the use of democratic rhetoric is that the ruled sometimes decide to take that rhetoric seriously.

Richie Rothstein, "ERAP and How it Grew"¹

On May 22, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the graduating class of the University of Michigan. He challenged the students: "For in your time, we have the opportunity not only to move to the rich society, and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society. The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty, and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time." Earlier that year, President Johnson had announced the undertaking of a national War on Poverty.

Speaking to the graduates in May, he said:

Within your lifetime powerful forces already loosed will take us toward a way of life beyond the realm of our experience, almost beyond the bounds of our imagination. For better or for worse, your generation has been appointed by history to deal with those problems, and to lead America toward a new age. You have the chance never before afforded to any people in any age: you can help build a society where the demands of morality and the needs of the spirit can be realized in the life of the nation.²

Students for a Democratic Society, the organization that had emerged from a group at the University of Michigan, had declared their willingness to take that lead two years before in *The Port Huron Statement*. Now, the War on Poverty program allowed SDS the opportunity

¹ Richie Rothstein, "ERAP and How It Grew," *Don't Mourn, Organize!: SDS Guide to Community Organizing* (Chicago: The Movement Press, 1968), 20, Oversize Collection, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

² Lyndon B. Johnson, "University of Michigan Commencement," (Ann Arbor: WUOM, 22 May 1964), audio recording from *Collected Speeches of Lyndon Johnson*, Vincent Voice Library, Michigan State University Library, <<http://archive.lib.msu.edu/AFS/vv1/010857/public/all/01-0857-013.mp3>>.

to take advantage of mainstream legitimacy for their newly proposed central program—the political mobilization of the poor community.

Two months prior to his speech in Ann Arbor, President Johnson addressed the United Auto Workers' Convention in Detroit. He commended Walter Reuther and the UAW as a leading example for the labor movement of “a clean, and honest, and progressive union.” In this speech, too, he emphasized the administrative War on Poverty: “Our times have been dominated by a Cold War; but now our times require that here at home we assume a warm-hearted war, a war of compassion for the well-being of all of our people here at home. [...] We have declared war on poverty. As long as I head this administration—and I believe as long as Walter Reuther heads the Auto Workers—the terms of this war on poverty are *unconditional surrender*.” Johnson read a portion from a wire he had received from the UAW president, pledging, “On behalf of the officers and one and one half members of the UAW, I am pleased to advise you that in answer to your call we enlist with you for the duration of the war against poverty.” Johnson assured the union that this war was, “above all, a fight for opportunity. Not a hand out, not a dole, but a vast upgrading of our people’s skills.”³ The union responded by creating the Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty to act as a component of the larger national effort.

In 1962, *The Port Huron Statement* declared, “Personal links between man and man are needed, especially to go beyond the partial and fragmentary bonds of function that bind men only as worker to worker, employee to employee, teacher to student, American to

³ Lyndon B. Johnson, “UAW Convention Speech,” (Detroit: ABC, 23 March 1964), audio recording from *Collected Speeches of Lyndon Johnson*, Vincent Voice Library, Michigan State University Library, <<http://archive.lib.msu.edu/AFS/vv1/010857/public/all/01-0857-012.mp3>>.

Russian.”⁴ With the Economic Research and Action Project, conceived in 1963 and instituted in 1964, SDS attempted to create personal links between the students and the people they tried to organize, as well as links between the various factions of what they hoped would become a powerful left-wing coalition of the labor, civil rights, and student/peace movements. ERAP envisioned these groups coalescing based on shared economic interests. The project was a deliberate attempt to bring the Southern Civil Rights Movement to the North, as well as to provide a provocative grassroots component to the liberal War on Poverty. Embodying the ideals of participatory democracy and transgressing traditional boundaries, the students involved in ERAP lived in the communities they were organizing, some for only a summer and others for years. The purpose of ERAP was to mobilize an “interracial movement of the poor.”

Although SDS had organized previous national projects—such as the Peace Research and Education Project (PREP), newsletters, and numerous student conferences—ERAP was a significant shift for SDS because of one crucial word: action. Until this point SDS was principally an intellectual movement. This dominance changed when in ERAP’s attempt to mobilize the poor, SDS also mobilized students, as they learned about community organizing in the ghettos of nine American cities. The project tested the utopian vision of participatory democracy set forth in *The Port Huron Statement*, and SDS based ERAP on the principles and ideology presented in *America and the New Era*, an SDS working document written by Tom Hayden and Richard Flacks in 1963. In the paper, SDS argued for a return to the populism and progressivism that mainstream liberalism had abandoned: “the organization of disenfranchised groups for the effective exercise of their political power—in short, the

⁴ Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), in James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 332.

recapturing of the populist inheritance of liberalism—these [...] are the only conceivable ways by which liberal programs could be enacted.”⁵

In its announcement of ERAP, SDS claimed, “Our critique of American society is not simply that it fails to meet the needs of its people, but that its institutions are not structured to allow popular control.”⁶ Through ERAP, the students attempted to put city institutions and the anti-poverty apparatus into the democratic control of the poor population and to directly confront the established structure of city politics. An introductory pamphlet to ERAP asked, “Can local organizations and protest movements move toward the achievement of a grass-roots political coalition capable of challenging the established power structure of the city?”⁷ The project attempted to create this coalition out of the poor population itself, allied with the Civil Rights Movement, labor unions, and the student radicals. SDS felt that the labor movement had failed to reach the unemployed and working poor, and took the challenge to mobilize the population in the stead of union organizers. The ERAP organizers saw poverty as a way to build a movement across racial boundaries. The same pamphlet demonstrated the new movement’s goal to connect economic grievances with racism, which made both poverty and discrimination social instead of personal problems:

[T]he façade of American prosperity hides a reality of depressed areas, sick industries, agricultural waste, planned obsolescence and unneeded products. The long standing problems of planless production, maldistribution and minority rule in the economy are brought to crisis proportions by automation.

⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, *America and the New Era* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1963), 13, The American Radicalism Collection, Special Collections, Michigan State University.

⁶ Students for a Democratic Society, “Economic Research and Action Project: An Introductory Statement,” Youth and Student Protest - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁷ Students for a Democratic Society, “Economic Research and Action Project – An Introduction,” Youth and Student Protest - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

This economic crisis is compounded by a moral crisis: racism becomes inherent in an economy that cannot provide jobs for the unskilled and does not provide training, education, housing or hope for those without work.⁸

The founding philosophy behind ERAP contended that economic grievance would connect the poor population across grave racial barriers, and that the common need for “jobs or income” created a “natural alliance” among all poor. The students set out to organize “those Americans who are now denied the opportunity to participate fully in the country’s economic and political life. We advocate a democratic transformation of American political, social and economic life.”⁹ Furthermore, the organizers intended to connect the civil rights, peace, and labor movements under a common cause. In the earliest days of the project, this ambitious coalition seemed possible because of the financial support of the labor movement.

THE CITIZENS’ CRUSADE AGAINST POVERTY

The Students for a Democratic Society conceived the Economic Research and Action Project in 1963, immediately after the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. SDS envisioned the American poor as the new vanguard of liberalism and democracy, a ripe population in need only of organizational guidance. As ERAP student Richie Rothstein later wrote, the students imagined the project with “the clear notion of how indigenous democratic organizations of the poor and the unemployed would contribute to major social change in American and the world.”¹⁰ The unlikely combination of middle-class students and urban poor would therefore lead liberalism into a new democratic American revolution. The SDS

⁸ SDS, “Economic Research and Action Project: An Introductory Statement.”

⁹ Students for a Democratic Society, “a movement of many voices....” Youth and Student Protest - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

¹⁰ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 18.

program preceded anti-poverty efforts by the labor movement and mainstream liberalism, reflecting the inspiration of the Civil Rights Movement.

However, the enlistment of the labor movement in the fight against poverty offered specific material advantages for the student movement. The United Auto Workers Reuther unveiled the “Crusade Against Poverty” at their 1964 National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The UAW Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP) took a legislative approach to the national anti-poverty program, propelled by a budget of \$1.1 million. The leadership of Students for a Democratic Society attended the UAW Convention at Reuther’s invitation.¹¹ Despite criticizing the top-down approach of the Crusade program, SDS recognized an opportunity to gain a mainstream ally for the newly conceived and chronically under-funded ERAP.

Michigan student Rennie Davis, who would later serve as ERAP president, reported on the Convention for the inaugural July 1964 *ERAP Project Report*. Davis noted that Reuther had sent hundreds of letters to different factions of the political left—women’s groups, civil rights groups, churches, businesses, unions, etc.—seeking support for the UAW campaign. While endorsing the common cause, Davis criticized the Crusade Against Poverty, concerned that the UAW program would carry “education and service into the ghetto at the expense of radical politics,” and that CCAP “considers the major significant [attacks] on poverty to be found on the legislative front, relying essentially on the ways of the liberal coalition of the last 30 years rather than the less certain road of building a new coalition with organized Negroes and poor whites as a critical new element.”¹² Therefore,

¹¹ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 390.

¹² Rennie Davis in *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964): 1, Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

ERAP would fill the role of organizing an interracial “critical new element” to liberal anti-poverty programs—with CCAP’s blessing. Davis also speculated that the student project might meet hostility from UAW locals or community churches that might deviate from their respective leadership. Davis saw this rank-and-file defection as a reflection of the problems of a top-down approach to creating a coalition, as opposed to a “genuine movement of the poor.”¹³

The federal administration’s Community Action Program (CAP) promoted the idea of trade union-style local organizations to foster political participation in poor communities, and served as the organizational and ideological underpinnings of Johnson’s War on Poverty agenda. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein wrote, “The Community Action Program (CAP) was by far the most radical innovation in the antipoverty program, for it was premised upon the idea that poverty is rooted as much in the political powerlessness of the poor as it is in their lack of jobs, education, or motivation.”¹⁴ Although the concept for ERAP preceded Johnson’s announcement of a War on Poverty and the accompanying establishment of the creation of the federal CAP and the UAW’s CCAP, these institutions provided mainstream legitimacy for SDS’s organizing program.

The students originally envisioned ERAP as a way to bring the student radicals and the labor unions together in organizing. One ERAP pamphlet claimed, “Ultimately organizations with established industrial and trade unions must work together as an alternative to corporate control.” The pamphlet explicitly listed one purpose of ERAP, to “create a working alliance between student radicals and progressive labor unions.”¹⁵ The

¹³ Davis in *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964): 2.

¹⁴ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 390.

¹⁵ SDS, “Economic Research and Action Project: An Introductory Statement,” 2.

students hoped that unemployment would be a viable issue to connect the poor population with the established political power of the labor unions. SDS would try to establish “student-labor coordinating committees in every campus area” to work together for education, action and organization, and white-collar unionism—in that order. An entire section entitled “ERAP and the Labor Movement” explained,

ERAP believes that the once strong alliance between radicals and progressive unionists must and can be rebuilt. We seek to develop cooperative action in areas of local organizing, civil rights, peace economics and insurgent politics. In the context of such action we hope that university based radicals can be both a spur to union militance and a stimulant to debate on issues of full employment, union political involvement and the strategy for democratic change.”¹⁶

Despite their criticism of the mainstream liberal approach to anti-poverty work, at this point SDS was still willing, even trying, to work within established political avenues. In fact, the ERAP *relied* on CCAP and the liberal War on Poverty in order to survive. The ERAP program worked in parallel to CCAP and the War on Poverty, not against it. A 1966 *CCAP Bulletin* urged, “College students of good will to drop whatever they are doing” to help Cesar Chavez in the San Joaquin Valley.¹⁷ Reuther supported ERAP, and he “authorized a series of student internships in Detroit and Washington, put SDS President Todd Gitlin on the CCAP steering committee, and urged UAW locals across the county to cooperate with SDS organizing projects. On occasion Reuther turned down an SDS funding request, but only because he mistakenly thought too much money was earmarked for ‘education’ and not enough for ‘organizing.’ [...] Reuther was not to be outflanked on the left.”¹⁸ CCAP even

¹⁶ SDS, “Economic Research and Action Project: An Introductory Statement,” 3.

¹⁷ “The Poor in Action: Struggle in the Vineyards,” *CCAP Bulletin* 1, no. 3 (June 1966): 2, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

¹⁸ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 391.

hired SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael to spend the summer of 1967 in Washington, DC to work as a field organizer.¹⁹

As Richie Rothstein later wrote, at the outset of ERAP, “SDS still believed in the possibility of change within the framework of the formally representative institutions of American government. ERAP’s goal was to goose those institutions a bit; to set up currents in American political life which would reverse the corruption of established liberal and trade-union forces.”²⁰ Thus, a coalition of labor unions and the poor, stimulated by the student radicals, could have a purifying effect on institutional liberalism, which *The Port Huron Statement* had called “acquiescent.” This return to the roots—radicalism, progressivism, and even democracy itself in its truest form—would in turn invigorate the civil rights and the peace movements, and the liberal and labor “forces, with pressure and inspiration from ERAP and other ‘new insurgencies’, would demand that resources be transferred from the cold war arms race to the creation of a decentralized, democratic, inter-racial welfare state at home.”²¹ SDS therefore envisioned ERAP as a potential galvanizing vehicle for the dormant rank-and-file labor movement.

