

The SDS Conference

Dena Clamage

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At the September 1965 National Council meeting, members of Students for a Democratic Society, (SDS), decided that the time had come for a thorough re-examination of the organization, its ideology, its programs and strategies, its coalitions, and its goals. In order to insure a broad number of participants in this reexamination, the organization decided to hold a conference in late December, a conference free from the normal pressures of decision-making, which could at least begin to define the questions which arise from a serious commitment to social change.

The December Conference, as it came to be known, was planned around the format of small workshops confronting questions ranging from "How specific should ideology be?" to "Community organizing and the ERAP strategy" to "The role of women in the movement." Each workshop began with the posing of positions, with general discussion following. The conference was, on the whole, poorly prepared for. Discussion questions were inadequately stated, making structured coherent discussion virtually impossible. Position papers on the various issues, which were to be written prior to the Convention in order to initially define some of the questions and initiate thought, were never sent out. Workshops were too large, making real discussion, at best, difficult. However, the most serious lack of preparation for the Conference was the fault of the general SDS membership. In almost every discussion, from community organization to ideology, the inadequacy of basic factual analysis of the present society seriously obstructed the course of discussion. How could the convention formulate a strategy for social change without understanding which constituencies were most oppressed by the present society, which constituencies most responsive to ideas for social change? How could the convention formulate an approach to community without understanding the basic facts about automation, unemployment, the flexibility of the present system? How could the convention define and cope with U.S. "imperialism" without understanding the history of U.S. foreign policy, the nature of the US economy, the nature of the Third World?

To combat this problem, a research and education program was adopted by the National Council on the following four assumptions:

- (1) The movement has a very shallow and poorly-grounded analysis of contemporary society. Because of this, it is impossible to formulate a realistic SDS ideology or a realistic strategy and program for social change.
- (2) There is a need for membership education and a high level of internal discussion on substantive issues of theory, values, strategy, and program.
- (3) The pace and demands of action tend to pre-empt resources for other aspects of the organization's work, in particular from its education responsibilities.
- (4) It is necessary to set up a separate national research center which can stimulate and facilitate a local educational drive.

The December Conference, by providing time for such pre-discussion, greatly facilitated the work of the National Council. Also, it conclusively revealed to us our profound ignorance and our vital need for self-education, followed by a great deal of deep thinking. That is enough for now.

fifth Estate

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