

SDS Weatherman War Council

Year of the Fork?

Liberation News Service

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FLINT, Mich. (LNS) — Weathermen, Weatherwomen, some of their friends and some of their critics, met in a “war council” Dec. 27–30. The gathering was a serious political meeting, although it had been widely billed as an outasight international youth culture freak show.

About 400 young people from across the country made it to the bare Giant Ballroom in Flint to practice karate, rap in regional and collective meetings, dig a little music and hear the Weather Bureau lay down its political line for revolution in Amerika.

The Weatherman SDSers, who sometimes refer to themselves as the Weathermachine or the Weather-nation or Weatherland, called the meeting to try to bring together various parts of the radical movement and other young people, including those turned on and turned off by Weatherman politics.

“We’ve made a lot of mistakes,” said Bernardine Dohrn, a Weatherman leader. The meeting was planned to make amends for some of these mistakes—such as the hostility shown by Weatherman for the rest of the movement—and to broaden support for Weatherman politics and actions.

The meeting place was decked out in large colored banners of revolutionary leaders—Che, Ho, Fidel, Malcolm X, Eldridge—hanging from the ceiling. One entire wall of the ballroom was covered with alternating black and red posters of murdered Illinois Panther leader Fred Hampton.

An enormous cardboard machine gun symbolizing Weatherman’s commitment to armed struggle also hung from the ceiling.

The Weathermachine began to gather on Saturday morning, Dec. 27.

Violence was the keynote of the long hours of talk that followed. For over a year, the New Left has expressed near unanimity on the need for armed struggle to overturn U.S. imperialism. This came naturally out of a number of political experiences, including the civil rights movement, the ghetto rebellions and the Cuban revolution.

Broad sectors of the movement have welcomed the occupation of buildings on campuses and the destruction of draft boards and ROTC installations as steps in this direction. But the distinction between revolutionary armed struggle and violence for its own sake is a major point of contention between Weatherman and its critics.

While Weathermen had spoken of their desire to reconstitute SDS as a mass organization representing various points of view within the revolutionary movement, it was clear that Weatherman was running the show. This was a Weatherman meeting, with a handful of outsiders there to gawk, scowl, listen and occasionally to debate.

Old-time movement people at the meeting remarked, however, at the large number of unfamiliar faces there. True, there were the Weatherman founders, people who had played a major role in SDS in 1966–69, many of them from Columbia and other elite schools. But then there were dozens of new, young kids—long-hairs, street kids, a few of them only 13 or 14 years old, some of them from out-of-the-way places like Grand Rapids, Mich., and Fall River, Mass.

The strongest debate centered on the question of who is going to make the American revolution. Weatherman, along with many others in the movement, recognizes that the American revolution is part of the world struggle against U.S. imperialism, a struggle for liberation from both colonial and capitalist oppression.

Weatherman's critics maintain, however, that Weatherman's internationalism is based on an analysis that ignores capitalist oppression in America. Weatherman sees revolutionary change in America as happening almost solely, if at all, as a belated reaction to a successful world revolution, including a successful revolt by the black colony inside the American mother country.

The logic of that view was expressed in a statement by Ted Gold, a top Weatherman, who said that "an agency of the people of the world" would be set up to run the U.S. economy and society after the defeat of the U.S. imperialism abroad.

A critic spoke up: "In short, if the people of the world succeed in liberating themselves before American radicals have made the American revolution, then the Vietnamese and Africans and the Chinese are gonna move in and run things for white America. It sounds like a John Birchler's worst dream. There will have to be more repression than ever against -white people, but by refusing to organize people, Weatherman isn't even giving them half a chance."

"Well," replied Gold, "if it will take fascism, we'll have to have fascism."

Weatherman continues to promote the notion that white working people in America are inherently counter-revolutionary, impossible to organize, or just plain evil—"honky bastards," as many Weathermen put it.

Weatherman's bleak view of the post-revolutionary world comes from an analysis of American society that says that "class doesn't count, race does."

