

Organizing the Knowledge Industry

by C. Clark Kissinger, National Secretary,
Students for a Democratic Society

In his recent book *The Uses of the University*, President Clark Kerr of the University of California attempted to characterize the role of the university in the contemporary society: "The university has become a prime instrument of national purpose. This is new. This is the essence of the transformation now engulfing our universities. Basic to this transformation is the growth of the 'knowledge industry,' which is coming to permeate government and business and to draw into it more and more people raised to higher and higher levels of skill. The production, distribution, and consumption of 'knowledge' in all its forms is said to account for 29% of the gross national product . . ."

With this characterization of the university drawn so sharply, it is not surprising to see the opposite side of the coin propounded by Paul Goodman: "At present in the United States, students—middle-class youth—are the major exploited class. (Negroes, small farmers, the aged are rather out-caste groups; their labor is not needed and they are not wanted.) The labor of intelligent youth is needed and they are accordingly subjected to tight scheduling, speedup, and other factory methods. Then it is not surprising if they organize their CIO. It is frivolous to tell them to go elsewhere if they don't like the rules, for they have no choice but to go to college, and one factory is like another."

While it must not be carried to extremes for obvious reasons, the factory analogy of the large educational system gives us a new grasp on the problems found in them. Most problems arising in the University are not the results of "breakdowns in communication" or "failure to follow proper procedures," but rather an expression of basic conflicts of interest. Conflicts which cannot be resolved until all the constituent parts of the university (and students in particular) are allowed to participate in a meaningful way in the decision making processes of the institution. Too often the minor blow-ups, which we lump awkwardly into the categories of academic freedom violations and *in loco parentis* problems, are simply the direct result of arbitrary and absolute rule by administrative elites. And it is this basic disease, not the symptoms, which we must treat.

What is needed then is the promulgation on the part of students of a *basic charter of university democracy*. And what is needed of society is a Wagner Act for the university working class. For we must realize from the start only through the organization within the universities of a real national union of students and sympathetic faculty can the democratization of the university take place.

The only rights which any people anywhere possess are those which they demand effectively.