

THE RED LETTER

NEWSLETTER OF THE YOUNG DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS

YDS Outreach Conference Draws over 150

By Rebecca Kanter and Sean Monahan

On the weekend of March 5-7, over a hundred fifty young radicals from around the country descended on Manhattan for the Young Democratic Socialists' 2010 national conference, *Democratic Socialism: REAL Change for a Change*. The title of the event played to the mood of the young American Left. After enduring eight agonizing years of the Bush presidency, many, led on by Obama's talk of "change" and terrified of a McCain-Palin White House, organized for the Democrats in the 2008 election. Meanwhile, most of the "hope" we were promised has been dashed. Early warning signs came via the President's cabinet appointees, with economic advisers from the neoliberal Clinton and even Reagan administrations. Since being sworn in, Obama chose not to close Gitmo or end torture, not to withdraw from Iraq, to ramp up the war in Afghanistan, not to end "Don't Ask Don't Tell," not to regulate Wall Street and instead give them \$700 billion (at least), not to protect households in foreclosure and not to include single-payer in the health care debate. Essentially he has not done anything we were hoping for. His administration has not meant change, and the American people continue to slide into poverty while the capitalists get richer and more powerful.

In this context, many young people are questioning the Democratic Party establishment for the first time, and many are looking for a way to get organized. Enter the Young Democratic Socialists, bringing a radical reformist political platform and a focus on pragmatic organizing on college campuses around the country, and offering (as the conference title suggests) REAL change for a change.

The first plenary session of the conference featured Steve Max, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) vice-chair, long-time community organizer and co-author of the *Midwest Academy Manual, Organizing for Social Change*. Also speaking was one of Glenn Beck's favorite targets, Frances Fox Piven, the renowned soci-

ologist and author of *Regulating the Poor* and *Poor People's Movement*. Max addressed one of the great dilemmas of being a democratic socialist: how many hours does one spend trying to improve things under capitalism versus speaking out on socialist principles? This, he said, distinguishes democratic socialists from liberals, who do not criticize the system; and from revolutionary "socialists," who see reforms as futile. He urged the young activists to spend more time discussing socialism and why liberal reforms are not equivalent, "for if this is not made clear, liberal initiatives will never pass."

But "disappointment with the Obama administration is beside the point," said Piven. She argued that meaningful reforms will only occur under his presidency if and when there is mass social pressure from below. Piven held that the Left cannot win with a strategy that emphasizes communication over mobilization for protests and disruptions. She reminded the assembled young radicals, "activists can make a difference. Giving people courage and confidence and defiance is not something to be ashamed of, but something the country needs."

"Hope in each other as one struggles against the grain" would sustain our activism, according to honorary Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) national chair Cornel West, who addressed a crowd of 300 on Saturday's opening plenary. West took the stage to a roaring auditorium and was tempted, he said, to start break dancing – which he sadly did not. He did, however, give us a little hope, but not without great caution. "Instead of a politics of fear, [we need a] politics of hope. Hope is serious work, don't confuse it with optimism. No optimism for 'blues people.' There is no cheap optimism for young democratic socialists. Hope is much deeper; it has to do with struggle, it has to do with cutting against the grain. It has to do with being wounded, but choosing to be a wounded healer, rather than a wounded hurter....Hope is a blues thing."

Before hope comes love; or so brother West implied. Imperative to being a democratic socialist is having a love for all

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people, he asserted. West urged YDSers to issue the following challenge to American society: “Can we treat workers, can we treat poor people, the way we treat investment bankers?”

Two dynamic feminist professors, authors, and activists, Christine Kelly and *Nation* contributor Liza Featherstone, led the third plenary session of the conference. Featherstone made clear that we must see the [college] campus as a battleground for struggle. She pointed out that “[Heck], the recent March 4th protests [against tuition increases] were even covered by the mainstream media!”

Currently, both Kelly and Featherstone suggested, public education in America is weak and sickly, or “totally physically decaying,” as Featherstone put it. Higher education is draining family incomes. Federal Pell grants have been cut substantially. There is an growing charter school movement competing with public K-12 education – which inevitably “fuels cynicism about the public sector and makes it harder to fight for anything else.” And constantly lurking right around the corner is the unregulated and highly exempt student loan industry. Together, both massive debt and tuition increases and the inherent partnership between the two, makes the fight for sound loan and public higher education practices even more important. Featherstone urged us to struggle for “an economic bill of rights for young Americans, in which there should be a universal right to higher education.” “You [young people] are cooler than we were,” Kelly said. But we cannot, she told us, keep financing our education with our future and our children’s future and our parents’ future. “The privatization of public higher education is the defining fight of [your] generation.”