The founding document for the philosophy behind ERAP, Carl Wittman and Thomas Hayden’s *America and the New Era*, blamed the unions retreat from populism and descent into managerialism for the overall apathy and inaction of American politics: “Organized liberalism, however, must take at least part of the credit for America’s political stalemate. A style of politics which emphasizes cocktail parties and seminars rather than protest marches, local reform movements, and independent bases of power cannot achieve leverage with respect to an establishment-oriented administration and a fundamentally reactionary

¹⁹ “Periscope on Poverty,” *CCAP Bulletin* 2, no. 2 (June 1967): 1, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

²⁰ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Congressional oligarchy.”²² The students believed that underneath the “liberal leadership in bed with Kennedy” of “organized liberalism” were people who would “support more militant action and more far-reaching solutions.” Therefore, “one of the chief goals of ERAP was to galvanize the quiescent populists in the ranks of labor and liberalism.”²³ In the view of the students, the self-proclaimed New Left vanguard, the once progressive labor movement had become absorbed into mainstream liberalism, instead of the political challenge that the unions represented in the past. One ERAP paper claimed, “there is a crisis and a paralysis among the liberal organizations, and behind it all is the Federal Government encouraging mild concessions and preparing to maintain order.”²⁴ Therefore, ERAP would be an exciting development for “anyone who cares about democratic improvements in our way of life, and who remembers with nostalgia and some bitterness the achievements and failures of the populist and labor movements of earlier times.”²⁵ The students would step in where, for many, their parents had failed; the New Left would save the Old.

The Other America author Michael Harrington clarified the method and strategy of ERAP, which set the students up as a prod to the vanguard of the poor, which would step into the void left by labor quiescence in an essay on the young radicals: “They are angry militants who see the poor as a new force in America, perhaps even as a substitute for the proletariat that failed.”²⁶ SDS’s criticism of the labor movement’s inaction and failure connected to larger disagreements about the methods of liberal anti-poverty programs. SDS condemned

²² Students for a Democratic Society, *America and the New Era* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1963), 13, The American Radicalism Collection, Digital Collections, Michigan State University, <<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/collections/index.cfm?TitleID=126>>.

²³ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 19.

²⁴ Thomas Hayden and Carl Wittman, “An Interracial Movement of the Poor?” (1963), reprinted in *The New Student Left: An Anthology*, eds. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale (Beacon Press: Boston, 1966), 184-185.

²⁵ Hayden and Wittman, “An Interracial Movement of the Poor?,” 180.

²⁶ Michael Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” *Beyond the New Left*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: McCall Publishing Co., 1970), 35.

the War on Poverty's inadequate size, symptomatic (versus fundamental) approach, and obfuscation of the poverty population. The students argue that the problem was not pockets of poor amidst "abundance, but rather [...] a surface of abundance which prevents us from seeing the fact that progress is both producing misery all over and leading us toward severe unemployment and economic dislocation."²⁷ However token, Johnson's War on Poverty and spin-off programs like CCAP provided much needed funding and people for the SDS "insurgency." The War on Poverty dramatized the problem, which raised public consciousness of poverty in terms of a social instead of individual issue, which in turn legitimizes the fight against poverty "in the way churches made civil rights acceptable."²⁸ Thus, the widespread national attention on the newly "discovered" problem of poverty offered mainstream legitimacy for ERAP. Michael Harrington, who clearly had close ties to the LID and SDS, famously "discovered" Appalachia and poor white people in his 1962 book *The Other America*, which in turn inspired Johnson's anti-poverty program. ERAP offered a grassroots companion or countermovement to the War on Poverty programs.

From the outset, ERAP took an outside-in grassroots approach to the problem of poverty while both CCAP and the War on Poverty adopted a more detached, legislative, top-down strategy. The organizers became frustrated by the administration's approach, which often seemed to dump money into the pockets of local officials, robbing the poor community of any agency in combating the problem. The difference in terminology demonstrated disagreement in approach: a *War* on Poverty, and the *Crusade* Against Poverty, as opposed to the non-violent and ambiguous Economic and Research Action Project. The SDS title

²⁷ The students did not mention that a "surface of abundance" allowed them to be, in fact, students. Students for a Democratic Society, *ERAP Newsletter* (February 1964): 4, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

²⁸ Rennie Davis, "The War on Poverty: Notes on an Insurgent Response," *The New Student Left: An Anthology*, eds. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 158. Originally published as "Insurgency to the War on Poverty," *ERAP Newsletter* (17 January 1965): 4, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

deliberately suggests their desire to address the fundamental *economic* causes of the problem of poverty, creating a truly grassroots movement *of* the poor in order to force structural change. The group held the larger liberal organizations to their promise of creating a political voice for the poor, helping to get representation on local War on Poverty councils—even taking control of the council in Newark.²⁹ In contrast, the liberal programs, despite the best of intentions, tended to address the symptoms of poverty rather than the causes.

In his biographical study of SDS, James Miller pointed out, “ERAP projects oscillated between alliances with liberal institutions such as the Office of Economic Opportunity and hostile attacks on them. The most tangible victories of the organizers involved winning concessions from established authorities.”³⁰ As described in more detail below, concessions were usually localized demands—traffic lights, or litigation against particular landlords. Furthermore, ERAP’s label emphasizes SDS’s combined impetus of “research and action.” With ERAP, the group sought a synthesis of those goals. The different anti-poverty programs along the liberal spectrum initially operated cooperatively, and ERAP was able to get started in Chicago because of a \$5,000 grant from the UAW.³¹

INSURGENCY TO THE WAR ON POVERTY

In 1964, Rennie Davis’ criticism of the legislative tactics of the Crusade Against Poverty at the UAW Convention noticeably irritated Reuther. Davis reported Reuther’s accusation that the student misunderstood the vision of CAP, and when he “was young, he also failed to understand such matters.” In his report to SDS, Davis responded indignantly:

²⁹ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 212.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 185. In *The Movement*, Unger reports the grant to have been \$7,500 (58) and Lichtenstein claims it was \$10,000 (391). The reason for this discrepancy is unclear.

“Jesus.”³² Four years later, in 1968, Davis described ERAP as an “insurgency” to the War on Poverty, writing, “It is not a phrase signifying fundamental opposition to the War on Poverty. Insurgency is conceived as a way to challenge the donor-donee relationship built into the army method of dispensing aid and as a set of tactics which help to visibly contrast the magnitude of poverty-related programs against Johnson’s token poverty program.”³³ Davis believed of ERAP constituted a righteous challenge to the liberal War on Poverty, forcing the administration to uphold the values and promises they were making—specifically, Title II of the Equal Opportunity Act.

The Equal Opportunity Act appropriated \$340 million specifically for its Title II, which called for Urban and Rural Community Action Programs. Although the rest of the Equal Opportunity Act was no huge deviation from established anti-poverty programs, Title II appropriated government funding for community service and organizing. SDS believed that ERAP should seek independent funding, although “refusing to ask for or take federal money should not be a *principle* of the movement. Instead, we should *demand* it, realizing and planning for the consequences of a grant not being renewed.”³⁴ Not only did Title II provide a financial well for ERAP, but “Sec. 202 of the Poverty Act provides for ‘maximum feasible participation’ of the poor in developing, conducting, and administering the poverty program.”³⁵ Recognizing that this participation had simply not been realized, SDS organized to challenge local leadership and obtain real representation on local poverty boards.

³² Rennie Davis, *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964): 2.

³³ Students for a Democratic Society, “Insurgency to the War on Poverty,” *ERAP Newsletter*, (27 January 1965): 4.

In *SDS*, Kirkpatrick Sale argues that the idea of “insurgency” also referred to an insurgency against the students’ alienation from the university system. (New York: Random House, 1973), 66.

³⁴ Davis, “The War on Poverty: Notes on an Insurgent Response,” 169.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 161.

Davis criticized the “corporate giants” and the Johnson administration’s militaristic attitude towards poverty as paternalistic and detached. Furthermore, “in defending civilian populations, like an army, they are apt to overpower the ‘enemy’ while trampling the people.”³⁶ In contrast, ERAP *was* (or at least hoped to be) the people themselves, in a truly democratic movement. The mainstream program, on the other hand, would work in opposition to “fundamental community change” and “local initiative,” the foundational goals of ERAP. The movement that ERAP attempted to organize would be fighting welfare agencies, slumlords, and city councils, “all of whom may be major backers to the local War on Poverty.”³⁷ Therefore, an insurgent response would represent a provocative challenge to the liberal strategy. This was clear from the outset in *America and the New Era*, which used the term “new insurgency.” The paper proposed, “the populist impulse in labor and organizations of liberalism can be reinforced by the emergence of new popular movements, articulating their own programs in the face of inadequate ones.”³⁸ Michael Harrington compared SDS’s strategy to the labor movement of the 1930’s, writing: “the young radicals, who have this knack of taking American’s promises seriously, sought a surge from below to give meaning to the phrasemaking on high.”³⁹ The new insurgency kept in the tradition of SDS’s challenge to mainstream liberalism.

Davis emphasized that “insurgency” did not necessarily constitute opposition to liberal programs, but instead challenged those programs to uphold their own ideals—much like the original conception of SDS in relation to mainstream liberalism. In 1964, at least, the New Left existed in parallel to organized liberalism, poking the mainstream when it

³⁶ Davis, “The War on Poverty: Notes on an Insurgent Response,” 155.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁸ SDS, *America and the New Era*, 13.

³⁹ Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” 35.

became “quiescent.” The student radicals challenged liberals to return to the roots, to the foundational democratic values of the United States—they did not oppose those values themselves. Davis concludes:

A strategy of insurgent response to the War on Poverty is essentially a fight by poor people for control over the existing poverty money and for federal support to a real war on poverty. And that fight begins at the neighborhood level, where block groups write their own plans and send them downtown. Eventually poor people must get together and make demands on the whole national system. But the beginnings for a more shared abundance and democratic participation are found at the neighborhood level where ordinary people are talking to each other about how to change the ghetto and outside country.⁴⁰

SDS conceived of ERAP as the vehicle that would galvanize the poor, whom SDS imagined—even romanticized—as a ripe radical demographic simply in need of leadership. Although they established projects in rural Appalachia, the most successful projects focused on the urban poor of industrial cities. The students’ experiences in the Southern Civil Rights Movement had inspired them to create a Northern movement to both support and supplement the efforts of civil rights groups like SNCC.

FROM FAYETTE COUNTY TO THE GHETTO

At the 1964 UAW convention in Atlantic City, Walter Reuther introduced his union’s Crusade Against Poverty as part of a strategy to elevate the problem as a moral issue, as opposed to an individual problem. This moralistic strategy was directly inspired by the success of the Civil Rights Movement against segregation in the South. Miller explained: “Reuther saw a parallel between CAP and the efforts of the labor unions and the churches to bring to the Civil Rights movement [...] legitimizing groups which had interests other than

⁴⁰ Davis, “The War on Poverty: Notes on Insurgent Response,” 169.

civil rights.”⁴¹ The Southern Civil Rights Movement also inspired SDS—many of the student organizers worked down South over the summer on the Freedom Ride campaign. Several of the original SDS leaders spoke about how illuminating they found the experience. Tom Hayden said before working with SNCC, “I didn’t realize the dimension, the depth to which the South was another country.”⁴² SDS sent Hayden to “report” on the movement in the South, and he wrote pamphlets and article for *The Michigan Daily* about his experience in Fayette County, Tennessee. Another SDS member, Vivian Leburg Rothstein, said that the South felt like an “underdeveloped country,” “desperately poor.”⁴³ However, SDS soon realized that although the South felt like “another country,” many of the problems plaguing the region existed in their own backyards as well, although sometimes in less explicit ways.

The students’ experiences in the Civil Rights Movement prompted SDS to start their own organizing projects in the North. The memo announcing an ERAP news service described the project as “a growing movement in the North as well as in the South, which is combating injustices similar to those in the south.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Hayden indirectly commented on the relationship between ERAP and SNCC: “We are not seeking a dramatic movement of conflict,”—a direct allusion to the Southern Civil Rights Movement—“but a long series of such movements that change the balance of power.”⁴⁵ The project was set up on the SNCC model, where the students lived in the communities they were organizing, and

⁴¹ SDS, *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964): 2.

⁴² Helen Garvy and Shire Films, *Rebels With a Cause* (New York: Zeigeist Films, 2000).

⁴³ Helen Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁴⁴ Leni Zeiger, Memorandum to Students for a Democratic Society membership, 21 February 1965, Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁴⁵ Tom Hayden, “An Open Letter to ERAP Supporters and New Organizers,” 5, Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

decisions were made democratically by the neighborhood groups.⁴⁶ This process both connected the students with the population they were organizing, as well as put the ideals of participatory democracy into practice—both elements an effort to embody the ideals of *The Port Huron Statement*.

SDS wanted the Northern projects to support the Southern movement while giving students an alternative so that they didn't have to "run down to the South," as Sharon Jeffrey put it, to gain organizing experience in the summer. Jeffrey said that with the establishment of ERAP, SDS had to "accept the fact that we have problems in the North and we, as Northerners, needed to begin to address those."⁴⁷ As Carl Wittman of the Chester project rationalized, a proportion of the Southern black population was now living in the urban industrial North. He asked, "Aren't these really the same people we were working with this summer? Why shouldn't we shift our activities here [Chester], only two miles from Swarthmore?"⁴⁸ With momentum and inspiration from the movement in the South, SDS chose nine cities for "one summer" and began to "organize an interracial movement of the poor."⁴⁹

There was a more personal racial element involved in SDS's shift North. As Rothstein later describes, "it had become clear, [...] that the role of white radicals could no longer be as organizers in black communities and in black organizations."⁵⁰ Some students felt that being white had held them back in the Southern movement, and no longer wanted to

⁴⁶ Joanne Grant, "Students organizing the poor in North's cities," 1, originally published in *National Guardian* and redistributed by Students for a Democratic Society, Youth and Student Protest - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁴⁷ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁴⁸ Carl Wittman, "Students and Economic Action," *The New Left: An Anthology*, eds. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale (Beacon Press: Boston, 1966), 173.

⁴⁹ Sharon Jeffrey quoted in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*. "Interracial movement of the poor" is used frequently in ERAP literature.