White workers are in fact fighting for their survival, insisted people doing organizing of factory workers in California. They claim that strikes for wage increases and job security can fairly easily be linked to an anti-imperialist analysis.

But Weatherman denies that survival is an issue for white workers. Weatherman leader Howie Machtinger derided white workers for desiring better homes, better food and essentially better lives.

Bob Avakian, from the Bay Area Revolutionary Union, argued that not only do white workers need those things for their survival, but that black people need them and want them, too.

The several black people who Weatherman had brought to the meeting shouted, "Right on!" and waved their fists.

"If you can't understand that white workers are being screwed too, that they are oppressed by capitalism before they are racists, then that just shows your class origins," said Avakian.

Machtinger shot back, "When you try to defend honky workers who just want more privilege from imperialism, that shows your race origins."

The Weatherman position boiled down to inevitable race war in America, with very few "honkies"—except perhaps the 400 people in the room and the few street kids or gang members who might run with them—surviving the holocaust.

That notion is linked to Weatherman's concept of initiating armed struggle now and not waiting to build mass white support—that is, a small but courageous white fighting force will do material damage that will weaken imperialism while the black liberation movement smashes "the imperialist motherfucker" by itself.

Machtinger talked a lot about how the black liberation movement is so far advanced at this point that the only thing left for white revolutionaries is to support blacks by fighting cops as a diversionary tactic.

The Giant Ballroom is a black-owned establishment in Flint's black ghetto. There was some fear of possible conflict between the blacks and the Weathermen, but relations were generally good.

At first, neighborhood blacks didn't like being frisked as they entered the meeting hall. But later, they cooperated with the friskers, who were checking everyone for drugs and weapons, and engaged the white radicals in lively discussions on the edge of the dance hall.

But the blacks who came to the meeting, as they stood alone on the fringes of the ballroom, argued strongly that it was "jive bullshit, just romantic" to think that at this stage the blacks alone can smash imperialism inside the mother country.

"We're just not that together yet," said one. "The man is coming down so fucking hard—look at the Panthers. They know they need white support, a white revolutionary movement too. Even Rob Williams split with the Repub-

lic of New Africa, which says you don't need white allies. He knows you do." But Weatherman is adamant in saying that whites cannot be organized into a mass revolutionary movement. To say that they can or should, according to Weatherleaders, is "national chauvinism."

"The Panthers say they should," argued Avakian. "Well, we don't agree with the Panthers on a lot of things," replied Machtiger.

Weathermen now talk less about a "strategy to win," more about their historic role as catalysts. They emphasize the need to establish a white, revolutionary presence, to break movement people out of the traditional role of long-term base-building and passivity.

A new Weatherman catchword was "barbarism." The Weathermen see themselves as playing a role similar to that of the barbarian tribes, such as the Vandals and the Visigoths, who invaded and destroyed the decadent, corrupt Rome. (Some Weathermen even suggested changing their name to the Vandals. This would have a double meaning: first, a reference to the barbarian tribe; second, a reference to the line from Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues"—"The pump won't work 'cause the vandals took the handle.")

Unlike former SDS National Council meetings, which used to be held quarterly, no specific resolutions were debated or voted on. The only formal structure consisted of speeches by the small leadership group known as the Weather Bureau. There were many small discussions and regional meetings, too.

Bernardine Dohrn, former inter-organizational secretary of SDS for 1968–69, gave the opening speech on Saturday night, Dec. 27. She began by admitting that a lot of Weatherman's actions have been motivated by "a white guilt trip."

"But we fucked up a lot anyway. We didn't fight around Bobby Seale when he was shackled at the Conspiracy Trial. We should have torn the courtroom apart. We didn't smash them when Mobe peace creeps hissed David Hilliard on Moratorium Day in San Francisco. We didn't burn Chicago down when Fred was killed."

