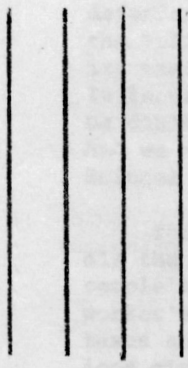


TOWARD A
STUDENT
SYNDICALIST
MOVEMENT

or



UNIVERSITY
REFORM
REVISITED

by
Carl Davidson

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Toward A Student Syndicalist Movement

or

University Reform Revisited

In the past few years, we have seen a variety of campus movements developing around the issue of "university reform." A few of these movements sustained a mass base for brief periods. Some brought about minor changes in campus rules and regulations. But almost all have failed to alter the university community radically or even to maintain their own existence. What is the meaning of this phenomenon? How can we avoid it in the future? Why bother with university reform at all?

It is a belief among SDS people that "all the issues are interrelated." However, we often fail to relate them in any systematic way. What, in fact, is the connection between dorm hours and the war in Vietnam? Is there one system responsible for both? If so, what is the nature of that system? And, finally, how should we respond? These are the questions I will try to answer in the following analysis.

Why University Reform?

We have named the system in this country "corporate liberalism." And, if we bother to look, its penetration into the campus community is awesome. Its elite is trained in our Colleges of Business Administration. Its defenders are trained in our Law Schools. Its apologists can be found in the Political Science Departments. The Colleges of Social Sciences produce its manipulators. For propagandists, it relies on the Schools of Journalism. It insures its own future growth in the Colleges of Education. If some of us don't quite fit in, we are brainwashed in the Divisions of Counseling. And we all know only too well what goes on in the classrooms of the Military Science Buildings.

This condition takes on more sinister ramifications when we realize that all the functionaries of "private enterprise" are being trained at the people's expense. American corporations have little trouble increasing the worker's wage, especially when they can take it back in the form of school taxes and tuition to train their future workers. To be sure, many corporations give the universities scholarships and grants. But this is almost always for some purpose of their own, if only as a tax dodge.

Furthermore, the corporate presence on campus grotesquely transforms the nature of the university community. The most overt example is the grade system. Most professors would agree that grades are meaningless if not positively harmful to the learning process. But the entire manipulated community replies in unison: "But how else would companies know whom to hire (or the Selective Service whom to draft)?" So we merrily continue to publicly subsidize testing services for "private" enterprise.

What we have to see clearly is the relation between the university and corporate liberal society at large. Most of us are outraged when our university administrators or their "student government" lackeys liken our universities and colleges to corporations. We bitterly respond with talk about a "community of scholars." However, the fact of the matter is that they are correct. Our educational institutions are corporations and knowledge factories. What we have failed to see in the past is how absolutely vital these factories are to the corporate liberal state.

What do these factories produce? What are their commodities? The most obvious answer is "knowledge." Our factories produce the know-how that enables the corporate state to expand, to grow, and to exploit more efficiently and extensively both in our own country and in the third world. But "knowledge" is perhaps too abstract to be seen as a commodity. Concretely, the commodities of our factories are the Knowledgable. Aid officials, Peace Corpsmen, military officers, CIA officials, segregationist judges, corporation lawyers, politicians of all sorts, welfare workers, managers of industry, labor bureaucrats (I could go on and on) --where do they come from? They are products of the factories we live and work in.

It is on our assembly lines in the universities that they are molded into what they are. As integral parts of the knowledge factory system, we are both the exploiters and the exploited. As both managers and the managed, we produce and become the most vital product of corporate liberalism--bureaucratic man. In short, we are a new kind of scab.

But let us return to our original question. What is the connection between dorm rules and the war in Vietnam? Superficially, both are aspects of corporate liberalism--a dehumanized and oppressive system. But let us be more specific. Who are the dehumanizers and oppressors? In a word, our past, present and future alumni--the finished product of our knowledge factories.

How did they become what they are? They were shaped and formed on an assembly line that starts with children entering junior high school and ends with junior bureaucrats in commencement robes. And the rules and regulations of in loco parentis are essential tools along that entire assembly line. Without them, it would be difficult to produce the kind of men that can create, sustain, tolerate, and ignore situations like Watts, Mississippi and Vietnam.

