

Contributions to the ISSE/SEP Conference on student work

14 April 2007

The following are contributions made to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War by students and faculty at campuses in the United States.

The contributions were given in response to the report on the work of the ISSE delivered by Andre Damon.

The conference was held March 31-April 1 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Contributions on the international work and perspective of the ISSE and SEP will be published in the coming days.

Jeff L., Richmond, Virginia

I want to give a report on some of the work that we have been doing at Virginia Commonwealth University. We are now holding weekly meetings, and have had a reading group as well as lectures. In terms of these other organizations that have been mentioned [antiwar and protests groups oriented to the Democratic Party], we are definitely offering a clear alternative to their practices of, for example, laying in front of the capital building and having a “die-in” [laughter]. There is an anti-war coalition at VCU, the only left group on campus. Their group emails will consist of the statement, “We have a meeting next week!”—and that will be it [laughter]. They offer no serious study of history, and the problems that people are confronting. They can’t explain what is going on, they don’t want to. They orient to the Democratic Party, and that is something that we really want to fight against.

We also want to expand our work relating to the conditions facing students and how they are the same as the conditions facing the working class as a whole—not only after college, but also during it. The vast majority of students have to work, and they have to work the same type of jobs that most people in society have to work—low-wage, service industry jobs, and the like. We intend to look into this more and write about it for the WSWs.

Andrea G., Los Angeles, California

I have been in Russia in recent months, and in relation to the question of the work of the ISSE, I want to emphasize the role of internationalism. This is an issue that does not simply take the form of the fact that we have organizations around the world, but in the fact that we are concerned with the problems workers and youth face in countries around the world. We are seeking to encourage an international outlook among students in every country.

One can use the conditions that students face in Russia today to give a sense of the struggles that young people face not just in the United States, not just in Western Europe, but also in the entire world. When you are talking about the Soviet Union, you are talking about a society in which up until 10 years ago most people could quote passages from Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* off the top of their head.

The conditions that students face today in the former Soviet Union, and in particular in Russia, are absolutely devastating. In Russia, the

government has eliminated nearly all free higher education positions, which means that youth face the prospect of either having to pay out of pocket the extremely high tuition costs, or of being involved in some sort of bribe or corruption scheme in order to get a spot at the University.

The alternative that people face if they do not enter college is to go into the military, where they will either be sent as cannon fodder into Chechnya or raped and beaten by fellow soldiers or officers in some of the most horrific conditions of any military in the world.

There is also an extremely high unemployment rate for young people between 18 and 35—20 to 40 percent in many cities. You have the growth of a vast array of social illnesses: alcoholism, prostitution, and mail order brides. People are desperate to get out of the country and will use any opportunity that they have to do so, including selling themselves.

I think that at the same time, in a country like Russia you have an extremely explosive situation developing politically. The government sponsors many youth organizations, paying them to support the Putin government in demonstrations. You have the explosive growth of nationalism. You have the development of fascist gangs, particularly in cities like St. Petersburg, where international students are regularly beaten up. You have a police that completely ignores the situation and in many ways perpetuates it.

One of the tasks of the ISSE has to be to examine the conditions faced by students internationally and bring forward these conditions so that students understand that the working class around the world is facing similar problems.

Nathaniel B., Connecticut

One issue that has come up in the course of this discussion that I think deserves some attention is that of the essential unseriousness of these various protest organizations that presently dominate our campuses’ political discussion. These organizations, with their die-ins and their mime shows, and their production of holding hands and surrounding the campus, etc.—these essentially childish and politically puerile kinds of activity I think have a very real and negative impact on political consciousness within the universities. By not engaging seriously in political discussion, they turn people away who are seeking a serious political alternative to war and social reaction.

In this connection, I think it is important that we raise the issue of our attitude toward culture, and the fact that we are living in the midst of a very serious cultural decline, which has most certainly impacted our educational system. We have to remember there are millions of people who are going to college who are expecting to learn something meaningful about the world, and they are not necessarily getting it. And if we come forward with a very serious attitude toward cultural and artistic matters, and we are able to make our student groups a rallying point, a place where we can really take these matters up in a

unique and serious way, then we can become a real force in that sense. This can be a very important way that we can fight against these unserious and unprincipled protest politics and help reinforce our struggle to build socialist consciousness within the student body.

