

A REPORT ON THE ANTI-WAR CONVENTION AND DISCUSSION OF THE
YSA-SWP POLICIES IN THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

The following article was written by Stephen Fox who has been recently expelled from the Detroit branches of the YSA and SWP.

While Steve Fox did not disagree with the organizational proposals of the YSA-SWP as such, he insisted that the important question was that of political orientation for the movement. Consequently he submitted a political document to the anti-war convention and was expelled for having done so.

The following article was originally presented to the Detroit YSA and SWP as a report on the anti-war convention and a defense of his position. We are presenting it as an informational report in the hope that it will aid in clarifying the issues that face the anti-war movement.

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THE ANTI-WAR CONVENTION, NOV. 25-28 AND
THE YSA-SWP PERSPECTIVE

by STEPHEN FOX

The first convention of a young movement whose life span is measured only in months could have been an important step in the clarification and development of a correct political perspective for the movement. On the whole the delegates were hungrily seeking new ideas and ways of building a mass movement to halt the war. The attitude was one of complete non-exclusion. Yet despite the crying need for political discussion in this movement, the YSA and SWP carried thru an organizational maneuver which submerged the entire convention from the first session of the first day to the last day in a bitter, demoralizing, fruitless organizational struggle. Yet today the SWP-YSA is carrying thru that same course in spite of the fact that their actions have alienated them from almost everyone in the anti-war movement, the civil-rights movement and every other arena the YSA and SWP may attempt to work in.

The questions that face us are: exactly what happened, why did it happen, and what should have been done.

The Mood

The National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam (NCC EWV) was first formed earlier this year as the organizational coordinator of the new local independent Committees to End the War. Delegates from all over the country came with several questions in mind: what is the nature of our enemies, what must we do to build a mass movement capable of halting the war, who must we approach to build this movement, how must we approach them, and what program will reach them?

The mood and organizational structure was one of complete non-exclusion. The organs of all the radical tendencies were freely distributed and sold without hindrance. The office of the Washington CEWV was always open to any of the participants in the convention without restriction who wished to use the facilities to put out position papers during the convention. These facilities included free use of stencils, paper and the mimeographing machine. The atmosphere was one in which all political ideas could be discussed openly and freely.

The mood of the overwhelming majority of participants was, on an individual level at least, in favor of immediate withdrawal of American troops. The people had, however, to be politically convinced on the viability of this demand in building a broader movement. Hundreds of delegates wore pins supporting the N.L.F.. (The Comm. to Aid the NLF was allowed full rights to present its views and literature.) Chapters of the SDS had 32 to 36 out of more than 600 full and alternate delegates attending the convention. (Total registration, incidentally, was over 1500.) The position of SDS (which is an extremely loose and heterogeneous organization) was in line with the militant mood of the convention. In its call for the Nov. 27th march, SDS came out clearly and strongly for immediate withdrawal of Amer. troops from Vietnam. Even the DuBois Club (which had few official delegates) was split to some extent on the issue of immediate withdrawal in the face of the vitality and militancy of the movement. At one point during the convention a DuBois Club member, in the name of his local club, supported the immediate withdrawal of Amer. troops as the central slogan for the proposed days of protest next March 25-26th.

There were, without question, a number of people who have been hostile to the SWP and YSA in the leadership of the NCCEWV. If they had, however, attempted to use their organizational position to stop the SWP-YSA from participating in the political discussion they would have alienated the overwhelming majority of the participants and would have been stopped short. Witness what happened when the chairman of the Friday night session attempted to cut off Jens Jenson who was speaking in favor of a new national organization for withdrawal now. An impromptu demonstration of the delegates and participants was held until the presiding committee allowed him to speak. There were no further attempts to stop free discussion on the floor of the convention. As it was, the success of the YSA-SWP in forcing the convention, contrary to the political mood of the overwhelming majority of the delegates, to concentrate almost exclusively on second rate organizational questions, is in itself proof of their ability, if they had so desired, to put forward a political line to a complete and exhaustive extent.