⁵⁰ Rothstein, "ERAP and How it Grew," 22.

merely be “tagging along” on the Southern campaign. Thus, SDS specifically sought out ethnically white areas of the city in which to organize, with the intention of blunting any poor white backlash to the Civil Rights Movement. SDS would therefore act as Northern allies to the movement. However, when the students actually arrived on site, they were often surprised by the demography of the project locations. As Richie Rothstein later admitted, “the fact that most ERAP projects were eventually placed in [mostly non-white] communities was not originally intended; the site of the Newark project, for example, was believed to have been inhabited much more by working-class whites than was in fact the case.”⁵¹ However, ERAP’s relationship to the Civil Rights Movement went beyond merely acting as a (white) Northern auxiliary. SDS wanted to provoke a new direction in the national student movement because they felt that “the targets of SNCC still remained primarily symbolic”—SDS wanted to go deeper than the lunch counter. As one Newark organizer said: “if you didn’t have a job, and you couldn’t afford that hamburger, what difference did it make whether you were sitting in the front of the restaurant or in the back, or in the restaurant at all.”⁵² SDS thought that SNCC and the Southern movement were mistaken to not focus specifically on economic issues, and that ERAP would fill that gap. Rothstein claimed that ERAP influenced CORE and SNCC to start organizing around poverty and urban issues, which in turn spurred the Black Power movement as it gained prominence later in the sixties.⁵³

⁵¹ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 22.

⁵² Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁵³ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 22.

“AN INTERRACIAL MOVEMENT OF THE POOR”

The ERAP effort emphasized Students for a Democratic Society as a multi-issue organization as the war in Vietnam escalated. One letter introducing ERAP addressed the implications of the escalation of the anti-war movement for SDS as early as 1965: “In the past few months, SDS has been increasingly identified to the public solely as an anti-Vietnam-War group, and its members and supporters have increasingly turned their attention to this issue. We do not wish to devalue SDS’s commitment to opposition towards an immoral war, but we feel that its commitment to positive social change through community political organizing is no less important.”⁵⁴ SDS saw the peace movement, Civil Rights Movement, and labor movement as interrelated, so that the success of one directly affected that of the others: “The organization of people in terms of economic issues and interests must also embrace the civil rights and peace movements. ‘Civil Rights’ means little if for the great majority of Negro people there are no roads up out of the ghetto. ‘Peace’ is but a hollow dream if alternatives to the war dependent economy are not formulated and made politically possible.” Unemployment became the focus of the economic campaign based on the belief that, “The social value that income is a reward for productive work can no longer be maintained in an economic system that cannot provide work for all its members.”⁵⁵ For some in the Civil Rights Movement, the shift from race to class was the “next logical step.” Junius Williams, an African-American student at Yale Law and Newark organizer, said that ERAP: “was the first chance I had to really confront the harder problems of economics and

⁵⁴ John T. Rich, Letter from ERAP Boston, *ERAP Newsletter* (8 April 1965), Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁵⁵ SDS, “Economic Research and Action Project – An Introduction.”

race together. It was a class and race thing. Up until that point I had only been dealing with race problems, and that's what the civil rights movement was all about."⁵⁶

The labor movement was directly connected to this interrelated "Triple Revolution," the ideology dominating *America and the New Era*. The triple revolution combined the different strains of the left: "Issues now pressing the Labor movement seem to converge with those of urban Negroes fighting for equality, and middle-class groups working for disarmament."⁵⁷ *America and the New Era* hoped for a "reinvigorated" labor movement, which they proposed, "could be a major force in the creation of the democratic social order. [...] by connecting democracy and economic equality and security, and by fighting in the formulation of work rules."⁵⁸ ERAP applied this strategy, in light of SDS' that "the traditional sources of power for movements for social justice find themselves on the defensive. [...] The traditional base of labor's power and social influence – the production line workers – is vanishing."⁵⁹ Once again, the students imagined themselves stepping up where labor had failed. Richard Flacks, an organizer at the first ERAP site in Chicago, wrote that the labor movement was the most capable major institution to organize "centers of political and economic power which are capable of effectively challenging the dominating influence of the corporations." However, "an outstanding tragedy of our time has been the labor movement's tendency to act to protect the jobs of those presently employed and presently unionized rather than acting decisively in behalf of those who are presently or potentially without jobs." Flacks argued that this new movement would be necessarily

⁵⁶ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁵⁷ Students for a Democratic Society, *America and the New Era*, 15.

⁵⁸ SDS, *America and the New Era*, 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

interracial, since jobs for white and black workers alike were “scarce.”⁶⁰ As ERAP would soon discover, despite persuasive argument and logical prediction, unemployment would prove to be an unviable organizing strategy since jobs were not, in fact, “scarce,” and unemployment was not dramatically on the rise in the mid-sixties.

Regardless, ERAP began “an interracial movement of the poor” in 1964 with projects in Chester (Pennsylvania), Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Hazard (Kentucky mining town), Baltimore, Cleveland, Louisville, Detroit and Newark. Thomas Hayden remembered,

It was almost like a lottery, we did a little analysis of the cities in the United States that had the biggest poverty problems, and then sat around trying to figure who was going to go there. I had never been to Newark in my life, but I got in a car with a bunch of people, and we moved to Newark; and spent four years there, livin’ on nothing, going door to door, trying to organize block clubs.⁶¹

SDS typically chose their sites because the Northern Student Movement had already established a project there, or because the conditions of white unemployment made the city an obvious choice. All of the ERAP sites chosen were in remarkably poor areas, excepting the Boston project, which was located “in suburban areas among middle-class defense workers. The issue is conversion to a peacetime economy.”⁶²

Although they strove to create an interracial movement, in most areas the students entered on the heels of white flight. For several locations, once the students arrived on the site they realized that the problems they would face were not necessarily the same ones they had expected. As mentioned, the racial composition of the communities was not majority white, and discrimination became an unexpectedly explicit issue. Most significantly,

⁶⁰ Richard Flacks, “Organizing the Unemployed: The Chicago Project,” *The New Left: An Anthology*, eds. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 133. Originally written in April 1964 at beginning of JOIN in Chicago.

⁶¹ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁶² Grant, “Students organizing the poor in North’s cities,” 1.

considering the original goals of ERAP, it became quickly clear that the main problem facing the ERAP sites was not unemployment, but rather housing, with impending urban renewal directly threatening the homes of ghetto residents. The law of eminent domain forced urban residents from their homes in order to make room for public housing tenements, expressways, and other projects. Historians like Kenneth Jackson and Thomas Sugrue have categorically proven that eminent domain was applied disproportionately to poor black communities.⁶³

Sharon Jeffrey, a leading organizer in Cleveland, remarked after the first few weeks onsite on both the unanticipated heterogeneity of Cleveland and the state of public housing in the city. She noticed that slums and poverty were not always visible because of public housing, which “is an organized system of poverty as opposed to a community of poverty.”⁶⁴ The creation of public housing was a component of President Johnson’s 1966 Model Cities program. Thus, the War on Poverty was actually creating problems for the poor that ERAP then attempted to ameliorate. The landscape of urban poor communities resulted in decentralization within the ERAP administration. Michael Harrington wrote that ERAP encountered problems when they discovered “the poor are not grouped into incipient communities. A slum street fragments and atomizes people.”⁶⁵ The most effective organizing focused on immediate issues, such as garbage removal, or as one site phrased it, “rats and roaches” instead of jobs or income.⁶⁶ The localized needs of their projects forced the students to adjust their strategies. Overall, this localization resulted in an organizational

⁶³ For more information about urban renewal, see: Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶⁴ SDS, *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964).

⁶⁵ Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” 36.

⁶⁶ “We’ve Got to Reach Our Own People,” *Don’t Mourn, Organize!: SDS Guide to Community Organizing* (Chicago: The Movement Press, 1968), 12, Oversize Collection, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

decentralization that made a national coordinated organization for ERAP increasingly difficult.

The experience of actually living in the cities meant that ERAP participants witnessed the direct effects of the physical reconstruction of American cities after World War II upon residents. Urban renewal and displacement became prominent issues for many of the projects. The first report from the Philadelphia project mentioned an area of Queen Village that had privately created and funded a plan to improve housing standards; but the plan emphasized home owning in an area of majority tenants. There was “no provision for the Negro members of the community, who will be displaced by the expressway coming through in six months.”⁶⁷ Public housing, another liberal program, also became an important issue for several of the projects. Philadelphia reported that “public housing at the same rent rate costs more” than private housing. Furthermore, blacks represented the poorest housing and the lowest income of the area. Additionally, the Philadelphia organizers observed that, “when any minority in a neighborhood reaches twenty per cent of the neighborhood population, the others start to move out. This seems to mainly apply to Negroes in our area.”⁶⁸ This “tipping point” phenomenon that ERAP observed resulted largely from long-standing discriminatory practices among real estate and loan agencies, and the resulting allegedly *de facto* segregation perpetuated itself.

ERAP set up the first project in Chicago, titled JOIN, for “Jobs or Income Now” and enabled by the UAW grant. One of JOIN’s first “actions” was to sell apples on the Chicago Loop, “the center of white-collar lower-middle-class employment,” and outside of a Pete Seeger concert to reach liberal organizations. JOIN also sold apples outside of plant-gates on

⁶⁷ SDS, *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

payday. The ERAP organizers naively intended the apple sales to symbolize Depression-era unemployment, reminding “employed workers of threats to their own job security” and thereby “arousing interest in JOIN, and raising money.” Completely unaware of the condescension inherent in this “action,” the students hoped that the apples would reinvigorate the dormant—*The Port Huron Statement*’s “acquiescent”—Chicago labor unions. The proposed goal of using the common cause of ERAP to create student-labor alliances was, indeed, not just lip service. However, not surprisingly, “rank-and-file assistance for plant-gate apple sales never materialized.”⁶⁹

The Newark Community Union Project, or NCUP, was one of the most successful ERAP sites, along with JOIN in Chicago. Incidentally, NCUP’s success owed much to the fact that the project was willing to work for change within the city’s established institutions. NCUP agitated the local “liberal coalition” to see race and economics as interrelated. The project focused on organizing block groups, hoping to eventually use the established coalition to form “association with homeowners and small businessmen concerned with property values, of all things to be concerned about.”⁷⁰ The NCUP was allied with the Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council and Newark Committee for Full Employment, and eventually achieved Title II representation on Newark’s poverty council. Joanne Grant’s *National Guardian* article about ERAP pointed out, “The attention it [NCUP] receives from city officials illustrates its influence.” The NCUP was even equipped with a hotline to the mayor’s office.⁷¹

The Newark ERAP site greatly benefited from consistent leadership in Tom Hayden, who spent four years there. NCUP embraced housing as the agent of mobilization, and in

⁶⁹ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 19.

⁷⁰ SDS, *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964).

⁷¹ Grant, “Students Organizing the poor in North’s cities,” 2.

“An Open Letter to ERAP Supporters and New Organizers,” Hayden wrote: “Today numbers of people, probably in the hundreds, live in better conditions because of pressure, or the threat of pressure, on their landlords.”⁷² In the letter, Hayden argued against slum clearance in recognition that the racist process displaced the poor population in order to gentrify an area to attract middle-class whites. Despite the hypocrisy inherent in that criticism, Hayden’s efforts in Newark are commendable if not simply for his longevity. One of the longest running sites, SDS eventually abandoned the Newark project as escalating racial tension, which eventually imploded in the 1967 riots, made it increasingly uncomfortable for the participants as white middle-class organizers in a poor black community.

ERAP suffered because many of the sites had an abundance of volunteers available in the summer, but availability dropped dramatically once the school year began—one of the inherent obstacles of a student movement and a specific project which required students to physically relocate. Furthermore, the ERAP organizers lived on a barely subsistence budget—there was a competition of sorts between the original sites to test which site could spend the least per day on food. The students worked constantly—when they were not going door-to-door talking to the community, or organizing meetings and rent-strikes, or managing the day-to-day tasks of the house, they were talking and writing about what they were experiencing. As Sharon Jeffrey later said about her time with ERAP: “We were very serious organizers. We *intended* to change the world, and our business and our life was about changing the world.”⁷³

⁷² Tom Hayden, “An Open Letter to ERAP Supporters and New Organizers,” 2-3.

⁷³ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

THE FAILURE OF ERAP

The decision of SNCC and the Civil Rights Movement that “it was time for blacks to organize their own communities, and for whites to organize their own communities” contributed to ERAP’s brevity. Although ERAP had been conceived as an interracial movement, and SDS was connected to the Civil Rights Movement, reality held that the majority of the urban poor were black, and the majority of students in SDS were white.

Junius Williams, an African-American organizer at NCUP, remembered:

Well, race in the NCUP project was the sleeper. The people who were basically in charge were white, and they were from out of the community. That became an issue, I won't say a problem, at first, but that became an issue to some people in the community because folks were saying well, they gonna leave one day, and I'm still gonna to be here. That was what was happening in SNCC in Mississippi and Alabama, and that's why SNCC said, White folks, you gotta go. It wasn't meant in any other way, it was meant to say, black folks at some point have to take the responsibility for their destiny; and you with your superior skills and knowing how to run a meeting, and knowing how to be articulate, and having all of the social skills and graces that poor black people didn't have; it became a significant issue.⁷⁴

In addition to the rise of Black Power, debates within SDS about the focus of organizing effort of a student movement should be in the community or on campus, the essential experimental nature of ERAP, and most tangibly the escalation of the Vietnam War all contributed to the end of ERAP.

FAILURE: THE CAMPUS VERSUS THE COMMUNITY

Students for a Democratic Society saw ERAP as an opportunity to “submerge themselves” in a community in order to affect real change. The nature of the project also encouraged the student organizers to create personal relationships within the community.

⁷⁴ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*..