Julia H., Delaware

A lot of the talk here has focused on college students, but I would also like to make known some of the political struggles of high school students, since I am a high school student myself. A lot of struggle is just in trying to pay for college going into it. High school students live with their parents, so you experience all the problems of jobs and layoffs, and this is what you have to look forward to. As work goes on and the objective conditions develop, you will start to see a broad number of students, younger students my age, who will start to understand these things simply because we are surrounded by these experiences. As time goes on, more working class students who see what their parents have, or experience themselves the necessity of juggling multiple jobs to pay for college or even help their families—these students will become interested in the political perspective we are presenting.

Naomi S., Kentucky

On some campuses in more conservative areas, there are not these radical groups. In fact at Morehead State University where we are trying to get a student group started, there is not a single group on campus that addresses the question of the war at all. During the anniversary of the invasion, the College Republicans came out and planted flags to remember the soldiers and this sort of thing. There are also the College Democrats.

I read through their handbook on how to get a College Democrat group started at your school. They say, “Call the businessmen first” [laughter], lobby and sell yourself, make friends with someone on the student newspaper and give them press releases from the Democrats. When you have meetings, expect protesters to come. Bring a big sheet and spread it out behind you in case there are photographers, so that no one can see the protests. If you are going to have any meeting on campus, make friends with security first—security is the Democratic Party’s friend. Screen people at the door. If someone does act out, contact security afterwards—let them have their free speech, it will be taken care of later. [laughter].

These are also questions that we have to take up as well, because if on some campuses the College Democrats are seen as the only oppositional force—then there is no opposition at all. In some of the more nominally conservative areas, we have a strong potential for growth, because if you present not only an antiwar but also an anti-capitalist perspective, it is just like opening the seams, and all the contradictions come out.

James F., San Diego, California

In my experience in California, these reformist organizations mentioned by Andre [such as the various antiwar groups] play a really devastating role in channeling students into unprincipled positions and broad left coalitions with all sorts of disparate elements. This is something that we cannot compromise with in the least. You find the SWP, the Green Party, the ISO, Pastors for Peace, United for Peace and Justice—none of them will let someone go up and speak at one of their rallies who says, “break with the Democrats because the Democratic Party is a party of war and a party of imperialism.” We cannot start building unprincipled alliances, even if these groups may be large, even if they may be attractive to vaguely left students. We are aiming for the most serious, the most critically minded students out there, and that is whom we should orient ourselves to.

Terry T., Monroe, Michigan

I want to speak a little bit about conditions on campuses from the perspective of faculty. Indeed, at least at Monroe County Community College, these conditions are truly saddening. We now have approximately 1,500 students above the previous 3,000-student level, yet we have the same number of full-time faculty as we did then. We do not have enough classroom space. We have privatized childcare services and the cafeteria, and our administration’s next project is the construction of a new Tech Center, when there are fewer and fewer tech jobs available.

All of this is taking place at a time when our students’ living conditions are declining at an alarming rate. I have witnessed, in my classrooms, students who are unable to afford textbooks, even as they struggle to stay awake in class after having worked two and sometimes three jobs. A buyout worker from Ford is in one of my courses and just had a heart attack, which her doctor attributed to the level of stress she is experiencing. What is even more devastating is witnessing the hunger among some of our students. With the privatization of our food services, meal prices have increased. Those students I see using the cafeteria are most often making meals of a large order of french fries, while many students are foregoing the cafeteria altogether, opting instead for the vending machines.

Those who must listen to these stories, our student counselors, are truly frightened by what they hear. They relate similar stories of student hunger and the inability to pay for books or stay awake; they tell me of students having to live in cars. But what most frightens them is the increasing number of older adults who are returning to school due to outright job losses or buyouts. A former autoworker, in order to obtain the buyout’s education option, must attend college full-time. Put yourself in his or her shoes. You have worked on the line for 20-30 years. You are given two weeks to decide whether you will take the tendered buyout, and then you are required to take the same number of hours as someone fresh out of high school. For the great majority of these students, they must first take “developmental” courses, which means they will feel humiliated and frustrated. They will also, for the same reason, take longer to attain their educational goals. The counselors have told me that many of them simply walk away from school, never to be heard from again.

I think that on the one hand, a number of my colleagues are still accepting the idea that this is the reality, and there is no avenue for struggle outside the trade unions. But you also get the idea that it would not take a great deal to get them to move away from this conception.



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