

# From Port Huron to postmodernism: The class politics of the “New” Students for a Democratic Society

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The response of the American pseudo-left to the US war against Iran has tested its political character, and the results are damning.

On February 28, as the US government launched its criminal war against Iran, the “New” Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) gathered for a regional conference at Wayne State University in Detroit. The group, which presents itself as an “antiwar protest” organization, did not issue so much as a statement on the attack. Its only response was to tack the words “no war” onto the list of demands for a protest against ICE.

SDS and Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) leader Jackson Robak (the Maoist FRSO founded the “New” SDS in 2006) justified this approach in the *Detroit Free Press*, saying:

Just as we are fighting across the state of Michigan for a sanctuary campus campaign to keep our students safe from Trump’s aggressive attacks, we see the same thing as he attacks Venezuela, as he attacks Iran, and we need to say “No.”

The systematic destruction of a country of over 90 million people is itself one front in an unfolding imperialist world war, which includes the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for war against China. Yet it is treated by the “New” SDS as one more item in a string of “aggressive attacks,” to be acknowledged with a perfunctory slogan while the group proceeds with business as usual. This is not an aberration. More than six weeks after the war began, there was still not a single statement opposing it on the national SDS website.

To understand why, it is necessary to examine the political and class history of both the original SDS and the “New” SDS. The defining feature of both is the substitution of other social forces for the working class as the agency of revolutionary change.

## From Port Huron to the Weather Underground

The original SDS was founded in 1960 as a breakaway from the youth branch of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID). The latter group was an explicitly anti-communist, social democratic organization rooted in the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy and heavily influenced by the ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman.

Shachtman had been a founding leader of American Trotskyism alongside James P. Cannon, but in 1940 he broke with Leon Trotsky and the Socialist Workers Party over the defense of the Soviet Union,

promoting the theory of “bureaucratic collectivism”—the claim that the USSR represented a new form of class society distinct from both capitalism and socialism.

Within two decades, Shachtman had entirely abandoned the political independence of the working class, dissolved his organization into the Socialist Party and elaborated a strategy of “realignment”—the subordination of left politics to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and the anti-communist AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy.

This demoralized evolution from revolutionary Trotskyism to pro-imperialist social democracy was the political tradition embedded in the LID and transmitted, through figures like Michael Harrington and Tom Kahn, to the organizational milieu that gave birth to the SDS.

Both Harrington and Kahn were protégés of Shachtman and were present at the 1962 SDS convention in Port Huron, Michigan. Here a major split occurred between Harrington/Kahn—who argued for overt anti-communism and placed the blame for the nuclear arms race solely on the Soviet Union—and Tom Hayden and his supporters.

Hayden authored the Port Huron Statement, writing that SDS expressed regret at the “perversion of the older left by Stalinism” and affirmed “anti-anticommunism.”

But while SDS opposed the League for Industrial Democracy’s outright anti-communism, it also opposed the Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism as a nationalist, bureaucratic, counter-revolutionary caste that usurped power from the Soviet working class. SDS rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and instead focused on students and “marginalized communities,” which it held up as the key agents of social change.

The Port Huron Statement specifically disparaged what it termed a “labor metaphysic,” replacing the Marxist conception of the proletariat with a vague category of “citizens,” in line with a perspective rooted in liberal pluralism rather than in class struggle. In short, the Port Huron Statement is a reformist program.

Nevertheless, for the children of the postwar boom, the Port Huron Statement signaled a political awakening—revulsion at racial injustice, inequality, poverty and the threat of nuclear war. Listing a series of reformist demands on housing, jobs and living standards, the statement concluded that corporations had to be made “publicly responsible” and resources allocated “based on social need.” While indicting the government for poverty, racism and war, the SDS placed its hopes in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, declaring:

An imperative task for these publicly disinherited groups, then, is to demand a Democratic Party responsible to their interests.

To this end, much of SDS's leadership backed Democratic President Lyndon Johnson in the 1964 election, against Republican Barry Goldwater.