This contact helped dispel popular preconceptions amongst the poor and working class of the student radicals as “bad or kooky.”⁷⁵ Thus, ERAP symbolized an important and significant effort to bridge the divide between the isolated university campus and the city. In his “Open Letter,” Hayden presented a challenge to his peers: “Students especially ought to consider whether their own needs are satisfied by life in the universities and the professions as now constituted, or whether they must find an alternative to staleness by taking sides, risky as it may be, with the movement for a truly democratic society we are trying to build.”⁷⁶

However, some within the ranks of SDS questioned whether it was responsible of the student movement to try to organize the urban poor at the expense of middle-class communities, both on the campus and within the society at large. Paul Potter, president of SDS from 1965-66, warned the student movement of over-emphasizing the “problems of the dispossessed,” which did not alter campus issues. Potter believed that if the radicals were to achieve a true American revolution that “the voiceless would have to become partners in a radical coalition that took seriously the ‘growing frustration of certain elements of the middle class.’” Potter claimed, “It is through the experience of the middle class and the aesthetic of bureaucracy and mass society that the vision and program of participatory democracy will come—if it is to come.”⁷⁷ He argued that it would be a mistake on the part of the students to ignore the middle-class frustrations that had driven them to the movement in the beginning.

In “Words Butter No Parsnips: Remarks on the Nature of Community Political Organizing,” Steve Max, who served as the first LID liaison to the campus after the LID-SDS split in 1965, assessed the community organizing phenomenon of the mid-sixties. Max attributed the creation of ERAP not to inspiration from the labor movement, nor the Civil

⁷⁵ “We’ve Got to Reach Our Own People,” 16.

⁷⁶ Hayden, “An Open Letter to ERAP Supporters and New Organizers,” 6.

⁷⁷ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 195-196.

Rights Movement, nor mainstream liberalism, but to the inescapable middle-class status of the students. He tried to answer the question, “Where does the conception of the improvement of a community through the primary activity of its inhabitants come from?” Max proposed, somewhat counter-intuitively yet perceptively, “The answer lies hidden in the very middle-class attitudes which the student brings to ghetto activity. It lies in the Horatio Alger rhetoric that anyone can make it if they try, that the poor don’t try hard enough and don’t care enough.”⁷⁸ Through this logic, the poor need only to act, and the students can help them do so in their role as “catalyst midwife.” Max recognized the inevitable localization of this approach: “While it is true that there is refuse in the hall because people don’t remove it, it is also true that there is refuse in the hall because the landlord doesn’t provide cans for it and the city doesn’t remove it.” Consequently, “What is entailed here is the building of block-by-block, district-by-district political organizations; not splinter groups or protest movements, but an organization which makes a direct assault in the dominant party, through the primary election.”⁷⁹

Although informed by middle-class values, the students never applied the program of ERAP to their own communities. Don McKelvey pointed out that in the context of SDS’s analysis of a domestic economic crisis based on the inability of the system to deal with automation-provoked unemployment, combined with the international crisis in Southeast Asia, “the political response of the middle class—especially the automation-prone lower middle class—will be extremely important. The possibility of a fascist response—involving domestic conservatism and, especially, international adventurism—is much too great not to

⁷⁸ Steve Max, “Words Butter No Parsnips: Remarks on the Nature of Community Political Organizing,” 2-3, Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 1, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁷⁹ Steve Max, “Words Butter No Parsnips,” 2-3.

be organized against now.”⁸⁰ In April 1965, when the national structure of ERAP was in its last throes, Steve Bookchester of Chicago’s JOIN asked in the *ERAP Newsletter*: “Should this organization, which grew out of the campus, have ever gone out to try and organize the urban poor in the first place?” Bookchester accused the project of lacking the “courage” to work on campus. He wrote:

And why do we run from the middle-class communities? True, SDS seemingly rejects the values of middle-class America. But it is also true, it seems, that any way one would define middle-class, the vast majority of SDS members come from middle-class backgrounds. Why don’t we set up a project in a typical middle-class community, perhaps a suburb, and attempt to organize those people around relevant social issues? Are we afraid of failure?⁸¹

Bookchester’s inquiries represent a rare direct contemporary acknowledgment of the problematic relationship between the students and their middle-class origins, and an additional dimension to the debate within SDS about organizing off-campus.

In his essay “On the Problem of the New Left,” League of Industrial Democracy Executive Secretary Thomas Kahn pointed out perhaps the biggest problem inherent in the students ERAP effort: “Voluntary poverty, precisely because it is voluntary, is never real poverty.”⁸² The students had the choice to leave the ghettos—and they did—whereas of institutional and structural discrimination entrapped (and entrap) the poor there. This fundamental difference between the students and the poor made the broader movement-oriented goals of ERAP impossible. Kahn recognized, “The students are in rebellion against middle-class values and ways of living. The poor, on the other hand, want nothing so much

⁸⁰ Don McKelvey, “Some Considerations in the Resource Allocation Question,” Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 2, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁸¹ Steve Bookchester, Letter to Editor, *ERAP Newsletter* (April 8, 1965), Youth and Student Protest - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁸² Thomas Kahn, “On the Problem of the New Left,” *Student Activism*, ed. Irving Howe (The Bobbs-Merrill Series in Composition and Rhetoric, 1967), 53. Originally published in *Commentary* XLII (July 1966), 30-38.

as to get into the middle class, and they are interested in tangible activities toward that end. [...] But the point is that between the students and the poor there is no essential identity of interest such as can be assumed to exist between the union organizer and the factory worker.”⁸³

FAILURE: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF AN EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT

Experiments produce information for organizers, not necessarily mass movements.

Richie Rothstein,
“ERAP and How it Grew”⁸⁴

The national ERAP structure had “dissolved” by the spring of 1965—less than a year after Chabot began work in Chicago. Although individual projects, including Chicago, Cleveland, and Newark, survived for a time, SDS rationalized national dissolution because the issues of ERAP became very localized. In 1968, ERAP chronicler Rothstein pointed out that “not since March 1965 had any two ERAP organizing staffs sat down together to evaluate and discuss their work.”⁸⁵ The pamphlet “Economic Research and Action Project: An Introductory Statement” lists the purposes of ERAP in this order: “1. Stimulate discussion, 2. Research and publication, 3. Action and organization, 4. Aid other groups, 5. Facilitate an “alliance between student radicals and progressive labor unions.”⁸⁶ While the inclusion of a student-union alliance is noteworthy, more significant is that action and organization lie third on the list. ERAP was in every way an experiment for SDS; as Richie

⁸³ Kahn, “On the Problem of the New Left,” 30-38.

⁸⁴ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁶ SDS, “Economic Research and Action Project: An Introductory Statement.”

Rothstein later wrote, “How could a project experiment with factory organizing, or consumer organizing, or draft-resistance organizing, in such a context?”⁸⁷

One ERAP organizer later proclaimed that: “I was the one who got organized, by the people I was organizing.”⁸⁸ Although the ERAP experiment was an important and invaluable lesson for the organizers, an “interracial movement of the poor” failed to materialize. Most of the projects were unable to accomplish any substantial change beyond rent strikes and occasional legal victories against slumlords. The only tangible achievements of the national ERAP project were, in fact, concessions from the liberal establishment: a pioneering free-lunch program in the Cleveland public schools, and the locally-elected anti-poverty board in Newark was granted funding for a recreational center. ERAP did not significantly affect the established institutions of city politics. As early as 1964, GROIN (Garbage Removal or Income Now) overcame JOIN (Jobs or Income Now) within the ERAP movement, and the programs become increasingly localized. Rothstein explains: “The issues shifted from national full employment to more local issues—Welfare administration, housing conditions, local city housekeeping issues. The original rationale was soon lost, however, as ERAP found local political structures to be so rigid that not even petty reforms, completely unthreatening to the national economic structure and distribution of resources, could be won.”⁸⁹

In the end, ERAP’s most important success was serving as a sort of organizer boot camp. Most students did not stay on a project anywhere near as long as Hayden’s four-year stint in Newark. Most students only worked for a summer before returning to the universities to organize campus reform projects and mobilize Vietnam protest. However, the original

⁸⁷ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 26.

⁸⁸ Wilkerson in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁸⁹ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 21.

goal to facilitate a student-union alliance through ERAP completely failed. Originally allied with the liberal establishment, “Before too long, this attitude of most ERAP organizers toward the organizations of labor and the liberal middle class changed from one of hope to one of the deepest hostility and contempt.”⁹⁰ In his retrospective 1968 article, Rothstein wrote: “The ERAP structure was set up to test particular hypotheses about American society. When these hypotheses were abandoned, the structure suffered a similar fate. [...] If structure should follow function, then the demise of ERAP was as it should be.”⁹¹ The growing anti-war movement, a more immediate and viable issue, soon consumed the attention of the student radicals.

FAILURE: THE ESCALATION OF THE VIETNAM WAR

The founders of Students for a Democratic Society initially intended the group to be a multi-issue organization for democratic change. The original group had deep domestic concerns, including problems within American society like poverty and discrimination that they attempted to address in ERAP. SDS never anticipated that it would become identified solely as an anti-war group. Organizer Carolyn Craven voiced this awareness: “We didn’t want to become a single issue organization and if we emphasized the war, that’s the path we were heading down.” However, the war overseas overshadowed all of the students’ efforts at home. Carl Oglesby, in his 1969 summary of the last decade of student action, wrote that in 1965, “The war abruptly becomes the leading issue for most white radicals. But not for community organizers, some of whom in fact are bitter about the new preoccupation.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹² Carl Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” *Liberation* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1969), 2, Pamphlet Collection, Socialism Series, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

Todd Gitlin later recalled the end of ERAP and the emerging unavoidability of the anti-war movement: “We thought we were not going to be able to evade Vietnam, Vietnam was coming after us and we’d better get ready for it. The war was going to become central to SDS whether we liked it or not. And for the most part SDS didn’t because we had domestic concerns that took priority.” Tom Hayden expressed a similar view to the relationship between the war and SDS’ agenda: “I already thought that we were going to, um, run into real troubles because of the lack of funding or commitment to the domestic problems of jobs and poverty, because of the war.” The anti-war movement was drawing bodies, funding, and momentum away from the ERAP effort, and the intensification of the anti-war movement played a significant role in the abandonment of ERAP. Hayden acknowledged that, “By 67, most of us felt that the war had undermined our project of trying to create this interracial movement of the poor in the cities, and in the South, and in Appalachia; and it was really the war that had become our ultimate problem to confront.”⁹³

The escalating war effort meant very different things for poor communities of the ERAP sites than it did for the students there. In the early stages of the war, the students received automatic draft deferments. The poor and working-class communities, on the other hand, were sending their sons and husbands to fight in Vietnam. James Miller reported, “As Jeffrey discovered during the summer of 1965, many poor people, though hostile to local police and welfare officials, clung to the American version of the myth of the Good King.”⁹⁴ Jeffrey understood poor and working-class support for the war because she recognized that the people fighting the war needed to believe that the administration was sending those men to fight for an underlying good cause. The radical coalition that ERAP sought to galvanize

⁹³ All quotes from Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁹⁴ SDS, *ERAP Project Report* (July 1964).

became impossible, partly due to the privilege of the students that had made the project problematic from the outset.

THE LEGACY OF THE ECONOMIC RESEARCH AND ACTION PROJECT

Fundamental flaws in the strategy of the movement contributed to the ultimate failure of ERAP. For one, *rising* unemployment was simply not a priority problem in most cities, as the students quickly discovered.⁹⁵ Although most of the sites attempted to adjust to local demands, they “oscillated between alliances with liberal institutions such as the Office of Economic Opportunity and hostile attacks on them.”⁹⁶ This indecisive approach complicated the increasingly tenuous relationship between the New Left and mainstream liberalism. Also, it was at this time (1965) that SDS was in the process of becoming completely autonomous from the LID.

Nelson Lichtenstein argues that the ERAP years represented a vital opportunity for the alliance of labor and the New Left. Lichtenstein wrote of the 1964 Atlantic City Convention that SDS was in attendance “because Reuther invited them, but more important, because for this brief moment in the history of American liberalism the UAW and SDS shared an equally radical agenda.”⁹⁷ The ERAP projects and rhetoric did have a perceptible impact on liberal-labor community projects. However, many ERAP veterans expressed contradictory views about the radicalism of American liberalism. As Richie Rothstein pointed out, “The use of ERAP rhetoric by the United Auto Workers elite in the Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty is a far cry from the galvanization of the UAW rank and file to

⁹⁵ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 212.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁹⁷ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 390-91.

mass protest.”⁹⁸ Although CCAP and the UAW articulated many of the same goals as ERAP, they contributed only funding for a project in great need of corporeal support. Despite its rhetoric, SDS placed CCAP much closer to the ineffectual programs of Johnson’s War on Poverty—Model Cities and urban renewal, the unrepresentative poverty boards—than with their own ERAP.

For many in SDS, ERAP exposed institutional liberalism as hypocritical and hopeless. The movement transitioned from willingness and even a desire to work within the institutions of American liberalism to a fundamental opposition to the mainstream left.