Finally, perhaps we can see the vital connections our factories have with the present conditions of corporate liberalism when we ask ourselves what would happen if: the military found itself without ROTC students; the CIA found itself without recruits; paternalistic welfare departments found themselves without social workers; or the Democratic Party found itself without young liberal apologists and campaign workers? In short, what would happen to a manipulative society if its means of creating manipulable people were done away with? We might then have a fighting chance to change that system.

The Present Impasse

Most of us have been involved in university reform movements of one sort or another. For the most part, our efforts have produced very little. The Free Speech Movement flared briefly, then faded out. There have been a few dozen ad hoc committees for the abolition of this or that rule. Some of these succeeded, then fell apart. Some never got off the ground.

However, we have had some effect. The discontent is there. Although the apathy is extensive and deep-rooted, even the apathetic gripe at times. Our administrations are worried. They watch us carefully, have staff seminars on Paul Goodman, and study our own literature more carefully than we do. They handle our outbursts with kid gloves, trying their best to give us an issue.

We have one more factor in our favor, namely, we have made many mistakes that we can learn from. I will try to enumerate and analyze a few of them.

Forming Single Issue Groups. A prime example is organizing a committee to abolish dorm hours for women students over 21. This tactic has two faults. First, in term of relevance, it is a felt issue for less than ten percent of the average campus. Hence, it is almost impossible to mobilize large numbers of students around the issue for any length of time. The same criticism applies to student labor unions (only a few hundred work for the university), dress regulations (only the hippies are bothered) or discrimination in off-campus housing (most black college students are too bourgeois to care). The second fault is that most of these issues can be accommodated by the administration. For instance, after months of meetings, speeches and agitation, the Dean of Women changes the rules so women over 21 with parental permission and a high enough grade average can apply, if she wants, for a key to the Dorm. Big Deal. At this stage, the tiny organization that worked around this usually folds up.

Organizing Around Empty Issues. Students often try to abolish rules that aren't enforced anyway. Almost every school has a rule forbidding women to visit men's apartments. They are also rarely enforced, even if openly violated. Since most students are not restricted by the rule, they usually won't fight to change it. Often, they will react negatively, feeling that if the issue is brought up, the administration will have to enforce it.

Our Fear of Being Radical. Time and time again, we water down our demands and compromise ourselves before we even begin. In our meetings we argue the administration's position against us, both before they will and better than they will. We allow ourselves to be intimidated by the word "responsible." (How many times have we changed a "Student Bill of Rights" to a watered down "Resolution on Student Rights and Responsibilities"?) We spend more energy assuring our deans that we "don't want another Berkeley" than we do talking with students about the real issues.

Working Through Existing Channels. This really means, "Let us stall you off until the end of the year." If we listen to this at all, we ought to do it just once and in such a way as to show everyone that it's a waste of time.

Waiting for Faculty Support. This is like asking Southern Negroes to wait for White moderates. We often fail to realize that the faculty are more powerless than we. They have the welfare of their families to consider.

Legal Questions. We spend hours debating among ourselves whether or not the university can legally abolish in loco parentis. They can if they want to; or, hopefully, if they have to. Besides, suppose it wasn't legal; should we then stop, pick up our marbles and go home?

Isolating Ourselves. Time and time again we fall into the trap of trying to organize independents over the "Greek-Independent split." This should be viewed as an administration plot to divide and rule. On the other hand, we shouldn't waste time trying to court the Greeks or "campus leaders". They haven't any more real power than anyone else. Also, SDS people often view themselves as intellectual enclaves on campus when we should see ourselves as organizing committees for the entire campus. We retreat to our own "hippy hideouts" rather than spending time in the student union building talking with others.

Forming Free Universities. This can be a good thing, depending on how it is organized. But we run the risk of the utopian socialists who withdrew from the early labor struggles. We may feel liberated in our Free Universities; but, in the meantime, the "unfree" university we left goes on cranking out corporate liberals. In fact, they have it easier since we aren't around making trouble.

Working Within Student Government. We should do this for one and only one reason--to abolish it. We should have learned by now that student governments have no power and, in many cases, the administration has organized them in such a way that it is impossible to use them to get power. (In a few cases, it might be possible to take over a student government and threaten to abolish it if power isn't granted.)