The Events

Before the first session of the first day of the convention, Thur. Nov. 25, as people entered the convention hall they were given a leaflet by YSAers announcing a meeting of a separate workshop which was to be held that afternoon. The workshop was to be concerned with the formation of a separate national organization of the independent CEWV's. It was signed by about 30 delegates, approx. half of whom were YSAers. At the first plenary session this workshop became the prime bone of contention. These were the issues: the independent workshop was to be held at the same time as the workshop on National Structure was scheduled. That is, ~~a~~ an independent organization was being formed under the leadership of the SWP-YSA before the delegates had a chance to decide what the NCCEWV should become. The question of having this workshop was never discussed beforehand with the presiding committee even though two of the signers of the leaflet were on the presiding committee. Finally, at the independent workshop Thur. afternoon, the YSA had separate registration forms for the new organization already mimeographed up and two YSAers were having people sign up. The SWP-YSA showed a crude lack of respect and regard for the forms of the convention in which the overwhelming majority of the delegates and participants had confidence.

The SWP-YSA by taking this question outside the NCCEWV ignored the real possibility of setting the stage thru political discussion and education of winning the mass of delegates over to a correct stance on the question of immediate withdrawal of troops. The SWP-YSA ignored the fact that the delegates and participants look upon the NCCEWV as the real vehicle at present for the most militant sections of the anti-war movement. Why the SWP-YSA did this will be taken up further in this document.

Because the SWP-YSA had begun the carrying out of an organizational maneuver of this type before the convention had a chance to discuss its objectives, and therefore what organization the delegates thought was necessary, the SWP-YSA was attacked from all quarters (including from most of the independents) as splitters and disrupters. This fight which had begun Thur. afternoon continued thru Thur. night. All other questions were pushed completely to the background. The depth of the hostility towards the SWP-YSA was so great that they had to break up the independent workshop and bring the discussion into the National Structure workshop where it properly belonged in the first place.

The completeness of the submergence of all other questions into this bitter, factional organizational struggle which seemed to go on endlessly, caused extreme confusion and disgust among many participants. The Southern delegation was going to pack up and leave Thur. night because they had come to find out what should be done, not to listen to organizational squabbles. They were finally convinced to remain at the convention.

The fight went on thru Fri., much of the discussion all the way thru being on the right of the independent workshop to hold a separate meeting, inasmuch as it hadn't been proven that the NCCEWV convention was not basically a viable vehicle for the independent committees.

Fri. night there were reports from a representative of the presiding committee and from a YSAer acting as a representative of the group wishing to form a new national organization. What the representative of the presiding ~~group~~ committee specifically said is unimportant. All that need be stated is that this maneuver by the SWP-YSA gave every political opponent of Trotskyism a firm basis to shift the question from a political discussion to an organizational attack on the SWP-YSA. The YSAer in his presentation stated that what is needed is two organizations: 1) a coordinating committee of all groups in the anti-war movement from right-wing SANE to the independent committees and the YSA, and 2) a national organization of the independent anti-war committees around the demand of immediate withdrawal. Further, the YSAer said that in order for the NCCEWV to be this coordinating committee it must have essentially a liberal, non-programatic approach and that it should therefore not take a position on such questions as immediate withdrawal.

The YSA and SWP were therefore proposing that the NCCEWV become simply an impotent umbrella coordinating committee like the Turn Towards Peace where the leaders of the various anti-war organizations such as SANE and the independent committees could meet once or twice a year. They were proposing this at a time when the left of the anti-war movement was not prepared for such a move and consider the NCCEWV as still essentially representing them. To propose such a move when the political differences had not yet been discussed and crystallized, when the forces within the movement had not yet had a chance to polarize, when the NCCEWV convention was still a viable political form for the thrashing out and clarifying of these differences, was completely wrong. It showed that the YSA and SWP were engaged in an organizational maneuver to split the movement and to win as many elements as possible, organizationally, away from the SDS and the DuBois Clubs and into an organization dominated by the SWP-YSA. All this was to occur and did occur without political clarification. The independent committees were unprepared politically for a national organization around the slogan "Withdraw the Troops Now". This was demonstrated by the results of two votes, one on Fri. night, one on Sat. morning.