Rothstein continued,

We are now enemies of welfare-state capitalism [...] We view these [liberal-labor] forces—and the system they might have espoused—as being incompatible with a non-interventionist world policy and no more than a manipulative fraud perpetuated upon the dignity and humane aspirations of the American people. This last conclusion we owe in large measure to four years of ERAP experience. In a healthy pragmatic style we tested an optimistic hypothesis about the limits of American pluralism.⁹⁹

Rothstein’s statement indicated a shift for SDS from alliance with established liberalism, working in conjunction with programs like the War on Poverty and the Crusade Against Poverty, to direct opposition. In his 1966 essay assessing “The Mystical Militants,” Michael Harrington also observed this shift: “The welfare state is, they [the young radicals] say, a fraud. And the liberals, who actually boast of having created this monster in the name of humane values, are therefore the worst hypocrites.”¹⁰⁰ Rothstein dismissed “liberal labor forces” as a “manipulative fraud” and acknowledged the experimental nature of ERAP with a positive spin. Rothstein made these conclusions based on a project that could not sustain itself at the national level for much more than a year. He speculated, “Whether ERAP was

⁹⁸ Rothstein, “ERAP and How It Grew,” 21.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” 37.

justified in concluding after so [s]hort a trial that the ranks of labor and liberalism could not be galvanized by the power of our example, and that the power structure was totally inflexible and unresponsive to demands from below, is a question that must remain unanswered.”¹⁰¹

The ERAP experiment meant more to the New Left than dismissal of the liberal-labor establishment, however. As James Miller pointed out, “Long after the experiments had wound down, it was possible to point to an example like Cleveland and say, ‘Look, *this* is participatory democracy in practice; *this* is the radical alternative.’”¹⁰² Harrington also defended the effort in spite of its possible failure, emphasizing middle-class values of the students, which were projected on the poor they tried to organize. Harrington concluded about ERAP: “By going into the slum, they are doing penance for the sins of affluence; by sharing the life of those who are so impoverished that they are uncorrupted, values are affirmed. It is honest and moral and antihypocritical to be on the margin of society *whether the community organization works or not.*”¹⁰³

The shift towards Vietnam protest was in a way beneficial to ERAP’s fate: “By the time the projects finally collapsed, the attention of journalists and radicals had shifted to the mounting protests against the Vietnam War. The image of participatory democracy survived untarnished. Of course, organizers who had lived through the experiments were in a position to know better.”¹⁰⁴ ERAP might have failed in realizing the utopian visions of socialist commonwealths set forth in *The Port Huron Statement*, but in the end the project has a decisive impact on the New Left, both politically and personally. SDS president Paul Potter

¹⁰¹ Rothstein, “ERAP and How it Grew,” 23.

¹⁰² Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 216.

¹⁰³ Harrington, “The Mystical Militants,” 35.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 216.

explained: “People in SDS [...] had seen a chance to go directly for the jugular vein of the system. We leapt and missed and came up, not with a new society, but with a slightly different portion of the well-chewed piece of gristle so many American radicals had gnawed and choked on before.”¹⁰⁵ Although inherently flawed and largely lost in the memory of the student movement, the students’ efforts to organize the poor represented important transgressions of their middle-class boundaries which impacted the direction of the movement which came to define the last years of the sixties. The looming presence of Vietnam quickly became unavoidable for SDS, and in the last years of the decade erupted and the war ripped both the movement and the liberal coalition to pieces.

¹⁰⁵Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 216.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLOSION

If the Economic Research and Action Project had been successful as an organizer boot camp, then it mobilized the Students for a Democratic Society for the Vietnam War. As early as 1965, it became clear that the anti-war movement required immediate organization. Although the Vietnam War itself drafted mostly working-class and poor men, thanks to draft deferments for students, the anti-war movement took bodies, funding, and attention from domestic SDS projects such as ERAP. The anti-war effort attracted many new members, and the swelling SDS membership challenged the organization's ideal of internal participatory democracy. The direct, immediate action required to mobilize against the Vietnam War directly contributed to SDS's self-implosion, and to the consequent suppression of an allied worker-student radical vanguard.

SDS eliminated their constitutional clause designed to prohibit Communists from membership in 1965—certainly not coincidentally when its membership mushroomed as anti-war organizing attracted unprecedented numbers of students. The evolution of SDS over the course of the sixties produced an unsustainable organization, and by the end of the decade SDS ultimately transformed completely from what the Ann Arbor core had initially instigated. In his 1969 article, "Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin," SDS leader and president Carl Oglesby asked:

What was the Atlantic City of the white student movement that was to go from pro-peace to anti-war, anti-war to pro-NLF [Vietnam's National Liberation Front], pro-NLF to anti-imperialist to pro-Third World revolution to anti-capitalism to pro-socialism—and thence, with much more confusion and uncertainty than this schedule implies, to anti-peace (i.e., no co-existence)

and anti-democracy (“bourgeois jive”), and which finds itself at the present moment broken into two, three, many factions, each of which claims to have the *real* Lenin (or Mao or Che) in its pocket?¹

Indeed, how did an organization with “democratic society” embedded in its very name, within the few years between the unavoidable escalation of Vietnam in 1965 and the turmoil of 1968, come to advocate anarchy and violent revolution?

SDS shifted from advocating *for* a democratic society to fighting to destroy that society. The Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party was actively attempting to take over SDS by the chaotic 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. James Miller pointed out: “With its disciplined, puritanical style and dogmatic commitment to create a dictatorship of the proletariat in America, the Progressive Labor faction stood against most of what once had defined the New Left as new.”² The defining organization of the New Left had, by 1968, circled back upon itself and until it much more closely embodied the very Old Left it had originally stood apart from. By 1968, SDS simply was not the same organization that drafted *The Port Huron Statement* in 1962, and no longer synonymous with the New Left. Many members of New Left organizations were dropping out of the student movement or splintering off—some, like former SDS leader Paul Booth, became union organizers.

Looking back on his time in SDS, Booth expressed regret for missed opportunity in the sixties: “Unfortunately, the Old Left *didn’t* influence us: we viewed them as intellectually bankrupt. But they were the only people in the society who knew what mass action was, who knew what a mass organization was or how you worked in one.”³ Perhaps the students made a fatal misstep in their initial reluctance to identify with their predecessors. They wrote and

¹ Carl Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” *Liberation* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1969), 2, Pamphlet Collection, Socialism Series, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

² James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 284-285.

³ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 322.

spoke about stepping into the gap that the unions had left when they retreated from progressivism and about forcing mainstream liberalism to fulfill the promises of which their parents had failed to follow through. However, Booth suggested that the students' failure to learn from the Old could have irrevocably handicapped the SDS in particular, which was unable to deal with the internal consequences of its massive growth in the late sixties.

SDS continued to reach out to organized labor even as SDS became an increasingly single-issue organization, but the rapid radicalization of the second generation of the New Left alienated much of the larger society. Although cultural memory of the student movement might suggest otherwise, the political similarities of students—the self-proclaimed “new-working-class”⁴—and workers even in the divisive last years of the sixties provided realistic ground for a coalition. Polls demonstrated that many blue-collar workers disagreed with the war in Vietnam and supported the student's anti-corporatist domestic agenda. However, influenced by media sensationalism and exaggeration, the differences between labor and the New Left, including SDS and the UAW, overshadowed their fundamentally similar interests, and the postwar liberal coalition finally imploded in the critical years of the late sixties.

THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT: SDS OUTGROWS ITSELF

So what does geometry have to do with the Viet-nam War?

Students for a Democratic Society,
“Call for an Examination of
Conscience,” 1967.⁵

⁴ Used in several instances, including Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” 3.

⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, “Call for an Examination of Conscience” (1967), Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Vietnam – Folder 1, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

The conflict in Vietnam represented the aspects of American culture, politics, and society that SDS had been working to reform since the late fifties. In fact, Vietnam was arguably the most extreme manifestation of the Cold War culture that had originally spawned SDS. Hesitant from the outset to become a single-issue organization, SDS instead attempted to use anti-war protest as a catalyst to synthesize several of the main points of its ideology, which condensed most simply to anti-corporate imperialism, imposed from the ghettos of Newark to the Cambodian jungle.

Miller pointed out, “Before the Berkeley rebellion, student protests had been largely limited to petitions, rallies and pickets. The Free Speech Movement suggested that more militant techniques, including sit-ins, the occupation of buildings and strikes, could be effective on campus. For young radicals, the sense of new possibilities was intoxicating.”⁶ By the mid-sixties the New Left as a whole was moving in a more militant direction, symbolized by the 1964 Free Speech Movement in Berkeley⁷ and more vividly by SNCC’s shift towards Black Power and the Black Panther Party, which argued United States imperialism domestically manifested in the internal colonization of urban ghettos. Black Power pushed white organizers out of the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War provided a new and prominent issue to organize around. A new leadership style emerged in SDS simultaneous to the growing dominance of anti-war protest. Somewhat paradoxically, Tom Hayden—fresh from the NCUP site—helped pioneer the new anti-leadership, which

⁶ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 224.

⁷ The Free Speech Movement at the University of California Berkeley was a student-led protest of a ban on political activity on campus, demanding the right to free speech and academic freedom. There are numerous studies of the movement, and it is included in most studies of the New Left (although it should be noted that the movement included right-wing groups, as all political activity had been banned). Numerous books have been written on the Free Speech Movement itself, and it is generally included in comprehensive studies of the New Left. See also <<http://www.fsm-a.org>>.

then-president Paul Booth deemed “imitation SNCC.”⁸ In fact, SNCC issued a statement opposing the war and encouraging active draft resistance in January 1966. Although by this time SDS identified itself as a northern, urban SNCC, they did not issue an equivalent statement until December of that year.⁹

At the December 1964 National Council meeting of SDS, the Council initially defeated a proposal to organize a march in Washington, DC to protest the war. After a close re-vote, SDS planned the demonstration for the collegiate spring vacation in order to facilitate maximum student participation. The April demonstration brought at least 15,000 and by some accounts as many as 25,000 people, primarily students, to the national capital to demonstrate opposition to the rapidly escalating war in Vietnam. It was perhaps the most successful mass demonstration SDS would ever sponsor.

At the march, SDS President Paul Potter gave a moving and poignant speech from the National Mall. Potter said: “But now the war in Vietnam has provided the incredibly sharp razor that has finally separated thousands and thousands of people from their illusions about the decency and morality and the integrity of this country’s purposes internationally; and that is a bitter and saddening insight for people who grew up as we did, believing the things we did about our country.”¹⁰ Potter articulated the philosophy behind *The Port Huron Statement* and the principles motivating *America and the New Era* and its offspring, ERAP. Notably, the March occurred at the height of ERAP organizing. The trends detailed—the increased militancy of the Civil Rights Movement and the escalation of the Vietnam War—occurred simultaneously to ERAP, forcing SDS to make organizational choices and sacrifices. For

⁸ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 225.

⁹ G. Louis Heath, ed., *Vandals in the Bomb Factory: The History and Literature of the Students for a Democratic Society* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), 52.

¹⁰ Transcribed from audio clip provided in Helen Garvy and Shire Films, *Rebels With a Cause* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2000).

this generation, a product of the “comfortable” fifties, the Vietnam War made painfully obvious the superficiality of that comfort that SDS had been trying to expose in American society.

The war was the very antithesis of democratic. Potter connected American imperialism and Cold War foreign policy to domestic discrimination and denial of political power:

What kind of a system is it that justifies the United States or any country in seizing the destinies of other people and using them callously for our own ends? What kind of a system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, that excludes millions and millions of people from the mainstream and promise of American society; that consistently places material values before human values?¹¹

He proposed, “We must name that system, and we must change it and control it, else it will destroy us.”¹² Potter specifically did *not* name the system in question (nor does he specify the “us”). Thus, in 1965 SDS still emphasized what they were fighting *for*: democracy. As Carl Oglesby pointed out, the government was “fighting in Vietnam to save those poor people for the free world; in fact what [they] were doing was opposing those great ideas. With every can of napalm that got dropped, the American Constitution died a little bit; with every village taken out the Declaration of Independence became a little bit more meaningless. We couldn’t possibly call ourselves a democracy-loving people and let that war in Vietnam go on.”¹³

James Miller provided an astute summary of how the anti-war march on Washington provided an apex for the student movement, especially as a high point in the evolution of SDS. Miller pointed out the surprisingly traditional organization of the March: “The form of

¹¹ Potter in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Oglesby in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

the protest was orthodox—a group of citizens submitting a petition to their elected representatives.” He described the way that the moment in Washington represented the growth of SDS: “But the mood of the moment transcended its carefully calibrated symbolism. At a camp in Port Huron three years before, sixty people, after four days experiencing the pleasures of face-to-face political debate, had ratified a document calling for participatory democracy.” This debate at the UAW camp led to ERAP, a project initially funded by the UAW in which, “in a few inner-city ghettos during the last twelve months, small circles of friends had probed the limits of democracy in practice, trying to change themselves, and to change America.” These experimental “small circles” had grown, and “Now they were marching with thousands of others on Congress. Walking 80 abreast, they clogged the Washington Mall. The vision of participatory democracy crystallized in a new experience, a new sense of power, a new sentiment of solidarity.”¹⁴

SDS did not choose Vietnam as their cause—in fact, some within the movement actively resisted organizing against the war; however, in a way, the war chose SDS. The conflict in Vietnam was so obviously anti-democratic, both domestically in the draft as well as internationally as an imperialistic attempt to colonize Southeast Asia for American corporations, that SDS could not avoid the necessary call of the anti-war movement. Anti-war organizing attracted more students to SDS because it affected them immediately and directly in ways that prior SDS issues like the dissatisfaction of an automated economy and the political potential of the poor simply did not. By the conclusion of the April 1965 march, SDS was “the undisputed leader of an anti-war movement that was growing far more rapidly

¹⁴ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 233.

than anyone had anticipated.”¹⁵ Paul Booth observed of SDS’s anti-war momentum: “We are really the only thing moving, but we are moving very very rapidly.”¹⁶

The momentum of SDS introduced thousands of new members to political organizing, creating a second generation of sixties student activists. The swelling membership complicated the increasingly prominent struggle within SDS over whether or not to support the Democratic Party. New members were largely ignorant of SDS’s “previous commitment to pluralism and experimentation, many of them resentful of the apparent lack of interest of the ERAP avant-garde in campus organizing.” The second generation also lacked some of the direct Old Left connections of the SDS founders. As Miller described, “Most members of this new generation not only were inexperienced but also did not have the kind of political family history that had helped make SDS leaders like Max and Booth into such precocious activists.”¹⁷

SDS began to have increasing difficulty maintaining a democratic internal structure beneath the weight of the new membership. Jonathan Eisen, an observer at an SDS conference, wrote to *The Activist*:

The SDS has had a hard time coming to terms with its new importance on the national scene and ... is groping around trying to reduce the hiatus between necessity and its rather inadequate structural capabilities. One of the tasks of the conference was to grapple with the hard fact that unless the SDS can overcome its organization limitations, its influence and magnetism are likely to fade rapidly. And Vietnam is the hangup.¹⁸

Moreover, new members began to suspect the “old guard” of the Port Huron group of being some sort of intra-SDS elite, and anti-elitism and anti-hierarchy began to define an internal lack of structure at the very moment the swelling organization required a concentrated

¹⁵ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 234.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁸ *The Activist* (March 1966), 6, quoted in Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 29.

national vision. Notably, after 1963's *America and the New Era*, SDS did not issue another organizationally definitive working paper.

