

Summer 2010

# THE RED LETTER

NEWSLETTER OF THE YOUNG DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS

## Proposals for the Activist Agenda

### Free Higher Education

*Submitted by Chris Maisano*

As democratic socialists, we believe that education is a human right, and that all citizens should be entitled to free public education from preschool through graduate study. This right has been recognized in many societies throughout the world, including in many Western European nations, but in the United States, higher education is becoming increasingly costly, pushing many students into debt before they even begin their adult lives.

Since 1980, the overall consumer price index has risen by about 179%. In contrast, the cost of college and university tuition and fees has gone up an astronomical 827%, almost doubling the rate of inflation in health care costs. During the same time, the average family's income has increased much more slowly or remained stagnant, increasing the amount of money families are forced to spend on higher education for their children. The cost of attending a four-year private college or university was 26% of a family's budget in 1979. Today, it's 58%. The cost of attending a four-year public college or university was 12% in 1979. Today, it's 25%.

At the same time, reductions in Pell Grants and other forms of support have forced students to turn increasingly to loans to finance their education; according to the Project on Student Debt, the average debt for graduating seniors in 2008 was \$23,200, a six percent increase from 2004. As the higher education commentator Jeffrey J. Williams has persuasively argued, such high debt burdens do not differ much in spirit from the old system of indentured servitude, and greatly constrain the career choices available to students after graduation. Why become a debt-saddled school teacher when a job at an investment bank can wipe out your debts in a year or two? Structural changes in the economy have made a college degree – and the attendant debt levels – a requirement for attaining even a minimally comfortable standard of living for most people. The average annual earnings of a college graduate are 83% higher than a high school graduate, and people with advanced degrees earn 159% more.

*Continued on Page 2*

### Blue-Green Action Campaign

*Submitted by Sean Monahan and Chris Hicks*

We propose that the Young Democratic Socialists initiate a strategic project to fight environmental sustainability and workplace justice on campuses around the country, called the Blue-Green Action Campaign.

In the 1950s and 60s, grassroots movements were rocking the establishment of the country, ending segregation, forcing meaningful environmental, social and human needs legislation through Congress, threatening the corporate establishment and the entrenched interests of American capitalism. In the 1970s, the business elites responded to this dire threat by coming together and devising a scheme that would destroy the left, break the labor-capital truce of the post-war period, hijack the government at all levels, and greatly expand their brutal dominance over American society. This scheme is called neoliberalism, and the corporations could hardly have been more successful in their implementation of it; meanwhile, the consequences for the American people have been disastrous.

There is a great need within the left, and among the people of the United States in general, for a new cause to rally around. We propose that the overarching and guiding force for the left be the union of worker's rights and environmentalism bolstered by the socialist critique of capitalism, the fight against oppression in all its diverse forms and the vision and pursuit of the democratic alternative.

As socialists, YDS brings a valuable perspective to environmentalism. We can easily link the issue by tying environmental destruction to the capitalist mode of production itself. Capitalism is a system based on perpetual growth and the perpetual consumption of natural resources, and consequently the struggle for environmental sustainability is nothing but a political struggle against corporate power.

*Continued on Page 3*

# Free Higher Education

*Continued from page 1*

Most young people are presented with something of a Hobson's choice: bury yourself in a mountain of student loan debt or be condemned to work precarious, low-wage jobs for life.

Congress recently passed a modest student loan reform bill over the objections of the private loan industry. It forced commercial banks out of the student loan market, introduced Income Based Repayment, and provided additional funding for Pell Grants. However, corporate lobbying hollowed out the bill to the point where it will end up having little impact on the lives of students and their families. The increase in the maximum Pell Grant - to \$5,900 in 2019-20 from \$5,550 for the 2010-11 school year — is minuscule, compared with the steep, inexorable rise in tuition for public and private colleges alike. This sum covers only one third of the average cost of attending a public college or university.