What later took ideological form as postmodernism and identity politics was already present in embryonic form within SDS. In practical terms, this perspective meant an orientation to the campuses, "communities," identity-based movements and single-issue campaigns, all directed away from the independent political mobilization of the working class.

The deepening crises of the 1960s led to an explosion of opposition, convincing countless youth that fundamental change required mass struggle rather than appeals to the Democratic Party. In addition to continuing civil rights struggles, major workers' battles erupted—from the Delano grape strike to the New York City transit strike and an upsurge of strikes in the auto industry and among educators.

In 1965, SDS staged the first major national antiwar protest. It played a prominent role at the inception of the antiwar protests, but the mounting opposition to the war quickly eclipsed SDS, as dozens of groups spearheaded the protests, in particular, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Communist Party (CPUSA), pacifists and antiwar veterans' groups.

Throughout this period, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Workers League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party) in the United States fought to turn radicalizing young people to the working class. They opposed the accommodation of the CPUSA and the SWP to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. The Workers League insisted that the only basis for stopping imperialist war was the building of an international socialist antiwar movement rooted in the working class and fighting for the overthrow of capitalism. The Workers League recruited a substantial layer of youth on the basis of this Trotskyist, internationalist perspective.

SDS took the opposite road. It drifted from Democratic Party liberalism into Maoism, a variant of Stalinism that subordinated the working class to bourgeois nationalism and class collaboration.

SDS reached its peak membership and influence during the upheavals of 1968—protests against the Vietnam War, the occupation of Columbia University and confrontations at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. This occurred against the backdrop of a pre-revolutionary world situation: the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the French general strike of May-June 1968, and mass revolts across Europe and Latin America. The political conditions were charged with revolutionary potential. By 1969, over a million US students described themselves as socialists or revolutionaries.

But because the SDS had no Marxist foundation—no orientation toward the working class, no understanding of the need for a revolutionary party grounded in Marxism and the historical struggle led by Leon Trotsky against Stalinism—it came under the influence of Maoism and a politically incoherent mixture of Third-Worldism and anarchism. This political disorientation left it highly susceptible to FBI infiltration and manipulation. SDS broke up into three groups in 1969.

The SDS majority, drawn to guerrilla warfare, transformed itself into the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM). Its declared aim was to convert SDS into a "mass revolutionary organization of youth" grounded in "Mao Zedong thought." RYM described the working class as "corrupted" by "white skin privilege," thereby writing off the proletariat as a revolutionary force.

The Progressive Labor (PL) faction of SDS moved away from Maoism but remained within the camp of Stalinism and, in an equally dead-end rejection of the working class, hailed the Black Panthers as the revolutionary force in the US.

Finally, the Weather Underground embraced urban violence and the thoroughly pessimistic practice of individual terrorism. This evolution exposed the petty-bourgeois character of the entire political tendency.

## The intellectual consolidation of defeat

The ideological groundwork for this trajectory had been laid well before the collapse of SDS. In the United States it was, above all, Herbert Marcuse—a German émigré philosopher and leading figure in the anti-Marxist Frankfurt School—who provided the theoretical ammunition for abandoning the working class. His widely read works, including *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), argued that American workers had been so thoroughly integrated into capitalist consumer society that they were incapable of revolutionary action.

In place of the proletariat, Marcuse pointed to students, racial minorities and the socially marginalized as the agents of change—a perspective that mapped directly onto SDS's rejection of the "labor metaphysic." Marcuse's pessimism was itself rooted in the irrationalist philosophical tradition, which rejected the possibility of a rational, scientific understanding of social development.

His popularity on American campuses in the 1960s imbued a generation of middle class radicals with a deep hostility to the working class—an intellectual inheritance the present-day SDS and FRSO fully embrace.

When the protest movements receded and the radical generation dispersed, these anti-Marxist ideas did not disappear. Former radicals consolidated and institutionalized them within the universities, finding tenured positions and waging unrelenting war not against capitalism but against Marxism. In France, ex-radical intellectuals such as Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard drew on the same well of philosophical irrationalism to develop and systematize postmodernism, which spread back across the Atlantic and took firm hold in American academic life.