Attempting to capitalize on its growing constituency and add to its base of support, SDS concentrated on acting against university connections to the “war machine,” accusing administrators of acting as “arms of the government.” Many students were shocked to learn that universities across the country used research facilities for defense research, and began to call upon their institutions to uphold a moral standard of research.¹⁹ Despite reluctance to embrace anti-war organizing at the expense of SDS's domestic program, which organizers like Hayden and Haber felt was of primary importance, the war quickly dominated the organization. Moreover, the draft made many American college students more intimately connected to the war. Students were initially protected from the draft with automatic deferments, and SDS member Sue Eanet Klonsky acknowledged that, “Middle class kids had the privilege of not serving so there was this hugely disproportionate mass of low income guys, kids of color being drafted and coming back dead.” However, in response for increased troop deployment, the Selective Service instituted an examination system wherein student exemption required a certain academic standard. Tom Hayden pointed out the paradox of drafting the disenfranchised:

A very important thing that people always forget that we couldn't vote. It wasn't just that the people who were African-American in the South were shackled and disenfranchised by a system that said you can't vote, or you can't vote without putting your life in danger; but there were four, five, six, seven million American college students who couldn't vote. So when people today say why did you work outside the system or what do you think about outside or inside the system it's a hilarious question to me since I was outside the system by virtue of the fact that I could be drafted but I couldn't vote.²⁰

¹⁹ Wilkerson and Klonsky in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

²⁰ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

SDS began to demonstrate against university administrators' "complicity with the war" after the new merit-exemption system implicated the universities in the war machine still more deeply because the government required them to provide students transcripts to determine exemption. The involvement of universities in defense research and recruitment was an established protest from the Reuther brothers' SLID days to the first anti-war protests in Ann Arbor.²¹ In their continual search for common ground, SDS attempted to reach out to the working-class community on the basis of a shared systematic oppression under their respective bosses.

SDS sought to translate the lessons and experience of the Economic Research and Action Project into anti-war organizing. "We've Got to Reach Our Own People," first published in December 1967 and later re-published in SDS's organizing manual *Don't Mourn—Organize!*, it outlined a strategy for anti-war resistance to "root itself in poor white and lower paid working class communities."²² The SDS authors believed that the urgency of the draft would allow SDS to break through the boundaries between "workers and welfare recipients," omitting the time-consuming conscious-raising phase of typical campaigns. The authors recognized that the working class and poor communities were actually fighting the war, and thus rationalized that these communities were the ripest for resistance. The students did not consider that their personal military involvement in Vietnam might require those communities to believe in the cause behind the war. Furthermore, although well intentioned, the proposed approach was condescending in that by separating themselves from the "lower

²¹ Reuther: Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 29.

Campus newspaper article covering anti-war protest, occupation of ROTC building: Richard Steiner, "Days of Protest: Pickets, Marches, Sit-ins, Carry-Outs," *The Michigan Daily*, 17 October 1965, 8, Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 2, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

²² "We've Got to Reach Our Own People!," *Don't Mourn, Organize!: SDS Guide to Community Organizing* (Chicago: The Movement Press, 1968), 2, Oversize Collection, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

classes” the students were in fact affirming their own privilege. The article suggested that these poor and working-class citizens are thus far “unmoved” by the anti-war movement because of “massive, unthinking, unchallenged racism and patriotism (anti-communism) which these communities share with the rest of white America.”²³

The article proposed that SDS employ the ERAP-tested strategy of moving into a community to organize the inhabitants using leaflets, the establishment of a community center, and a regular newsletter. In this case, instead of unemployment and housing councils, however, the purpose would be to organize “community based draft resistance unions.” Sharing ERAP’s concept of the student organizer provoking the true vanguard of the American working class, the proposal declared: “Students are most often the troops of the movement, but they are not all the people. A significant resistance to the war and to the unrepresentative political machine which directs it must be based not only among students but among working people.”²⁴

SDS member Lee Webb argued for a similar strategy in SDS’s second installment in the self-published series *Manuals on Organizing to End the War in Vietnam, “Vietnam and the Unions.”* Webb argued that the unions were ripe for resistance because of their radical history, and because trade unionists were likely to be personally affected by the Vietnam War. Webb criticized the labor movements recent quiescence but saw anti-war protest as a hopeful motivator for a resurgence of union militancy, stating that despite the simultaneous “absence of any meaningful internal trade union politics” and a fifteen-year legacy of consistent support “of the administration’s cold war foreign policy. [...] In the past year, the trade union movement, stimulated by the civil rights movement and internal dissatisfaction of

²³ “We’ve Got to Reach Our Own People!,” 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

the membership has begun to open up many issues, including criticism of cold war foreign policy.”²⁵

Webb cited UAW Secretary-Treasurer and vocal opponent of the war Emil Mazey, who spoke publicly against the war until pressure from George Meany of the AFL-CIO and the UAW’s own Walter Reuther forced Mazey to back down. The union leader remained influential, and UAW Local 600, a large and historically militant Michigan local, ran an anti-war Mazey speech in their paper, which circulated amongst 50,000 members. Webb claimed that the trade union rank-and-file was “isolated,” with “no vehicle for expressing their dissatisfaction” with the liberal administration. He urged student organizers to avoid trying to contact “higher-ups” in the unions, who gave money but not bodies to the march. Webb instead encouraged potential organizers to focus on galvanizing local rank-and-file resistance on the points of draft resistance, trade union freedom to strike, threats to domestic social policy and change, and general morality. Webb concluded: “the important thing here is to get the unions to do anything, even the most minimal action.”²⁶

STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY’S 1968 WORK-IN

Taking the application of ERAP’s strategy more directly and further, in the summer of 1968 350 students took jobs in factories and offices to “talk with working people about the Vietnam war, racism, the student movement and topical political questions.” The stated goal of this quasi-anthropological experiment was not to organize the workers but to understand their position. The students felt isolated from the American working class and conducted the

²⁵ Lee Webb, “Vietnam and the Unions,” *Manuals on Organizing to End the War in Vietnam* (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, [1967?]), 1, Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Vietnam – Folder 1, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

²⁶ Lee Webb, “Vietnam and the Unions,” 2.

Work-In to end that separation. One participant exhibited his middle-class isolation when he attested to discovering, “Workers are just the opposite of what our professors tell us they are. Rather than the failures of society, they are the prime movers. Only they can keep production going; only they can grind production to a halt; and only they can overthrow the bosses.” Admittedly, many of the Work-In participants joined the project experimentally: “Other students were mainly concerned with their special middle class background, and wanted to broaden their outlook.”²⁷ SDS published a pamphlet compiling the experiences of students throughout the Work-In sites. They experienced varying degrees of success; one student was naïve enough to admit his communist ideology within the first couple of days, and other students forged genuinely symbiotic friendships with their co-workers.

The students involved in the Work-In made a deliberate attempt to dispel popular misconceptions about the New Left, which in the public mind had become increasingly entangled with the counterculture. Although one student working at a New York trucking plant admitted he was a Communist his third night on the job, he claimed that even that was okay in the end because, “I worked hard, but not too hard. I wear normal clothes and have short hair. I fought against the wise-guy attitude that is inculcated in students. The workers reacted much more adversely to two bearded, beaded long-haired hippies who worked on the platform for two nights. The hippies managed to project the attitude that workers who did this every night for years to support their families were stupid; that if only you were clever this is ‘post-scarcity society.’”²⁸ One befriended worker declared to a Work-In student: “The

²⁷ Chicago Work-In Steering Committee, “Work-In 1968: SDS Goes to the Factories,” *SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance* (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, [1968?]), 2, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

²⁸ “N.Y. Work-In: Student Tells Workers ‘I’m a Communist’,” *SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance* (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, [1968?]), 24, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

reason they're soaking us [low pay] is to kill more commies in Vietnam and get to the moon faster. I say let them live—what the hell are we doing in Vietnam anyway? And as far as the moon goes, I hope they never get there, because if they do get there they'll just make a mess of it.”²⁹ The participants also tried to remind the workers of their own radical history. One challenged his Chicago co-workers, “Would we be making \$3.50 an hour unless some guys had been willing to go on strike and use violence against scabs and cops protecting them?”³⁰

The Work-In students were generally quick to realize the sharp differences between the middle and the working classes, and they typically agreed that racism was a mechanism of the “ruling class” to pit divisions of the working class against one another. The Boston Work-In group, one of the largest, reflected on one of the most remarkable collective experiences in the project. While individual students or very small groups facilitated many of the sites, the Boston project was distinctive because it connected sixty to seventy students to the same project. The participants wrote: “We are convinced [in Boston] that strikes and economic demands must be supported, that a worker-student alliance must be built if SDS is going to become a viable and politically effective group.”³¹ In the same vein that the cognizant Boston SDS member who challenged ERAP for not organizing middle-class communities—actually reaching “our own people,” as they sought to do—the Boston Work-In group argued, “In fact, every struggle in which students are engaged will be in alliance with workers; it is not just a question of walking picket lines every now and then.” They

²⁹ “SDS Work-In in New Jersey Copper Mill,” *SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance* (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, [1968?]), 15, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

³⁰ “N.Y. Work-In,” *SDS Work-In 1968*, 24.

³¹ Kay Kreiss with Bruce Allen and Dennis Decoste, “Work-In Notes From Boston,” *SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance* (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, [1968?]), 31, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

extended the argument, questioning the true nature of the student movement's opposition to the war. They asked provocative questions about the self-interest of the anti-war movement:

For instance, do we fight for NO DRAFT FOR VIETNAM, or do we fight to retain our student exemptions, at the expense of working people? Do we oppose Dow recruiters because we are more appalled by napalm than liberals are, or do we opposed Dow because the use of napalm reflects a consistent policy to exploit and suppress workers by any means necessary, in Vietnam or anywhere else? At Harvard, do we oppose the newest fee hike only because it makes our lives more difficult, or do we oppose Harvard's entire system of systematically excluding working class students, a system of which the exorbitant fees are an integral part?³²

These questions probably hit the mark too closely for many students. The Boston group concluded: "Here are two important movements in America today: the workers' movement (including the Black liberation movement, since most Blacks are workers), and the student movement. On the basis of the Work-In we feel that it is possible and necessary to ally with workers to defeat racism, to end wars like Vietnam, and to fight for social justice in our common interest against the common enemy."³³ This statement reflected the ways in which the students saw themselves as the "new-working-class," allied with the workers against a common corporate enemy—factory bosses and university administrators.

The Work-In affirmed for its participants the necessity of the long-heralded SDS goal of a student-worker alliance. As one student wrote, "Two main ideas were expressed: one, that students were impotent by themselves to make the changes that they wanted to see, and that workers had both an interest in these changes and the power to make them; secondly, that the university administrations that we fought were run by corporation owners—their

³² "Work-In Notes From Boston," *SDS Work-In 1968*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 31.

bosses.”³⁴ Some students began to actively refocus on building the elusive worker-student alliance. One instance of note was student support of a wildcat strike at the Ford plant in Mahwah, New Jersey, in April of 1969, where the position of black workers at the plant provided an organizing issue for SDS activists to ally with the union.³⁵ The repeated and consistent struggle of the student movement to reach out to the labor movement against a common enemy attests to the importance that SDS continued to place on the labor movement, despite their sometimes flippant attitude to this “old” institution. Although somewhat isolated instances of success exist in actions like the Boston Work-In, strike support, and the campus worker-student alliance, overall the growing differences between the working and middle classes in the United States drove rifts between the students and the unions.

THE 1968 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

In his study of the Macomb County electorate, *Middle Class Dreams*, Stanley Greenberg asserts: “Every election now is an expression of this new era where revolt is commonplace.”³⁶ This “now” arguably began with the 1968 election, and particularly with the 1968 Democratic primary elections. George Wallace’s third-party candidacy presented an alarmingly substantial challenge to the Democratic constituency. President Lyndon B. Johnson had taken himself out of the race, so Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey constituted the primary Democratic candidates. 1968 promised

³⁴ Nina Shapiro, Cathy Fisher, and Carol Shick, “Chicago Work-In Supports Wildcat REA Strike,” *SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance* (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, [1968?]), 7, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

³⁵ G. Louis Heath, ed., *Vandals in the Bomb Factory: The History and Literature of the Students for a Democratic Society* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), 142.

