

The Student Left

A History

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The history of the oppression of youth goes back to the origins of society, the imposition of the Patriarchy, and the division of society into classes, (freeman and slave). But at every stage in the development of class society; youth have, in rebelling against their specific oppression as youth, played a role in the overall class struggle and helped to advance the struggle of humanity to liberate itself from all oppression.

History advances in waves and several revolutionary waves have swept across America, each gaining in depth and force. And in each, youth have been the most active element and have increasingly come to the fore as youth in their own cause and under their own organization. Between the high tides there have been periods of retrogression but each new wave builds upon the last: Each revolutionary generation stands upon the shoulders of the preceding generation and takes the struggle higher.

From the early days of European colonization of America, Native American youth played the most active role in resisting the colonizers. It has become a Hollywood cliché for the Old Chief to say that he cannot control the “young bucks.” In reality, many young braves did rise rapidly to become leaders of rebellions and whole Indian armies, such as Teedyuscung of the Lenape, Ocoela of the Seminole, and Blue Jacket and Tecumseh of the Shawnee. [Actually Blue Jacket was originally a white youth adopted into the Shawnee nation after being taken captive.]

Masses of white Youth came to America as indentured servants, many of them to die under the harsh conditions of servitude, and many of them ran off to join the Indian nations as did many Black slave youth. Most of the slaves that were kidnapped and brought on the “middle passage” from Africa were youth, or children, and many of them died along the way, or shortly after arrival in the new land. Conditions of living for slave children were deplorable. They were denied any type of two parent family life, and usually their parents were worked for very long hours, and they had little time or energy left to rear their children, who were often raised under the care of older children or women too old for the master’s to exploit another way. When they got sick they often died.

Both white indentured servants and Black slaves played an active role in Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676, which was a foretaste of the War of Independence a century later. Youth organized as the “Red Indians” played an important role in the popular movement led by the “Sons of Liberty,” as did student leaders like Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. Tom Paine was a young English

radical who came to America and became the Revolution's most noted propagandist along with young Thomas Jefferson who drafted the Declaration of Independence.

But the Revolution was dominated by and served the interests of the rising middle class and land owners, and youth, women, Indians, and slaves, as well as those without property, were counted out from the Liberty that was won. To the new dominant classes of capitalists and landlords, Freedom meant freedom to trade and develop the productive forces in ways that would maximize their profits. This meant exploiting the unpaid labor of youth under slavery or on the family farm and exploiting the barely-paid labor of youth as workers in mines and mills.

The Abolitionist Movement gave rise to the first leader of a radical student movement in the U.S., Theodore Welt, of the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1833–34, he organized the sons of slave holders to publicly speak out against the institution of slavery at meetings of students. Eventually, he and his core group were expelled, and they transferred to Oberlin College, where they continued their abolitionist activities and helped to organize the "Underground Railroad." They also campaigned for the right of free speech on campuses. Abolitionist youth fought in Kansas and were with John Brown in the raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, when he attempted to initiate guerrilla warfare to overthrow slavery in the South. During the Civil War, millions of youth (Black, white and Indian) answered the call to take up arms against slavery. But the Civil War, which was a continuation of the American Revolution, did not address the issues of youth liberation, women's liberation or even racism, class oppression and exploitation, or genocide against the Native Americans. The oppression and exploitation of youth intensified after the war as many tens of thousands were forced into taking jobs in factories where they worked twelve and thirteen hour days for half pay. In the South, former slave plantations were turned into semi-feudal manors where poor whites and Blacks worked the land as sharecroppers, including the unpaid hands of children and youth. In the North, factory owners like Simon Slater competed to see who could exploit children the most, even recruiting orphans as young as seven or eight years old to work in their "sweat shops." In Rhode Island, where Slater had his mills, the census in 1875 listed 1,258 factory workers under twelve years old. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), organized in 1905, took on the issue of child labor, and on August 3, 1913, Mother Jones of the IWW led a march of factory children from New York City to Washington, D.C. to protest child labor and demand free public education. The Socialist Party had been founded in 1901 by Victor Berger, Eugene Debs and Morris Hillquit. In 1905, Jack London, Upton Sinclair and other students founded the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS). Sinclair wrote that, R...only a few institutions would let us in under our own evil name, and we had to disguise ourselves as...open forums and social science clubs" [Prospect for Youth, p. 143]. After the First World War, the ISS was reorganized as the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID). In a pamphlet titled the Revolt of Youth published in 1923, Dr. John Holmes wrote:

Our young people have come to the time when they propose to be free from the domination of their elders – free to follow their own courses and seek their own goals ... to my way of thinking, this declaration of independence is as glorious as all previous declarations of the same kind; and the youth movement, which embodies it, not a terror, but a great hope to humanity" [Ibid, p. 144].

Early in 1933, a split in the SLID led by the Young Communist League (YCL) led to the formation of the National Student League (NSL). The first action of the NSL was a student expedition

to Harlan County, Kentucky, where miners were engaged in a tough armed struggle with company goons known as the Harlan County War. This was followed by an NSL-led student strike at Columbia University over the expulsion of the editor of the Columbia Spectator. In October of 1934, The YCL led several successful student strikes and demonstrations in the Chicago high schools protesting racial discrimination. And in general the YCL was active on many fronts of the rising worker's movement during the depression, particularly in building the Unemployed Councils and in celebrating events such as International Worker's Day (May 1st), International Women's Day (March 8th), and International Youth Day (August 31st). SLID continued under Socialist leadership, but it continued to work with the Communist-led NSL on issues such as combating racism and kicking ROTC off campus. Eventually SLID and NSL re-merged to form the American Student Union (ASU). Throughout the 1930's mass student protests against war and fascism rocked American campuses. During the April 12, 1935 student strike, 10,000 students rallied in New York City against war and fascism. In November, 20,000 rallied on the different campuses in the city. Together with other progressive student and youth groups, the ASU organized the walkout of a million college students in protest of the war in Europe in April of 1937.