Joseph M. Schwartz, DSA vice-chair and author of *The Future of Democratic Equality*, opened the Sunday afternoon plenary on “Progressive Responses to the Global Economic Crisis.” According to Schwartz, the current “Great Recession” is a culmination of 30 years of global neo-liberal capitalism. The neo-liberal attack on the “social contract” of the post-World War II era began in the 1970s, when transnational corporate elites decided that social democratic movements were becoming too powerful, threatening capitalist profit. Thus began neo-liberal policies of deunionization, deregulation, and privatization” of public goods. Schwartz argued that with the outsourcing of basic industrial production to non-union areas and the developing world, corporate America increasingly invested at home in “FIRE” – finance, insurance and real estate. Thus, the “booms” of the 1980s, 90s and the first millennial years were “asset bubbles,” rather than a growth in real productive capacity that served human needs.

With the collapse of the financial speculative bubble, working people are not the only group losing their homes and exhausting their unemployment benefits, so is the middle class. Schwartz contended that unless social protest against the federal government bailing out banks rather than homeowners grows, we will not see a meaningful government response to the housing and unemployment crises. “People [in foreclosure] should have the right to rent homes at the market price,” he said, while advocating a federal program that would force banks to “cram down” mortgage debt to the current market value of homes. Schwartz held that the right attacked ACORN because of its national role in organizing a multi-racial coalition that resisted foreclosure.

The trade union movement must organize both the employed and the unemployed. But this is difficult because absent real labor law reform “there is no right to organize in the U.S., and there is a war on trade union rights across the globe.” Schwartz, alluding to DSA’s new “Economic Bill of Rights” project, urged students to defend public education as part of the Left’s historic effort to “de-commodify” basic human needs and fund these public goods through progressive taxation.

Bertha Lewis, CEO of ACORN, and Dan Cantor, executive director of the New York Working Families Party, spoke alongside Schwartz. Lewis started out her speech applauding the audience. “I give you all a hand because saying ‘I’m young and democratic and a socialist’ is a good thing to do; and no light thing to do in this time.” And then she fervently began: “We are in it right now... This is for real;” alluding to the scent of McCarthyism and racism that wafts in the right-wing populist air. “Economic crisis...What crisis?” Lewis loudly asked. “We have always been in a crisis,” she exclaimed, “this is NOT NEW!” While this may be a crisis for [the elites], we have always been in a crisis if we are poor, working class, and/or people of color, Lewis explained. Moreover, Lewis questioned how the global corporations can still have lots of money and give out big bonuses. “How blatant do they have to be?” she asked. This is “one instance where size does not matter,” for no bank or corporation should be giving or receiving bonuses.

Thus, Lewis urged us to knock on doors, and organize, rather than just advocate for the oppressed. She also urged us to not depend on the kindness of strangers (e.g. foundations, philanthropies) and to work on building an organization that is self-sufficient and gets into real battles. Lewis believes that the next real battle coming in the United States will be around immigration. As we are “getting ready to have a majority planet of color,” this is how the “fear of the black planet is being played out today.” “The face of immigration needs to be blacker than it is,” proclaimed Ms. Lewis. “Second and third generation blacks here in the U.S. are not marching with other [more recent immigrants]. They need to say ‘I am an immigrant too!’”

When someone asked, “how I, as a white woman, could help fuel this renewed black movement that she spoke of,” Ms. Lewis passionately responded, “Organize white women! Black people need to organize themselves. Keep it simple and organize what you know and then join together, which will just make attacks stronger. This is how you help us and we help you.”

Dan Cantor then spoke about the 12-year-old Working Families Party of New York (WFP-NY). Cantor promotes the WFP-NY because it a “unique and powerful way to make non-violent change.” The WFP-NY is an example of a fusion voting system, where two parties (a minority and a majority), endorse the same candidate and aggregate their votes. (This is only possible in six states, in one of which, Connecticut, the WFP is currently organizing.) Cantor believes that if one “really wants power one has to scare, not influence, the influentials.” He also wanted

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William Paterson YDS Leads the Way

By David Duhalde

While there is no particular paragon for YDS excellence, the William Paterson University chapter definitely set a good example this year. The New Jersey-based socialist collective made major inroads in the fields of education rights, labor activism, and state budget cut fight-backs. Their actions united the campus and surrounding communities, taking many student activists outside of their usual comfort zones. A large part of the group's success was due to the leadership of YDS National Co-Chairs Michael McCabe and Tatiana Guerrero.