³⁶ Stanley B. Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 17.

to be a decisive and dividing year for liberalism. The second generation of the New Left—by this time original members like Haber, Flacks, and even Hayden were considered old and even irrelevant by many of the new anti-war recruits—rejected the Democratic Party as illegitimate and unrepresentative. They came to refute, also, those institutions with their “eggs in the democratic basket,” such as the labor movement. UAW historian John Barnard dates the breakdown of the New Left-labor alliance to the Vietnam War, when, “The UAW’s failure to condemn the war on moral and ideological grounds and break with the Johnson administration over it was taken as proof of a corrupt alliance with ‘the establishment.’” Soon, many within the student movement actively and harshly criticized the labor movement. Barnard reports, “The hostility of the New Left to labor weakened the position of the doves in the UAW hierarchy, leading Emil Mazey to charge that the New Left ‘did a great deal of disservice to those of use who felt strongly about Vietnam.’”³⁷ Throughout the sixties, SDS and the UAW constantly attempted to nurture the evident seed for cooperation, but the incompatible extreme elements of each—the radical hippie manifestation of the youth movement, and the reactionary racist blue collar worker—proved devastating images. Moreover, the labor movement had attached itself to the Democratic Party long ago, for better or for worse, severely hobbling its ability to enact meaningful critical pressure despite widespread working-class opinion against the Vietnam War. Labor and liberalism confronted a student movement committed to issues and devoted to a corresponding morality, both values requiring the students’ immovable resistance to the Vietnam War, opposition trumping party affiliation and domestic politics. Neither organization could endorse the Democratic Party in 1968 and maintain absolute integrity.

³⁷ John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935-1970* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2004), 421.

In 1968, the forces of the sixties imploded. The Tet Offensive early that year made it painfully clear to the concerned American public that the conflict in Vietnam was not a small insurrection, and that the American government had been deliberately lying about the war abroad. Soon thereafter, Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination, President Johnson announced that he would not run for the ticket, and SDS felt like they were exercising real power over the decisions and course of American liberalism. Then, four days later, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and riots erupted throughout the country. Columbia students went on strike in April and “liberated” the university, evidence of how quickly the student movement was outgrowing SDS. Soon after this dramatic student victory, Senator Kennedy was assassinated.³⁸ His death was a crippling blow to many of the New Left “Old Guard,” as Leaders like Hayden saw Kennedy as a last hope and an embodiment of what their generation had experienced.³⁹

Finally, in late August 1968, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the forces of sixties liberalism descended upon the city. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the Columbia University occupation, the double assassinations of 1968, and mainstream liberalism’s endorsement of Hubert Humphrey combined to push the student movement outside of the traditional politic in Chicago. Said SDS member Jane Adams, by 1968, “we were no longer appealing to the powers to be to do their job right; we were saying you’re doing your job wrong and we’re going to stop you.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Summary from interviews in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*. There are also books which focus solely on the year 1968, including Walter LeFeber’s *Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election*, David Caute’s *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968*, David Farber’s *Chicago ’68*, and Mark J. Davis’ film *1968, Young blood*.

³⁹ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 293-294.

⁴⁰ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

Walter Reuther's biographer, historian Nelson Lichtenstein, sharply remarked, "Reuther's persistent failure to divorce his person and his union from the administration's war program squandered a real chance to link at least one important institution of the working class to the thousands of men and women energized by the movement against the war."⁴¹ A break with the Democratic Party platform would have been risky, but Lichtenstein suggested that such a split, "might well have legitimized political opposition on an even wider scale and provided, in the words of ADA Chairman John Kenneth Galbraith, 'the political strength, disciplined troops and stability' that the new politics sorely lacked."⁴² Therefore, the UAW missed an opportunity to galvanize a liberal coalition with the political clout to challenge established institutions. As Barnard concludes, "The UAW's hope that a new, idealistic youth movement would form part of a progressive coalition with the UAW was another casualty of Vietnam."⁴³ Lichtenstein wrote, "Reuther's caution meant that he had abdicated any meaningful role for himself or for his union in shaping the American New Left he so earnestly sought to build. 'If Reuther had marched with King against the war, it would have made all the difference in the world,' mused one Berkeley activist."⁴⁴ Walter Reuther remained loyal to the Democratic Party despite his dovish instincts, determining that his union's interest in the domestic agenda of Johnson's Great Society was of higher priority than the turmoil surrounding the administration's Cold War foreign policy. Indeed, "Throughout the late 1960s the most explosive fissure within the white working class was not Vietnam but race relations, and on this issue Reuther did not hesitate to champion racial

⁴¹ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 426.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 426.

⁴³ John Barnard, *American Vanguard*, 421.

⁴⁴ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 426.

liberalism, even when it provoked rank-and-file resentment.”⁴⁵ Reuther was willing to risk a split with the union membership on the basis of race, but assumed that the rank-and-file endorsed the United States’ actions in Vietnam when, in fact, they did not.

Much of the labor movement rank-and-file did not feel represented within the Democratic Party. Many of them supported Robert Kennedy and George Wallace because they felt that, each in his own way, these men spoke for them at a time when their voices were lost. When Alabama’s Governor Wallace, the man who had sworn “segregation now, segregation forever,” gained credible support in Michigan in 1968, Reuther and the UAW leadership became rightfully alarmed. The riots of the late sixties ignited suburban concern about crime and racial strife, and busing controversies had introduced the explicit race problems of the South to the urban and metropolitan North. To many, it seemed that “the federal government that had helped create their world was now wholly biased against them,” and Governor Wallace’s populist rhetoric appealed to the suburban white ethnic communities that comprised much of the UAW membership. The Wallace campaign ultimately provoked a break between the UAW leadership and rank-and-file, and Lichtenstein wrote that the UAW effort to block Wallace’s nomination was “unquestionably the unions finest hour in 1968, a last hurrah for Reutherite labor-liberalism.”⁴⁶

With the loss of Robert Kennedy, McCarthy unable to provide viable contention, and Wallace effectively marginalized, Hubert Humphrey stepped into the party’s void. Although leaders like Reuther were pushing Humphrey to adopt a peace platform, his nomination was unacceptable for the New Left; they rejected the Democratic Party outright as “illegitimate

⁴⁵ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 404.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 428.

and unrepresentative.”⁴⁷ Thus, SDS planned a demonstration at the upcoming Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In preparation, Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis issued “Perspectives on Democratic National Convention” with the disclaimer, “This draft is merely to stimulate discussion: in no sense should it be considered a final proposal.” They sought to emphasize the interrelatedness of the war in Vietnam with the domestic racial crisis. The men wrote: “We can hasten the death of the traditional Democratic coalition by working among the constituencies with past loyalties to the Party: black people, the young, suburban liberals, trade unionists, the students and intellectuals.” They added, “we must keep open the possibility of cooperation with insurgent groups inside the Democratic Party. We can do this either from the perspective that greater trouble within the Party is useful, or from the perspective of including some Democratic-oriented elements in our overall coalition. [...] We must argue with the ‘dissident Democrats’ that their own party is the obstacle even to the social change they want.”⁴⁸

In their proposal for Chicago, Davis and Hayden recognized the need for the order and maturity that characterized the 1965 March on Washington: “The election year campaign should not be focused on v[io]lence and disruption against the convention. [...] We have no illusions about the distortions which are inevitable from *Time* magazine and the rest of the mass media.”⁴⁹ They advised, “We must make an absolutely clear commitment to nonviolent tactics, develop a simple and clear political message that large numbers of Americans can understand, carry out effective local organizing which can interpret the national program and, finally, mobilize an assembly of people too large to be considered a

⁴⁷ Rennie Davis and Tom Hayden, *Perspectives on the Democratic National Convention* (Students for a Democratic Society, 1968), 4, Oversize Collection, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁴⁸ Davis and Hayden, *Perspectives on the Democratic National Convention*, 3-4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

lunatic fringe.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, the organizers did not focus singularly on protesting the Vietnam War. They proposed that at the Convention, SDS protest in “waves”—the first being the crisis in the cities, the second the war, and the culmination a symbolic funeral for the Democratic Party.⁵¹

Come August, order crumbled quickly in Chicago, as destructive and reactive violence swept through the Windy City. Abbie Hoffman’s Yippies joined radical anarchic elements of the SDS second generation and other volatile factions, and the ensuing chaos provided a sensational representation for the average Americans watching the national news. On coverage of Chicago, “Television had shown them a mob of long-haired kids—spoiled brats, they seemed to some—hurling curses and changing slogans and waving Communist flags. A lot of people thought Hayden a firebrand and a rabble-rouser. Period.”⁵² Chicago exposed the fatal divisions within the New Left and contributed to their distance from the liberal mainstream, and alienated many Americans from liberalism itself. In “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” Carl Oglesby declared: “Chicago, in any case, occasioned these two terminal movements: the humiliation of liberalism, and the ‘official’ reversion of SDS to a Marxist-Leninist worldview.”⁵³ He summarized the event: “*Chicago*: (1) Liberalism has no power in this country. It is not politically organized. The few secondary institutions in which it lives its hand-to-mouth existence are, at best, nothing more than insecure and defenseless sanctuaries. In none of the estates—not the church, not the media, not the schools—does it exhibit the least aggressiveness, the least staying power, the least confidence. [...] [The liberals] were helpless at Chicago, and their helplessness has only

⁵⁰ Hayden and Davis, *Perspectives on the Democratic National Convention*, 4-5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12-15.

⁵² Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 305.

⁵³ Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” 7.

deepened since then.”⁵⁴ In *The Sixties*, SDS leader Todd Gitlin echoed Oglesby’s assessment: “The tear-gas clouds and media spotlights during the Democratic convention polarized public opinion and established a new threshold for militancy while fatally discrediting the Democrats.”⁵⁵ The violence in Chicago conclusively hurt Humphrey’s campaign, and for the first time in twenty years, the Democratic Party did not begin their presidential campaign in Detroit’s Cadillac Square, a symbolic moment of defeat for labor-liberalism.⁵⁶

THE DEATH OF SDS

*Give us a more careful look before you go
joining the young peoples front for
community and love.*

Paul Booth, 1965⁵⁷

In 1969, Carl Oglesby claimed of the early years of SDS, in the age of Port Huron, ERAP, and before Vietnam began to escalate wildly: “Whenever it began, this was the Heroic Period, the movement’s Bronze Age. In transition ever since, the movement has yet to prove it will have a Classical Period, but maybe we’re on the verge.”⁵⁸ Instead, the anti-war movement quickly transformed SDS from an organization comprised essentially of a circle of friends to a “three-ring circus.”⁵⁹ The organization outgrew itself, and the challenges of maintaining the ambiguous ideal of participatory democracy in a group of tens of thousands of people resulted in self-destructive factionalization. As the anti-war

⁵⁴ Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” 5.

⁵⁵ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 185.

⁵⁶ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 427.

⁵⁷ Paul Booth to Erwin Rosen, 11-19-65, SDS Microfilm, Series 3, No. 1, cited in Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 252.

⁵⁸ Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” 2.

⁵⁹ Todd Gitlin in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

movement gained momentum and the New Left became increasingly militant, SDS—in its true constitution—ceased to exist as a viable national organization.

The women's movement began to emerge in the late sixties, marked by the publication of "Sex and Caste" by Casey Hayden and Mary King, both members of SNCC.⁶⁰ SDS member Jane Adams later wondered, "what is it in our upbringing, what is it in our background," that created the middle-class assumptions of SDS organizers about women. These internal conflicts began to contradict the directions of the movement, and the women of the New Left split off from groups like SDS to create their own feminist faction. Women had begun to realize that, despite doing much of the work within SDS, they were never elected leaders. As the greater youth movement gained momentum, female students saw an "opportunity to change the world, grab it, let's do it."⁶¹ The women's liberation movement, or second-wave feminism, began to defect from established New Left organizations where they were unrepresented in order to form their own groups.⁶²

Significantly, SDS's decline was not entirely self-inflicted. As the movement gained prominence in the later half of the sixties, the government began to actively monitor SDS, and successfully infiltrated the organization. Alarmed by the success of the anti-war demonstration in the capital in 1965, at a time when SDS was ironically over concerned with its internal democracy, the government red-baited the organization in the mass media, prompting accusations of Communist-fronting; a grave statement in the McCarthy/HUAC era. The situation prompted SDS President Paul Booth to issue a press release clarifying the

⁶⁰ Casey Hayden and Mary King, "Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo from Casey Hayden and Mary King to a number of other women in the peace and freedom movements," <http://www.cwluherstory.com/CWLUArchive/memo.html>.

⁶¹ Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁶² For a history of the women's movement, including its relationship to the New Left, see: Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000).

position of SDS in 1965, which coined the mantra “Build, Not Burn,” embraced by the anti-war movement. Booth defended SDS, stating: “We are anxious to advance the cause of democracy. We do not believe that cause can be advanced by torture and terror.” He referred to ERAP as an example of the tenacity and credibility of SDS organizers: “Our generation is not afraid of service for long years and low pay; SDS has been working for years in the slums of America at \$10 a week to build a movement for democracy there.” Booth thereby connected SDS to the working class, and he continued to defend the students, likely against criticism for automatic draft deferments: “We are not afraid to risk our lives—we have been risking our lives in Mississippi and Alabama, and some of us died there. But we will not bomb the people, the women and children of another country Let us see what happens if service to democracy is made grounds for exemption from the military draft. I predict that almost every member of my generation would chose to build, not burn.”⁶³ However, even Booth’s eloquence ultimately suggested the inevitable destruction of the organization he was trying to buttress; the membership became vocally angry that Booth spoke on their behalf without first insuring that he was supported by a consensus.

This environment made leadership impossible, and combined with the pressures imposed upon SDS by the United States government surveillance, the student movement began to collapse upon itself. In fact, government investigation of the student left in the sixties echoed similar tactics used against the “Old Left” of the 1930s.⁶⁴ To warn members that federal agents were watching them, SDS published and circulated a letter to one SDS member from his father, a professor informed of his son’s visit to an SDS conference in Michigan by government intelligence. In the letter, the father warned his son: “Please get the

⁶³ SDS Microfilm, Series 3, No. 1, quoted in Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 251.