From the nature of the above criticisms of our mistakes of the past few years, I think the direction we should move becomes more clear. Also, when we consider the fact that our universities are already chief agents for social change in the direction of 1984, I think we can see why it is imperative that we organize the campuses. However, I do not mean to imply that we ought to ignore organizing elsewhere.

Toward Student Syndicalism

The Relevance of Participatory Democracy. In the above analysis (by no means original with me) of the university, we can find an implicit antagonism, or, if you will, a fundamental contradiction. Namely, that our administrators ask of us that we both participate and not participate in our educational system. We are told we must learn to make responsible decisions, yet we are not allowed to make actual decisions. We are told that education is an active process, yet we are passively trained. We are criticized for our apathy and our activism. In the name of freedom, we are trained to obey.

The system requires that we passively agree to be manipulated. But our vision is one of active participation. And this is the demand that our administrators cannot meet without putting themselves out of a job. That is exactly why we should be making it.

What Is To Be Done? Obviously, we need to organize, to build a movement on the campuses with the primary purpose of radically transforming the university community. Too often we lose sight of this goal. To every program, every action, every position, and every demand; we must raise the question--how will this radically alter the lives of every student on this campus? With this in mind, I offer the following proposal for action.

(1) That every SDS chapter organize a student syndicalist movement on its campus. I use the term "syndicalism" for a crucial reason. In the labor struggle, the syndicalist unions worked for industrial democracy and worker's control, rather than better wages and working conditions. Likewise, and I cannot repeat this often enough, the issue for us is "student control" (along with a yet-to-be liberated faculty in some areas). What we do not want is a "company union" student movement that sees itself as a body that, under the rubric of "liberalization," helps a paternal administration make better rules for us. What we do want is a union of students where the students themselves decide what kind of rules they want or don't want. Or whether they need rules at all. Only this sort of student organization allows for decentralization and the direct participation of students in all those decisions daily affecting their lives

(2) That the student syndicalism movement take on one or two possible structural forms--a Campus Freedom Democratic Party or a Free Student Union.

(a) Campus Freedom Democratic Party. This is possible on those campuses where the existing student government is at least formally "democratic" (i.e. One Student - One Vote). The idea is to organize a year-round electoral campaign for the purpose of educating students about their system; building mass memberships in dormitory and living area "precincts"; constantly harassing and disrupting the meetings of the existing student government (for instance, showing up en masse

at a meeting and singing the jingle of the now defunct "Mickey Mouse Club"); and, finally, winning a majority of seats in student government elections. As long as the CFDP has a minority of the seats, those seats should be used as soapboxes to expose the existing body as a parody of the idea of government. It should be kept in mind that the main purpose of all the above activity is to develop a radical consciousness among all the students, in the real struggle yet to come against the administration.

What happens if a CFDP wins a majority of the seats? It should immediately push through a list of demands (the nature of which, and this is crucial, I will deal with later) in the form of a Bill of Rights and/or Declaration of Independence. The resolution should contain a time limit for the Administration (or Regents or whatever) to reply. If the demands are met, the students should promptly celebrate the victory of the revolution. If not, the CFDP should promptly abolish student government and/or set up a student government in exile. Secondly, the CFDP should immediately begin mass demonstrations; sit-ins in the administration buildings, in faculty parking lots, in maintained departments, etc.; boycotts of all classes, and strikes of teaching assistants. In short, the success of these actions (especially when the cops come) will be the test of how well CFDP has been radicalizing its constituency during the previous two or three years.

(b) Free Student Unions. The difference between a FSU and a CFDP is mainly a tactical one. On many campuses existing student governments are not even formally democratic; but are set up with the school newspaper having one vote, the Inter-Fraternity Council having one vote, and so on. In a situation like this, we ought to ignore and/or denounce campus electoral politics from the word go. Instead, following the plan of the Wobblies, we should organize One Big Union of all the students. The first goal of the FSU would be to develop a counter-institution to the existing student government that would eventually embrace a healthy majority of the student body. It would have to encourage non-participation in student government, and to engage in active nonelectoral "on the job" agitation. This would take the form of sleep-outs, "freedom" parties in restricted apartments, non-violently seizing the building housing the IBM machines used to grade tests, campaigning to mutilate IBM cards, disrupting oversize classes, non-violently attempting to occupy and liberate the student newspaper and radio station, etc.). All this should be done in such a manner as to recruit more and more support. Once the FSU has more support than student government (i.e. when its membership is a majority of the campus) it should declare student government defunct, make its demands of the administration; and, if refused, declare the general strike.