Labor strife hit Wayne, NJ in the fall of 2009. The unionized campus cafeteria workers were stuck in the middle of representation dispute between Workers United (an SEIU affiliate) and rival UNITE-HERE. Their contract was expiring and each union was vying for the workers' hearts and minds. The management wanted to take advantage of the chaos to subvert the workers' interests. YDS members operating in both the official YDS chapter and the Student Labor Action Project kept management from capitalizing.

YDS served as a catalyst for labor solidarity. The activists collected a 1500 signatures for a petition demanding a fair contract. They elicited support from the faculty union, the American Federation of Teachers, and the clerical staff represented by Communication Workers of America. A two-day call-in to the administration used unique scripts for both students and staff. Students also staged direct actions in defense of the workers.

They organized a rally in the cafeteria and McCabe confronted the General Manager of the Sodexo operation. The message was students would not accept the tactics of fear used by management nor the hostile conditions that campus workers were subjected to. Students were willing to stand up to management and disrupt the status quo. A strong contract was settled and ratified in February.

Next month William Paterson YDS took up the Activist Agenda – YDS's national priority – of education is a right, not a privilege. In conjunction with the national day of action for public education on March 4th, the William Paterson campus witnessed a mock funeral for higher education after a 600-person faculty and student walk out organized by the local YDS chapter. Chapter President Riad Azir gave a eulogy and students carried a mock casket around the quad. Students – including several non-activists – railed against rising tuition costs at the open microphone.

Meanwhile, the New Jersey State Legislature was using the economic crisis as an excuse to slash vital government services. The "Take Back Trenton Coalition," launched in response, united community and labor organizations against public sector cuts. YDS was key in rallying 150 people at the state house on May 1st. This nascent convergence later blossomed into a 35,000 person rally on May 22nd. The coalition organizers recognized that in order to build credibility there must be alliances among students, labor, and community groups. Marches won't be enough, either. Serious talk of civil disobedience is in works.

YDS Redesigns Website

By Erik Rosenberg

In accordance with our strategic plan, the Young Democratic Socialists (YDS) website has been redesigned. The new website went live on May 21st after months of planning and design. The URL of the website has not changed; it is still ydsusa.org. Please check it out!

The Strategic Plan adopted at last years Summer Conference mandated the redesign of the website to attract more new contacts. Since most new members' first encounter with YDS is online, activists at the Summer Conference decided our face on the web needed to make a better impression. The new website features an attractive slide show on the home page showcasing YDS activists in action. Also located on the home page is a brief description of Democratic Socialism, allowing those unfamiliar with our ideology to quickly and easily read about our basic beliefs.

YDS' vast array of literature and resources is better organized and more easily accessible on the new website. Users are able to access organizing guides, flyers, and literature through an easy to use drop down menu on the site's navigation bar. Furthermore, the new Socialist Education Reader is also accessible in this menu. The creation of the Socialist Education Reader is a component of the Strategic Plan designed to help chapters do more effective internal socialist education.

As YDS National Organizer, I supervised the design and production of the new website. The programming was performed by Bill Schaepe of Lenox Web Design, a firm committed building websites for non profits.

SAVE THE DATE:

YDS Summer Retreat

August 5-8

Valley Brook Inn, Wurtsboro, NY

For more information visit *ydsusa.org*

Join the Young Democratic Socialists for an unforgettable summer weekend of socialist politics, activist workshops, swimming, pick-up sports, partying and much more. Due to popular demand, we will continue to hold the conference at a country retreat center in the Catskill Mountains, in up-state New York. We'll get away from the distractions of day to day life, relax and get to know each other.

*This conference will be especially important because it will be the first time we review progress made on the strategic plan we adopted last year.

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us to understand that there are “no shortcuts to doing the work that we do.”

The closing speaker, prominent literary critic Gayatri Spivak (who also runs a rural public school in one of the poorest regions of India), affirmed the importance of language and reminded us that the struggle for democracy and freedom would not end with the abolition of capitalism (which she affirmed would come someday). The socialist movement, she argued, must be global and internationalist or it will not be a movement at all.

The conference was a resounding success for YDS from an organizational standpoint. Over 150 young socialists attended, representing 49 campuses and 26 states, from Rutgers in New Jersey to Wichita State University in Kansas, to the University of Oregon. New chapters at Temple University and Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA, and at Sam Houston State University in Texas, were introduced to the national aspect of YDS while comrades from more established chapters were reunited with friends from across the country. Fourteen unaffiliated YDSers said they are interested in forming a new chapter on their own campus or in their own community. Many of them are new faces on the YDS scene (a couple of which have already begun to organize in the few weeks since). The conference brought together a growing community of young radicals from around the country, many of whom will see each other again in Detroit at the US Social Forum in June, and again in Up-State New York at the national YDS summer retreat in early August. As Dan Cantor urged, it is time we think critically about new terms and language as eloquent and simple as the “living wage;” but at the same time, be careful, do not get stunned by the “paralysis of analysis” (Lewis’ words) and go out there and organize!