⁶⁴ See Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

hell out of the movement, shave your beard and cut your hair and stay out of the organized protests. There are times when I know what I am talking about. Love, Dad.”⁶⁵

The United States Federal Bureau of Investigation kept a “Rabble Rouser Index” and began infiltration of the New Left with its COINTELPRO program. A terrible irony, COINTELPRO used illegal methods (e.g., they would force entry into SDS offices by claiming there was a fire) to try to subvert a society trying to hold the United States government to their own rules. The FBI had people following certain SDS members constantly in an attempt to “neutralize” them, and some members of SDS were indicted.⁶⁶

Eventually, the original New Left experienced some of the inherent paradox of a student movement, when the founders of SDS became too old for the movement they built. Compounding this dilemma, many of the activists expressed hesitancy to speak up during the struggle to accommodate the rapid influx of new membership. James Miller described this intrinsic challenge in *Democracy is in the Streets*: “they were handcuffed by their own ideology: power struggles weren’t part of their democratic credo. They also did not want to be considered old fogeys—they were proud to be a part of a radical avant-garde. Besides, the organization they had created was *Students for a Democratic Society*. Nobody wanted to be the next Michael Harrington.”⁶⁷ The new SDS membership attracted by the anti-war movement swept the Old Guard from leadership at SDS’s 1966 conference.

SDS held their 1969 National Convention at the site of the 1968 chaos: Chicago. From June 18-22 of the last year of the sixties, SDS completed its self-destruction. Two distinctive factions developed within the organization: the militant, anarchic and

⁶⁵ Letter published and distributed by Students for a Democratic Society (1969), Youth and Student Protest – Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – Folder 4, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁶⁶ Accounts of government surveillance in Garvy, *Rebels With a Cause*.

⁶⁷ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 256.

unashamedly violent Weathermen, and the Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party division or RYM II (Revolutionary Youth Movement). Neither of these factions sought to create a more democratic society; SDS had ceased to embody its own ideals. The Weatherman set up headquarters in New York, and the RYM II faction took over the Chicago national office. As historian G. Louis Heath points out, “There was little to appeal to a college youth in the Weathermen’s position that youths should quit school to join a movement of revolutionary cadres and that all schools should be shut down. Some chapters publicly changed their name or dissolved in an effort to disassociate themselves from Weatherman violence.”⁶⁸ The student movement alienated students: “A particularly troubling aspect of SDS tactics was the willingness to use the most violent and obnoxious means to reach SDS goals, such as the seizure of the university buildings, disruption of classes, holding administrators hostage, and the silencing of those who disagreed with SDS objectives. Such tactics are anathema to the principles of academic freedom which undergird the entire educational system.”⁶⁹ SDS’s second generation was out of touch with not only the mass of the American people but also their basic demographic, students. Thus, in the wake of the growth that allowed for factionalization in the first place, the organization Students for a Democratic Society had become anti-Student and anti-Democratic, and even, in the anarchic manifestation of the Weathermen, anti-Society. By the 1969 Convention, SDS was dead, cold in the grave.

The Old Guard of SDS decentralized and focused on local projects, and some, such as Paul Booth, even became union organizers. Tom Hayden entered mainstream Democratic politics in the 1970s after a brief flirtation with the counter-culture. In 1969, the year of the SDS death rattle, Carl Oglesby warned the movement of its “vanguarditis,” and called for a

⁶⁸ Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 169.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

revived willingness to work within established political avenues: “it is not lost causes, however heroic, or martyrs, however fine, that our movement needs. It needs shrewd politicians and concrete social programs.”⁷⁰ Oglesby asked that the students cease being so unwaveringly anti-bourgeois, which alienated their liberal allies. He warned, “if SDS continues the past year’s vanguarditis, then it, at least, will have precious little future at all. For what this movement needs is a swelling base, not a vanguard.” SDS’s “vanguarditis” did provide a swelling base, but not for the Democratic Party, liberalism, or the Left in any form. Rather, Richard Nixon and the Republican Party adopted the populist potential of participatory democracy to capitalize on the middle-class, white, suburban base that SDS had consistently refused to address.

THE TROUBLED AMERICANS

SDS historian G. Louis Heath summarized: “In 1960, an embryonic organization of students reached out to channel the exploding idealism of young white American concern for civil rights into an effective instrument for correcting some of the inequities and inadequacies of this most affluent and fundamentally free society.” Eventually, “The Students for a Democratic Society became a misnomer. [...] What the Students for a Democratic Society promised at the end was the destruction of democratic society.”⁷¹ In recognition of this destructive quality, SDS patron Walter Reuther warned the students against violence, and in a 1970 interview recalled: “I said [to them] we knew what we were fighting for [during the birth of the UAW]. And you only know what you’re fighting against. And that’s not good enough. You have no moral right to destroy something unless you think you’ve got

⁷⁰ Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” 11.

⁷¹ Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 207, 208.

something better to put in its place.”⁷² SDS began in the early sixties fighting for democracy, but by the end of the decade the organization had devolved in anarchy, demonstrated tangibly in the destruction at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

The chaos accompanying the destruction of the liberal coalition inspired national fear that contributed to the election of Richard Nixon in 1968. However, as Greenberg points out in his analysis of the oscillating electoral patterns of the post-Kennedy years, “Racial conservatism helped break the Democratic hold on middle America, but it did not renew the Republican party. It created, instead, a new rootlessness and volatility.”⁷³ Nixon won the 1968 presidential election on a platform of law and order, anti-busing, and by vocally associating himself with the “forgotten” working class. Meanwhile, Detroit and its lifeblood, auto manufacturing, suffered immensely in the wake of deindustrialization, culminating in the 1967 race riots.⁷⁴ The UAW continued to struggle to cope with the changing American work force. Despite consistent arguments by both SDS and the UAW leadership for the need to organize the white-collar workforce, this necessary effort never materialized. Neither SDS nor the UAW led the progressive vanguard in the United States.

The failure to organize the Southern work force proved to be a critical defeat for the labor movement. Even in Michigan, the UAW was losing authority. In 1972, George Wallace won the Michigan Democratic Primary and 66% of the vote in definitively blue collar Macomb County although the UAW did not support him. Much of Wallace’s support emerged due to increasing racial backlash to a September 1971 busing order for metropolitan

⁷² Barnard, *American Vanguard*, 421, cites Walter Reuther, Interview with William J. Eaton on 8/20/69, *The New York Times* (21 April 1970), 10.

⁷³ Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams*, 128.

⁷⁴ For an excellent and compelling analysis of the conditions in Detroit that fed into the riots, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Detroit.⁷⁵ The failure to create a worker-student alliance in the sixties, the goal of both SDS and the UAW, resulted in fragmentation within the working and middle classes. This fissure did not cause, but contributed to, the election of conservative presidents like Nixon and Reagan, who adopted the populist rhetoric of the student and labor movements to recruit Middle America. As James Miller observed, the original strategy of SDS, “had in some measure succeeded, only to create new—and unintended—opportunities for a kind of counterrevolution. Under the administration of President Reagan, it was neoconservatives who reaped the benefits of what the New Left, before its sudden collapse, had helped to sow—the delegitimation of liberal corporatism and the ideal of the welfare state.”⁷⁶ The relationship between the UAW and SDS in the sixties reveals important trends in American politics that continue to this day; the story of SDS and the UAW illustrates the historical contingency of the American working class.

In the early sixties, the United States “discovered” the poor whites of Harrington’s *The Other America*. In the late sixties, America “discovered” the white working class. This new population emerged under several titles: the Silent Majority, the Troubled American, the Middle American. The exposure of the angry American middle began with the revelation that 56% of Americans sympathized with the police, and not the demonstrators or the press, after the violence of the 1968 Chicago Convention. Walter Reuther was shocked at this statistic, fearing that it portended a police state.⁷⁷ In *Fear of Falling*, her analysis of American working-class consciousness, Barbara Ehrenreich remarks on the national recognition of its blue collar: “They showed scattered signs of discontent that became, in the media, a full-scale backlash: against the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and

⁷⁵ Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams*, 29.

⁷⁶ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 321.

⁷⁷ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 427.

apparently against middle-class liberalism in general.” Indeed, “as the news media presented it, a blue-collar vanguard was leading Middle America in its shift to the right.” The media “did not discover the working class that was – in the late sixties and early seventies – caught up in the greatest wave of labor militancy since World War II.” Instead, this discovery focused on the “dumb, reactionary, and bigoted” blue-collar men of the majority.⁷⁸ The media portrayed the working class as racist and uneducated, which insured their alienation from the student movement.

The October 6, 1968, issue of *Newsweek* featured the cover story “The Troubled American: A Special Report on the White Majority,” based on a poll of 2,165 white Americans. The article claimed that “the middle American malaise” went down to the fundamental “sanctity of work and the stability of the family, of whether a rewarding middle-class life is still possible in modern America.”⁷⁹ Strangely, some of the report’s assessments echo *The Port Huron Statement*: “There is a pervasive feeling of being cheated by the affluent society. [...] But most of all there is a sense of loss and neglect.”⁸⁰ The article’s poll revealed that the majority of Middle Americans opposed United States involvement in Vietnam, but were not sure how to disengage “with honor,” and liked Nixon but were not overly excited about him. Furthermore, “despite his rejection of campus revolutionaries, the average white has a favorable attitude about young people and thinks much of their criticism of society is warranted.”⁸¹ However, the eponymous citizen detected an “anti-middle class bias” among the college radicals, and 84% of those polled felt that the demonstrators had

⁷⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) 98, 105, 101.

⁷⁹ “The Troubled American: A Special Report on the White Majority,” *Newsweek* (6 October 1969), 28.

⁸⁰ “The Troubled American,” *Newsweek*, 32.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

been treated too “leniently,” while only 11% disagreed with that statement.⁸² A quote in a *Time* celebration of “Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans,” expressed working-class frustration with the disrespectful college radicals: “Our boys don’t smoke pot or raise hell or seek deferments. Our people are too busy making a living and trying to be good Americans.”⁸³

Less than two years later, the labor unionist construction workers of the 1970 Hard Hat Riots on Wall Street shouted their support for the Republican president and announced their love for the establishment. Throughout the month of May, *The New York Times* reported on the clash between the workers and the students and reactions to the incident from across the country. The initial report described the incident: “The hardhats, long scornful of excesses by privileged longhairs on campus, were obviously delighted at the opportunity to pour out their hatred on the students and any who dare to raise a voice in their defense.”⁸⁴ The men who had elected Richard Nixon based on his commitment to law and order were “chasing youths through the canyons of the financial district in a wild noontime melee.”⁸⁵ One longshoreman’s wife, Dolores Fanale, watched from her job on Wall Street and wanted to join the men: “We wanted to tell off those kids. They have too much.”⁸⁶ Lawrence Eliot of the Building and Construction Trades Council, the responsible union, observed: “That the attackers should be members of a union is only sad evidence of how far we have slipped from the time when unionism meant striving for human decency and social justice.”⁸⁷

⁸² “The Troubled American,” *Newsweek*, 33, 35.

⁸³ “Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans,” *Time* (5 January 1970), <<http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/film/middle.htm>>.

⁸⁴ “Violence on the Right,” *The New York Times* (9 May 1970), 24.

⁸⁵ Homer Bigart, “War Foes Here Attacked by Construction Workers,” *The New York Times* (9 May 1970), 1.

⁸⁶ Emanuel Perlmutter, “Head of Building Trade Unions Here Says Response Favors Friday’s Actions,” *The New York Times* (12 May 1970), 18.

⁸⁷ “Comments on Worker-Student Clash,” *The New York Times* (19 May 1970), 38.

From the reportage, Eliot clearly represented the minority, and Middle Americans from New York to North Carolina expressed, in class-conscious terms, their support of the workers, opposition to the escalating Vietnam War, and their resentment of the students. *The New York Times* quoted Cecil Onion, secretary-treasurer of the Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union: “I would say the majority were opposed to the decision to go into Cambodia. They feel that the students should have a right to dissent. They can’t understand how the students can tear up their own facilities. They are paying high tuition and see the schools closed down. Their kids missing class. This isn’t right.” A steel worker in Youngstown, Ohio said the consensus agreed, “the students got what was coming to them.” And Wayne Haynes from Wixom, Michigan’s Local 26 of the UAW said that the workers “wanted more force to be used” against the demonstrators.⁸⁸ Labor historian Jefferson Cowie reports that the use of the Hard Hat Riots to create an image of a pro-war working class was unqualified, and “manual workers were more opposed to the war and more in favor of withdrawal than were the college educated.”⁸⁹ Backlash rhetoric and reactions were not stands on foreign policy, as the incident and aftermath “did not reflect support for the war so much as reveal class resentments of workers towards the protestors’ methods, privilege, and apparently nonexistent sense of duty.”⁹⁰

The students and workers formed an unexpected coalition, in the end—*The New York Times* equated the hard hats with their student counterparts: “They have now joined the

⁸⁸ Agis Salpukas, “Unionists Say War Protestors Prompt a Backlash,” *The New York Times* (16 May 1970), 70.

⁸⁹ Jefferson Cowie, “‘Vigorously Left, Right, and Center’: The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s,” *America in the Seventies*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 88.

⁹⁰ Cowie, “‘Vigorously Left, Right, and Center,’” 88.

revolutionaries and bombthrowers on the left in demonstrating that anarchy is fast becoming a mode of political expression.”⁹¹ The labor movement and the student movement, overtaken by extreme manifestations, had each ceased to embody their own definitive former democratic ideals and progressive ideology. Although the Hard Hat Riots were rightfully alarming, they do not represent a symbolic culmination of the story of labor and the left or of workers and students in the 1960s. As the complicated, complex relationship sustained over the course of the decade between Students for a Democratic Society and the United Auto Workers demonstrates, students and workers continually attempted to reach to each other in the interest of a broader liberal alliance. Although they managed temporary contact in collaborations such as the Economic Research and Action Project, the structural opposition exposed by their political relationship to liberalism in the Vietnam War prevented these factions from a genuine coalition. This fragmentation and alienation is a dilemma that continues to plague student activists, labor unions, and the Democratic Party well into the present day.

⁹¹ “Violence on the Right,” *The New York Times* (9 May 1970), 24.

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