In 1934, the American Youth Congress (AYC) was formed under the slogan "RPeace. Freedom and Progress," and it adopted "The Declaration of the Rights of American Youth" at its second congress on July 4th, 1935. Together with ASU, AYC succeeded in getting the American Youth Bill before the 74th Congress and organized a demonstration of more than 1,000 youth in front of the capitol to demand passage of the bill. It was not passed. Both ASU and AYC participated in the American League Against War and Fascism (ALAWF) which had been established in 1933. By 1939, ASU had a membership of some 12,000 students, 400 of whom volunteered to go to Spain to fight fascism with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

In 1959, SLID changed its name to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In June of 1962, SDS leader Tom Hayden, presented a sixty-one page document to the SDS convention at the AFL-CIO camp at Port Huron, Michigan. It became known as the Port Huron Statement, and some 100,000 copies were eventually distributed by SDS. In April of 1965, SDS drew 20,000 students to Washington, D.C. in what was up till then the largest anti-war demonstration in the capital's history. For many students, the Revolution had begun in 1964, during the "RFreedom Summer" in Mississippi, organized by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). More than 2,000 Mississippi Black youth were organized into forty-two two-month "RFreedom Schools" that stayed open despite KKK terror, while other students organized voter registration. SNCC leaders Stokeley Carmichael and H. Rap Brown would sum up that the SNCC civil rights approach was wrong and mired in middle-class liberalism and subtle white racism, and they launched the Black Liberation Movement taking their cue from Malcolm X, who was assassinated in 1965. Also inspired by Brother Malcolm were the Black Panther Party (BPP), born in Oakland, California when Bobby Seale hooked up with Huey P. Newton at the local junior college in 1966. The Panthers added a new dynamic into the American Left by popularizing the "Little Red Book," Quotations From Chairman Mao, and openly advocating and practicing armed self-defense. Parallel to the Black Panthers, and allied with them, were other ethnic based revolution organizations centered among oppressed youth, such as the Young Lords Party (YLP), later the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers' Organization (PRWO), The Young Patriot Party (YPP), composed of hillbilly white youth, La Raza Unida Party, (Chicanos), I Wor Kun, (Chinese), and others including the American Indian Movement (AIM). Dennis Banks and George Mitchel founded AIM in 1968, con-

sciously patterning it after the BPP. The Panthers, by their example and through the liaison work of Bob Avakain, had a profound influence on SDS as SDS was having a profound influence on the growing anti- Vietnam War movement. Picking up the chant first raised by SNCC outside the U.S. Army Induction center in Atlanta, SDS rocked the Rivory towers” of academia with “HELL NO WE WON’T GO!” and “HO – HO – HO CHI MINH, THE NLF IS GOING TO WIN!” Student takeovers of buildings at Columbia and Harvard in the spring of 1968, led by SDS and the Black Student Union (BSU), the student wing of the Black Panthers, led to the rapid growth of both organizations and severely hurt government attempts to sell the war as “winding-down.” coupled with the Tet Offensive by the National Liberation Front (NFL) in Vietnam, it marked the turning point in the war. That spring marked the high tide of revolution internationally and the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago was a showdown between youth and the Cold War Liberal Establishment. Contrary to the popular impression, the young demonstrators in Chicago were not, for the most part, the hard core of the American Left. The Black Panthers and most militants had heeded SDS’s call to stay away. The overwhelming majority of demonstrators were unaffiliated with the revolutionary Left. Many were supporters of anti-war candidate, Eugene McCarthy, or had come for the Yippie! Festival of Life. According to the official Walker Report, of the 668 persons arrested, 75.8% were twenty-five years old or younger (64% were under 18) and roughly half were from Chicago or its immediate suburbs. Forty-three percent were workers and less than a third were students. Only 39 out of the 668 had been previously arrested for political activity.

Following its convention after Chicago, SDS split apart into numerous factions, one of which, led by the political line of Bob Avakain, regrouped in the 1970’s as first the Attica Brigade and later as the Revolutionary Student Brigade. Following the formation of the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1975, it became the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade. Other factions tended to form other Marxist-Leninist parties such as the Communist Workers’ Party, Communist Party (ML), etc. – joining the alphabet soup of the fractionalized American Left. Most of these formations have since passed out of existence.

In response to the revolutionary upsurge of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, certain concessions were made to youth, such as lowering the voting age to eighteen and discontinuing the draft in practice, (though it can be reinstituted at any time). Most importantly, there has been an acknowledgement that youth are a social, and potentially political, power which must be considered.

The issue of Youth Liberation was raised in this upsurge and the results can be seen in changes in the custody laws and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it has yet to win decisive victories, and only another and more powerful wave can accomplish this. The student Left is at present quite weak, as is the Left generally in the U.S. The Youth Liberation Movement will have the task of rejuvenating it, which will ground it more firmly in youth issues and a youth perspective, but it is important not to narrow or negate the revolutionary scope of the student Left in doing this. Youth should discuss and deepen their understanding of this heritage and prepare to enrich it as they move forward to prepare a tidal wave of youth liberation in the 21st century.

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