Tuition is skyrocketing for most people because the states are reducing their financial support for public colleges and universities. As the recession grinds on and the states slide ever deeper into fiscal crisis, this situation is only going to get worse into the foreseeable future. So it's time to start raising the demand that the federal government increase its support for public higher education, and even cover the cost of tuition for every student that gets into a public college or university. While continuing to work in student coalitions with less ambitious goals, the demand of a socialist organization like YDS should be for free public higher education for any student with the grades to gain admission.

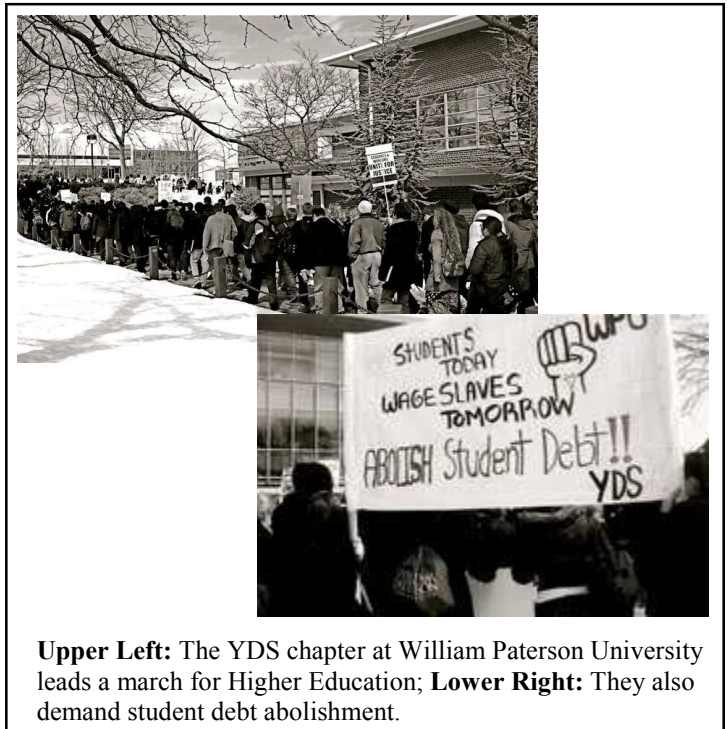
The cost of such a radical program would not actually be very high, relatively speaking. According to government figures, the total cost in tuition and fees paid by all students enrolled in public colleges and universities was about \$43 billion in fiscal year 2007. U.S. Federal Budget is currently \$3.7 trillion. That means that the total cost of tuition and fees at all public colleges and universities is a microscopic 1.2% of the total budget of the country. The money to fund this program could be found by reorienting our national priorities; namely, ending the Bush and Clinton tax cuts for the super rich, as well as ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and cutting the military budget.

The student rallies, protests, and walkouts that occurred around the country on March 4 showed that a mass movement in defense of public higher education may be on the verge of becoming a major political force. As the successful March 4 action at William Paterson University in New Jersey shows, YDS chapters are well positioned to lead campaigns for free public higher education on campuses around the country. The skyrocketing cost of higher education affects all students regardless of their personal ideology. It provides us with an excellent opportunity to bring our socialist values and analysis to a broad range of students, and perhaps most importantly, it allows us to organize with the people next to us on the basis of common self-

interest. Other campaign proposals that will not have such immediate relevance to the lives of fellow students may be worthy goals in their own right, but a campaign around free public higher education is the best way for YDS to grow its base and educate students about the need for socialism. All Americans accept that public education should be free from kindergarten through grade twelve. Extending that commitment to higher education is the historical role of this generation of young socialists.