Postmodernism denied the existence of objective truth, declared "grand narratives" such as socialist revolution obsolete and erased the central role of the working class in history. It transformed Marxism from a scientific theory of class struggle into a mixture of cultural critique and lifestyle politics, elevating personal alienation and individual liberation over class analysis. This has remained the dominant ideological framework in Western universities over decades.

The long-term trajectory of SDS's leadership is deeply instructive. Former SDS leaders like Todd Gitlin and Tom Hayden moved sharply to the right following the protest movement's end, integrating themselves fully into the Democratic Party. Gitlin became an enthusiastic backer of US-NATO military intervention in Yugoslavia, supported the Afghanistan war as a "war of necessity" and campaigned heavily for John Kerry and Barack Obama.

Tom Kahn, originally an assistant to Bayard Rustin, who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington, attended the Port Huron conference and criticized the statement as soft on communism. He followed Shachtman's path and went on to a career directing the AFL-CIO's international operations—in particular, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which functioned as a conduit for CIA subversion against the working class in Latin America and beyond.

Hayden became a Democratic state assemblyman in California. Another former SDS leader, Carl Davidson, spent decades building the Democratic Party electoral machine. In 2020, over 60 former SDS leaders signed an open letter in *The Nation* calling on Bernie Sanders supporters to back Joe Biden.

This was not a betrayal of SDS's original ideals. It was their logical culmination. SDS never broke with the Democratic Party framework.

## The "New" SDS and the FRSO

The present-day SDS is the heir of this trajectory—from the Port Huron Statement’s liberal pluralism, through the Maoist adventurism of RYM and the Weather Underground, to the anti-Marxist irrationalism of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism.

There is more than a passing element of “the first time tragedy, the second time farce” in the reincarnated SDS. The original SDS emerged in a period of social upheaval—mass civil rights struggles, an upsurge of working class militancy, a radicalization of millions of young people.

Its class limitations and programmatic confusions arose under conditions in which the welfare state still offered the illusion of reforming capitalism from within, the Soviet Union still existed and a generation of youth was encountering the contradictions of imperialism for the first time.

The new SDS, launched by the FRSO in 2006, can claim no such mitigating circumstances. It was born after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decades of rapacious plunder by US imperialism that followed, after the working class had grown to unprecedented size internationally, and after the full bankruptcy of Stalinism, social democracy and every variety of bourgeois nationalism had been demonstrated in practice.

The elements forming the “New” SDS, including several of the original participants and other old radicals, sought to revive the “glory days” of mass student protest, even though this strategy had been both historically superseded and politically discredited.

The naming of the new organization “SDS” was calculated to revive the images of the antiwar 1960s and make a virtue of all of its weaknesses. The “Points of Unity” issued in 2024 advance an activist and opportunist policy of student protest completely divorced from the working class and socialism. The document states:

The SDS welcomes all students who are progressive and down to protest. SDS is a fighting student organization. We lead students in protest and confrontation against university administration whose interests are in direct opposition to the demands and needs of students. By doing this on a national level, SDS will build up and expand the student movement here in the U.S. ... Some common campaigns for SDS chapters include divestment from Israel, defend ethnic studies, stop tuition hikes, and increase Black enrollment.

This programmatic document further states that members “do not have to uphold a special political view,” and that “it is not necessary for SDS to have a statement on all social issues.” It concludes: “What we say alone will not build the student movement. What we do by calling protests and waging campaigns builds SDS and the student movement.”

Nothing could more clearly express the gulf separating the “New” SDS from a revolutionary perspective. Entirely rejecting Lenin’s maxim, “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement,” the SDS promotes action without “a special political view,” and the conception that “calling protests” and “waging campaigns” are sufficient. As Lenin explained in *What Is To Be Done?*, socialist consciousness, that is, an understanding of the capitalist system’s historical laws, the need to overthrow bourgeois property and its state machine, and the program of proletarian revolution, is a scientific question and must be brought into the working class.