Dohrn characterized violent, militant response in the streets as "armed struggle" against imperialism. "Since Oct. 11 (the last day of the SDS national window-breaking action), we've been wimpy on armed struggle...We're about being a fighting force alongside the blacks, but a lot of us are still honkies and we're still scared of fighting. We have to get into armed struggle."

Part of armed struggle, as Dohrn and others laid it down, is terrorism. Political assassination—openly joked about by some Weathermen—and literally any kind of violence that is considered anti-social were put forward as legitimate forms of armed struggle.

"We were in an airplane," Dohrn related, "and we went up and down the aisle 'borrowing' food from people's plates. They didn't know we were Weathermen; they just knew we were crazy. That's what we're about, being crazy motherfuckers and scaring the shit out of honky America."

A 20-foot long poster adorned another wall of the ballroom. It was covered with drawings of bullets, each with a name. Along with the understandable targets like Chicago's Mayor Daley, the Weathermen deemed as legitimate enemies to be offed, among others, the Guardian (the radical newsweekly which has criticized Weatherman) and Sharon Tate.

"Honkies are going to be afraid of us," Dohrn insisted. She went on to tell the war council about Charlie Manson, the accused leader of the "Tate Eight," who allegedly murdered the movie star and several others on their Beverly Hills estate.

Manson has been portrayed in the media as a Satanic, magnetic personality who held near-hypnotic sway over several women whom he lent out to friends as favors and brought along for the murder scene. The press also mentioned Manson's supposed fear of blacks—he reportedly moved into rural California to escape the violence of a race war.

Weatherman, the Bureau says, digs Manson. Not only for his understanding of white America—the killer purportedly wrote PIG in blood on the wall after the murder—but also because he's a "bad motherfucker."

"Dig it, first they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they even shoved a fork into a victim's stomach! Wild!" said Bernardine.

The Weatherwomen also held a panel discussion on women's liberation. The fighting women, "the women who carry bombs under their dresses like in 'The Battle of Algiers,'" was put forward as the only valid model for women's liberation.

Women's liberation comes not only with taking leadership roles and with asserting yourself politically, they said, but also with overcoming hang-ups about violence.

In between the women's raps, the people sang a medley of Weatherman songs, high camp numbers such as, "I'm Dreaming of a White Riot," "Communism Is What We Do," and "We Need a Red Party." Spirited chants broke out, too: "Women power!" "Struggling power!" "Charlie Manson power!" "Sir han Sirhan power!" "Red Army power!" "Power to the People!" "Off the pig!"

Other women speakers pointed out that male chauvinism has both an active intolerant side and a passive insulting side. They criticized the men in many Weatherman collectives for passively accepting women in leadership roles while refusing to engage in political struggle with them.

Another speaker referred to the white women's role as reproducer, and characterized white women who bring up children in white America as "pig mothers."

The "crazy violent motherfucker" theme was picked up on Monday night in a long address by Weather Bureau member John "J.J." Jacobs, who laid out the "White Devil" theory of all world history, and traced the history of today's youth from the Beat Generation of the 1950s.

"We're against everything that's 'good and decent,'" J.J. declared. That notion, coupled with the White Devil theory, formed the basis of what they call "Serve the People Shit."

Serving the people, relating to people's needs, is a crucial factor in many people's minds of organizing white working people in America, so that the revolution will come as class war and end in socialism, rather than come as race war and end in fascism.

Despite the cabaret atmosphere of the ballroom, the occasional music and the constant reference to orgies and "wargasm," Weatherman's reported swing to the youth culture freak hippie world didn't quite materialize.

Some Weatherleaders appeared in beads, headbands, and capes. But when it came down to digging music over hard politics, or combining them, the Weathermen chose serious discussion.

The Up Rock and Roll Band from Ann Arbor, Mich., had been invited to make music for the war council, but when people broke up into small groups for more discussion, the Weatherbureau asked Up to leave. Things were apparently too heavy for music.

White Panther Party people who came on the promise that Weatherman would soon be relating strongly to youth culture and hippiedom, went away somewhat disappointed.