If this proposal is adopted, the membership of the organization will have to formulate and decide on a campaign strategy. I would not presume to map out a strategy for the entire organization to follow at this point. However, I submit these broad principles to inform the strategic discussion:

- This demand will be won primarily through disruption and direct action. Students will have to demonstrate to politicians that any more increases in the cost of public higher education will be met with walkouts, protests, and other disruptions on campuses, at state legislatures and governors' mansions, and, when the movement has sufficiently developed, in Washington, D.C. Students need to create disruptions so that state level politicians increasingly look toward the federal government for relief, and eventually, full federal funding of tuition and fees at public institutions.
- At any campaign activity, YDS activists should speak openly and proudly about the fact that free public higher education is a socialist demand. Our opponents will throw the S-word at us anyway, so let's be up front about it. Further, recent polls show that young people are open to a socialist appeal and are not necessarily scared off by the label. Framing free higher education as a socialist demand will help us undo the stigma by showing students how moving toward a socialist society can improve their life opportuni-



**Upper Left:** The YDS chapter at William Paterson University leads a march for Higher Education; **Lower Right:** They also demand student debt abolishment.

# Blue-Green Campaign

Continued from Page 1

Capitalism is also a system in which the massive wealth produced by workers goes not to them, but instead to the capitalists who own their labor and pay them no more than what will keep them alive; the struggle for a decent wage, benefits and workplace are necessarily a struggle against corporate power. And the fight against the rise of tuition and the shift of university priorities from education to big business research is also necessarily a struggle against corporate capitalism in our universities. With students, workers and environmentalists united against a common enemy, sharing a common vision of a sustainable and just society, we will make progress for humanity not seen in this country since the early 1970s.

We do not intend to imply that labor and the environment are somehow more important than other issues, simply the two on which it makes the most sense to focus. Without doubt the most dynamic movement within the left today is that for immigration reform. We struggle in solidarity with the immigrants, the women, the people of color, the Native Americans and the queers. As a democratic socialist organization, we are best equipped to take on the corporate power directly responsible for the destruction of the environment and the brutalization of the working class.

In a Blue-Green Action Campaign, the existing chapters would actively organize to fight their administrations for recycling services, low-water dishwashers and toilets, solar paneling on rooftops, bicycle sharing systems, and other environmental concessions, all with guaranteed union contracting on installations and services. By supporting these efforts, chapters link capitalism to the destruction of the environment and the exploitation of workers, connect capitalism to the university administration, and demonstrate that students only win meaningful change by organizing pragmatically. We must establish a nationwide worker/student alliance on environmental and economic justice and challenge corporate power on campus and in the community, fueled by the democratic socialist vision of a better world.

A Blue-Green Action Campaign Day of Action would prove a useful tool to conduct membership outreach, build national cohesion between chapters, and solicit the support and tap the networks of YDS' many coalition partners. YDS' current quarterly magazine, the *Red Letter*, would be converted into a yearly report on this blue-green week of action, detailing the actions and campaigns of YDS chapters and allied organizations around the country. The magazine, distributed in paper and electronic form, would spur organizational momentum and foster solidarity between campuses around the country, together in struggle for environmental and workplace justice.

Conducting a Blue-Green Action Campaign can strengthen YDS in numerous ways. Instead of loosely pursued national agenda items, a planned, coordinated and targeted national campaign will bring a new energy to the organization and build momentum for the blue-green movement. Short-term small victories will invigorate current members and chapters, while attracting new members and building momentum toward long-term, large victories.

By not only offering the democratic socialist critique of capitalism and authoritarianism, but by complementing the critique with a concrete plan of action and national solidarity network, YDS will be able to offer a more attractive pitch to potential members. We can expect new chapters fostered at small colleges with previously weak leftist student scenes, where YDS and the blue-green campaign can fill the progressive void, and also at large universities with large left student scenes, where YDS and the campaign will bring a new vibrancy and real added value through a multi-issue campaign and a multi-issue social analysis. We will encourage new YDS chapters to be formed by members of our coalition partners' organizations, seeking the added value of the socialist critique of capitalism, while simultaneously maintaining activity in their parent organization.