The SDS’s opportunism immediately translates itself into support for the dominant, capitalist ideology—in this case, Democratic Party reformism, bourgeois nationalism, and identity politics.

To this end, the SDS’s relationship with the DSA is collaborative. Under cover of “not endorsing any candidates,” the SDS avoids criticizing Bernie Sanders, Rashida Tlaib, Zohran Mamdani and other Democratic

Socialists of America (DSA) members and supporters who function as an essential “left” flank of the Democratic Party.

This silence implies consent. SDS organizes joint demonstrations on campuses with the DSA as a “direct action” ally.

The focus of SDS entirely follows the postmodernist embrace of identity, not class, politics—a central plank of the DSA and the Democratic Party as a whole. One of the few direct political prescriptions in the “Points of Unity” is that SDS fights “all attacks on Ethnic Studies, DEI programs, DACA, Women’s and Gender and Sexuality Studies,” and calls for increased “Black, Chicano/Latino, and Native enrollment at all universities.”

SDS’s uncritical endorsement of bourgeois nationalist regimes as “socialist models” reproduces, in cruder form, the Pabloite revisionism that destroyed the Socialist Workers Party as a revolutionary organization—the theory that Stalinist and nationalist regimes were historically progressive forces, to which the working class had politically to subordinate itself.

SDS’s parent organization, FRSO, was itself cobbled together in 1985 from fragments of the Maoist-led New Communist Movement, including the Proletarian Unity League and the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters. It later absorbed a further constellation of Stalinist remnants—elements of the Communist Party USA and several smaller Maoist and nationalist grouplets.

The reinvented SDS presents itself as a progressive organization rooted in the anti-war movement, but it conceals its Stalinist pedigree and its fundamental alignment with the Democratic Party. Its program declares that SDS stands with any movement or leader who “resists and defends their country by any means necessary,” a formula that endorses not the independent struggle of workers and youth, but the maneuvers of capitalist politicians and bourgeois nationalist regimes.

It would be a mistake, however, to treat the politics of FRSO and SDS as merely the product of ideological confusion or historical ignorance. These organizations have a definite social base in privileged layers of the middle class, and their politics express definite class interests. Their perspective—substituting identity politics for class analysis, bourgeois nationalism for socialist internationalism, and protest theater for the independent mobilization of the working class—serves the need of the bourgeoisie to intercept a radicalization and subordinate it to the political requirements of the Democratic Party and the capitalist order it defends.

## Conclusion

There is a sharp shift to the left among broad sections of the population in the United States and internationally. Millions are horrified at the unspeakable war crimes and expansion of imperialist war abroad coupled with the destruction of democratic and social rights at home.

Young people looking for a genuine socialist perspective will not find it in the SDS, an opportunist mixture of Stalinism, reformism and the anti-Marxist politics of the New Left, which serves to block students from finding their way to revolutionary Marxism.

From its reformist origins and rejection of the “labor metaphysic,” through its degeneration into Maoist adventurism, to its rebirth under the tutelage of a pro-Democratic Party Stalinist group, SDS has opposed an orientation to the working class, the only class capable of defeating world imperialism and building socialism.

The history of SDS confirms the analysis of the Trotskyist movement: the failure of the 1960s radicalization was not due to a lack of mass energy or genuine grievances, but to the crisis of revolutionary leadership. What prevented socialist revolution in that period was the combined

betrayal of Stalinism, Pabloism, social democracy and the various trade union bureaucracies, supplemented by the political disorientation sown by the New Left itself, which glorified Maoist and nationalist movements while opposing the building of a Trotskyist leadership in the working class.

The Workers League put the matter precisely in its 1966 founding congress resolution. The struggle against imperialist war, it stated, “cannot be separated from the other anti-working class policies of the imperialists. Middle class political parties set up on a ‘classless’ basis to fight the ‘war issue’ are futile efforts and serve to obscure the class issues involved rather than to explain them.”

Sixty years later, this remains the verdict on the “New” SDS.



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