While Weatherman has talked a lot about getting stoned and tripping, drugs were prohibited at the meeting and in the sleeping area on security grounds (a sound decision). While Weathermen spoke favorably of the liberal use of grass, acid and alcohol, there was some criticism of self-indulgence in recent-months. Some Weathermen said they had spent too much time in personal things, including drugs and sex, not enough in furthering struggle.

Ken Kelley, a leader of the White Panthers and editor of the Ann Arbor Argus, came away from the meeting calling it "heavy" and saying with awe, "These guys are really serious."

Kelley, who has been annoyed at the anti-Weatherman sentiment in the movement, affirmed that he was not about to join Weatherman.

There was, however, a clear celebration by Weatherman of white youth culture. While "honky bastards" were denounced, there was relatively little talk about the fight against "white skin privilege," an important aspect of early Weatherman rhetoric.

While some of the non-Weathermen present remained critical if not openly disdainful of the Weathermen, there were others who concluded that it was important to take the Weathermen seriously.

The intense seriousness of the Weathermen themselves was very noticeable. They gave the impression of being internally disciplined, of being able to absorb the blows of repression. Eric Mann, Weatherman leader from Boston, is set to begin a 7-to-12-month jail term in mid-January—but this was treated rather matter-of-factly. Mann himself was the ideal stoic.

There is no sense of demoralization or fear on the surface, although it's clear that they're obviously in trouble: the vast majority of Weathermen are up on charges, many of them felonies, and future police/ court actions based on testimony from undercover agents seem quite likely.

Some Weathermen said they did not expect to hold a public meeting of this sort ever again.

Among the most prominent non-Weathermen present at the meeting was Tom Hayden, one of the founders of SDS. Early in the gathering, he led the nearly 400 participants in a mass karate exercise. Later, he and the other six white defendants in the Chicago conspiracy trial were subjected to harsh criticism by Bernardine Dohrn, who said they should not have stood by passively while Bobby Seale was dragged off to jail on contempt charges.

Hayden, somewhat forlorn, did not respond to the charges, nor did he participate actively in the meeting.

Hayden later said he was “turned off” by the proceedings. He said that Weatherman seemed to be giving up on a fight for socialism in America. The Weatherman scare-the-shit-out-of-honky-America approach represents a real loss of faith in people—the faith that you need to sustain a revolution, Hayden said.

Weatherman is not about to collapse or disappear, however. The group has grown slightly in numbers since its inception last summer. The Weathermachine is still grinding out intense, excited, very dedicated people who are willing to risk a lot.

But, as a black guy from Seattle, who Weatherman brought along, said, “They are simply not where it’s at.”

Their strategy of “upping the cost of imperialism” is key. Heavy fighting in the streets, assassination, bombings, terror and fear—chaos is a Weatherman word for this new strategy—may in fact do some material damage to Amerika, and may encourage liberation fighters throughout the world. But the Flint war council has brought the Weathermen no closer than they ever were to a strategy for making revolution for all oppressed people in America, black, brown and white.

For further discussion on Weatherman see “Debate within SDS” available for 50 cents from Radical Education Project, Box 561-A, Detroit 48232.

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Text box

PHILADELPHIA (LNS)—On Jan. 10, Quaker City SDS (Weatherman) held their first action, a prototype example of Weatherman’s hit-and-run tactics.

In reaction to a Jan. 6 CBS documentary on the Black Panther Party, they invaded the Philadelphia affiliate of CBS television (WCAU), at 1:30 pm, smashing plate glass windows and display cases with telephones which they ripped off walls and desks. Chased by employees, the group attempted their getaway through the back door, and ran smack into eight policemen.

All told, 11 people were arrested, including an observer from the Philadelphia Free Press who had watched the action from a car. Those arrested were charged with unlawful entry, malicious mischief and conspiracy. One Weatherman was also charged with resisting arrest.

Total bail for the 11 runs to more than \$20,000; damage to the TV station was estimated at \$15,000. It is reported that two participants in the action avoided arrest.

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