Rebecca Kanter, a graduate student at John Hopkins, is a new member who attended the conference. Much of this article is taken from her posts about the conference on her blog at Alternet. Sean Monahan is the Greater Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America, student organizer and the Young Democratic Socialists, northeast regional coordinator

Greetings from New YDS Organizer: Andrew Porter

Dear Young Democratic Socialists:



I became involved with YDS during my sophomore year in college when Sean Monahan and I started a socialist organization at the College of Wooster. We felt the need for a socialist presence at the school and that the other student groups were not doing the work that we wanted to see done. The two of us gathered some friends and began the Wooster Ice Cream Socialists. We created a facebook page and began recruiting on campus. Our facebook presence caught the attention of David Duhalde, at the time the National Organizer. He contacted the two of us, to see if we were interested in affiliating with YDS. We looked over the website and brought the idea to the group. After a near unanimous vote, we became part of YDS.

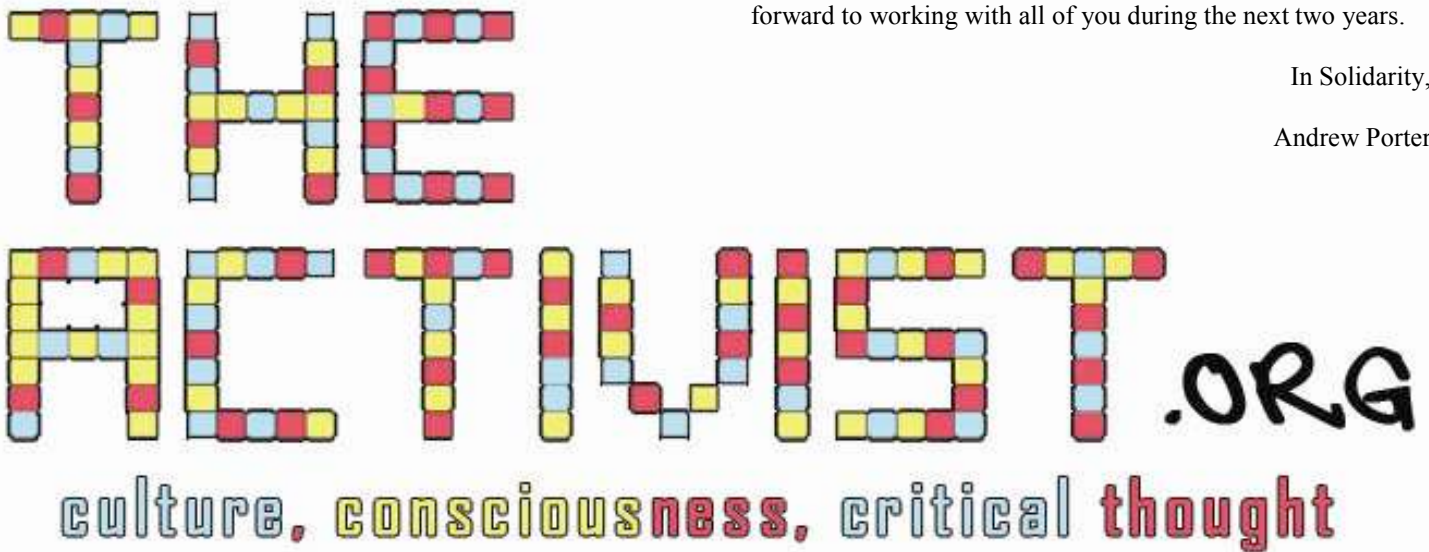
During that first year, I focused on building our chapter up and was not very involved in the national organization, but that changed after the first summer conference Wooster attended. We met many of the other great YDS people and I decided to run for an at large position on the CC. I held that position for two years, and then I was elected to the National Organizing Facilitator position.

After graduating from college I was hired by Green Corps, the field school for environmental organizing. With Green Corps, I worked in West Virginia on passing federal climate change by organizing around Senators Byrd and Rockefeller. Then I moved to Utah and worked at Brigham Young University to move the school off of coal energy. I am finishing up my year in Ann Arbor, Michigan directing a canvass office for Environment Michigan and PIRGIM.

I am very excited to have the opportunity to work for an organization that has been so important to me and I look forward to working with all of you during the next two years.

In Solidarity,

Andrew Porter



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