Obviously, the success of either a CFDP or a FSU depends upon our ability to organize a mass radical base with a capacity for prolonged resistance, dedication, and endurance. With this in mind, it is easy to see why such a student syndicalist movement must be national (or even international) in its scope. There will be a need for highly mobile regional and national full-time organizers to travel from campus to campus. When critical confrontations break out from campus to campus to campus, there will be a need for sympathy demonstrations and strikes on other campuses. There may even be a need to send busloads of students to a campus where replacements are needed, due to mass arrests. Again, we can learn much from the organizing tactics of the Wobblies and the CIO.

- (3) That the student syndicalist movement adopt as its primary and central issue the abolition of the grade system. This is not easy to say that the other issues, such as decision-making power for student governing bodies, are unimportant. They are not; and, in certain situations, they can be critical. But to my mind, the abolition of grades is the most significant over-all issue for building a radical movement on campus. There are three reasons why I think this is so:

(a) Grading is a common condition of the total student and faculty community. It is the direct cause of the alienation of most faculty members from their work, in addition to being the direct cause of most student anxieties and frustrations. Among our better educators and almost all faculty, there is a common consensus that grades are, at best, meaningless, and more likely, harmful to real education.

(b) As an issue to organize around, the presence of the grade system is constantly felt. Hour exams, mid-terms, and finals are always cropping up (while student government elections occur only once a year). Every time we see our fellow students cramming for exams (actually, for grades), we can point out to them their exploitation and try to organize them. In every class we take, throughout the school year, every time our profs grade our papers and tests, we can agitate in our classrooms, exposing the system and encourage both our classmates and profs to join with us to abolish that system.

(c) The abolition of the grade system is a demand that cannot be met by the administration without radically altering the shape and purpose of our educational system. First of all, if there were no grades, a significant part of our administrators would be without jobs, for they would have nothing to do. Also, large mass-production TV classes and the like would have to be done away with. Since education would have to be done through personal contact between the student and his professor, classes would necessarily be limited in size. Since the evaluation of a student's work would not have to be temporally regulated and standardized, independent scholarships would be encouraged, if not necessitated. As a result, the corporate system might have some difficulty in finding manipulable junior bureaucrats. Finally, the Selective Service would have a hell of a time ranking us.

For these reasons, it is my feeling that the abolition of the grade system should serve as the "umbrella" issue for a student syndicalist movement, much in the same manner as "the abolition of the wage system" served within the syndicalist trade union movement. Under this umbrella, a myriad of other issues can be raised, depending upon which segment of the student community we were appealing to and at what degree of strength we might have at any one time.

(4) That the student syndicalist movement incorporate in secondary issues the ideology of participatory democracy. This can be viewed as an attempt on our part to sabotage the knowledge factory machinery for producing the managers and the managed of 1984. There are numerous ways to go about this. I will list a few:

(a) Approach students in Teacher's Colleges with a counter-curriculum based on the ideas of Paul Goodman and A. S. Neil for the radical education of children.

(b) At the beginning of each semester request (or demand) of the prof that you and your fellow classmates participate in shaping the structure, format and content of that particular course.

(c) Sign up for, attend, denounce, and then walk out of and picket excessively large classes.

(d) Organize students and liberated profs in certain departments to work out model counter-curriculae and agitate for its adoption, mainly because students participated in shaping it rather than on its merits.

(e) Hold mock trials for the Dean of Men and Dean of Women for their "crimes against humanity."

(f) Women students might organize a decentralized federation of dormitory councils (soviets?) where each living unit would formulate a counter-set of rules and regulations; and then use them to replace existing rules on the grounds that the women themselves made the rules.

I am sure if we used our imaginations, we could extend this list indefinitely. And as programs embodying the philosophy of participatory democracy, these suggestions, to my mind, are of intrinsic worth. However, I also believe that they might have far-reaching effects. For participatory democracy is often like a chronic and contagious disease. Once caught, it permeates one's whole life and the lives of those around us. Its effect is disruptive in a total sense. And within a manipulative, bureaucratic system, its articulation and expression amounts to sabotage. It is my hope that those exposed to it while building a movement for student syndicalism will never quite be the same, especially after they leave the university community.

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