Since the 1970s the right has talked ideology, while the left has talked issues. This can be seen by looking at the national and local student groups working on these very issues, where students focused on environmental issues and student/labor alliances rarely came together to work towards the "big picture." In fact, nearly all student activist groups entirely eschew discussion of ideology and systemic root causes of problems. As a student group with a strong grasp on the structural factors behind the common plights of labor and the environment, YDS has a chance to be a unifying force as the left moves forward. It is time for the left to start tying the issues to the critique of capitalism and it is time to organize. The campus is the ideal arena to fight the early battles of this contest and students are the ideal group to organize. YDS is poised to lead the drive, but can only do so with the support of those who know that real vision and real organizing are needed if we want to turn the tide in the United States and around the globe.

## Q: What is the Activist Agenda?

**Answer:** One of the most important parts of the YDS summer conference (August 6th to 8th) is the adoption of the Activist Agenda. The Activist Agenda is the organizing priority that the YDS national office takes on with chapters and members for the year. This summer there are two Agenda items up for vote, Free Higher Education and an The Blue-Green Campaign, the summaries of which appear in this *Red Letter*. It is highly encouraged that YDS members, fellow activists, and friends comment upon the proposals before the conference. We have posted the two proposed Activist Agenda items on our blog, *The Activist* ([www.theactivist.org/blog](http://www.theactivist.org/blog)). We want your input and critiques before the conference. At the conference, YDS members will get a vote in deciding whether or not to endorse these proposals which will set the tone and direction of YDS for the next year.

THE RED  
LETTER 3

# YDS at the 2010 U.S. Social Forum

By Amber Frost and Veronica Hill

In late June, over 15,000 activists from around the globe converged on Detroit, Michigan for the second U.S. Social Forum (USSF). For a week, Detroit witnessed a radical gathering of individuals who sought to repave the way to liberation. Cobo Hall, the Motor City's main convention center, played host to thousands of workshops, cultural performances, forums and panel spaces, and plenaries.

Veronica Hill, a YDS chapter activist at Wichita State University, worked with some brilliant people as a volunteer organizer with the Communications-Media and Youth Working Groups in planning the USSF. She had never worked on such a large scale, collective effort of this type before and it was truly transformative for her. At one point, Hill missed the beginning of the march to kick off the Forum. Lost for a few minutes, she turned around and viewed a flood of thousands of activists walking down the street. The eclectic parade symbolized the myriad of mediums through which people were discussing environmental, labor, GLBT, Israel, Immigration, as well as numerous other issues. She found the Social Forum to be an arena for major social change and movement building. In addition, she found it refreshing to see such a strong presence of youth participation at the Forum.

College and high school students alike were represented and took a lead in presenting workshops and posing important questions that will help dictate the future of the American Left. On the Friday of that week, YDS hosted a workshop centered on socialist organizing on campuses called "WTF is Socialism Anyway?" to reach out to young people. The talk was split into three parts: Erik Rosenberg - then National Organizer - talked about democratic socialism and socialist theory, at-large YDS Coordinating Committee member Amber Frost spoke about the American historical impetus towards socialism as a facet of human nature, and College of Wooster YDS activist Matt Porter addressed organizing on campuses and its challenges. From there the workshop proceeded to an open discussion.

Over 50 people attended our workshop; a few participants had experience with socialist groups, and some were even veterans in the movement. Most, however, were curious and uninitiated into any extensive discussion about socialism. The dialogue ranged from topics such as revolution versus a democratic move towards socialism, environmental sustainability, the place of other liberation movements such as feminism and anti-racism within a larger socialist context, and of course the difference between socialism and communism. Most of the discussion centered on practical and applicable tactics for achieving a more socialist and egalitarian America.

Some applications merely meant addressing radical movement's habits. An older Marxist complained that Millennials are too into sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Frost gently reminded him his generation had an affinity for those hobbies, too. Sometimes a friendly reminder is the most progressive thing you can do.



Rally at United States Social Forum in Detroit

**YDS would like to extend a big thanks to the following donors for supporting the Winter Conference:**

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LETTER4