The Fri. night vote occurred around a motion from the MFDP delegation. It stated that the convention should adopt the slogan "Freedom Now - Withdraw Now" as the major theme on its signs during the demonstration the following day. The motion was overwhelmingly defeated with the delegates from the SWP-YSA voting with the majority against the motion. This act is the most revealing and indefensible of political acts. It showed the logical end of the SWP-YSA position which states that the anti-war movement must exclusively deal with the anti-war questions. Further, it showed the organizational fear by the SWP-YSA that the NCCEWV might become a viable opponent the the proposed SWP-YSA dominated organization, and completely undercut its base by the NCCEWV taking a militant position for immediate withdrawal.

The next morning, Sat. 11/27, a motion was brought in by the National Action workshop supported by Dave Dellinger & Staughton Lynd for days of protest on March 25-26, '66 around the central theme of immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops. The position that SWP-YSA had taken the night before was so transparent and embarrassing in daylight that they reversed themselves. The SWP-YSA came out in support of the motion. Not the least of the reasons for this change was the separation of the civil rights struggle from the anti-war struggle. However, because the delegates and their committees were not politically prepared to support such a national slogan, the motion was soundly defeated. There still had been no real political discussion, except limited discussion around those motions and in the workshops, in which, with few exceptions YSAers and SWPers did not participate because of their complete absorption in the organizational dispute. Just a partial list of the panels indicates the wide range of openings: political perspectives, campus action, anti-draft, national structure, peace & freedom (civil rights), national action and six others.

All during that Sat. after the demonstration the YSA & SWP caucused with independents, trying to convince them as to the correctness of their course. All along independents dropped away as it became clearer and clearer what the SWP-YSA were trying to do.

The final absurdity came on the last day of the convention when the SWP-YSA put forward a counter proposal to that of the presiding committee's on the structure of the NCCEWV itself. The presiding committee put forward a resolution which included the following points: national organizations supporting the anti-war struggle (including the SWP & YSA) would have one delegate without vote in the standing committee; independent committees would have one vote per 100 members; in areas where there were no independent committees a local chapter of an anti-war political organization would have one vote regardless of how large it is; a whole machinery was set up for political discussion.

The counter YSA-SWP proposal stated that the NCCEWV would have no political line because it would function simply as a coordinating committee and that the decision of the NCCEWV would be based on the independent committees to end the war, with national organizations having one vote per organization.

This proposal by the SWP-YSA is beyond all rationality. If the organization is indeed to be a non-political coordinating committee, why in the world have any kind of fight over its structure? Why indeed should it be based on the independent committees if they cannot put forward any kind of political program thru the NCCEWV? The only answer that could possibly be made as to the reason for such a fight was that the SWP-YSA did not want a viable political organization which would undermine their own organization. The final result was only that the last day of the convention was destroyed and added to the casualty list of the first three days. By the time discussion on political questions and perspectives came around at about 1:30 PM Sun., everybody was getting ready to leave and was generally too tired and embittered by the

The YSA & SWP ~~ended~~ ended the convention with a notice of a meeting of the caucys to form a n independent national organization.

The Political Questions at the Convention

The YSA and SWP showed a complete lack of political seriousness thruout the convention. They put forward no political position papers at all for the delegates to discuss and vote on any time during the convention proceedings. The only papers that were presented were organizational documents mentioning a few slogans. But this is not all. The SWP-YSA did not make even the minimum political preparation required for preparing the anti-war movement and the convention for such a move. The anti-war committees in the overwhelming majority went to the convention not having even thought of the possibility of the building of an alternative organization at this point. In fact, this tactic which is having such important repercussions was never discussed among th the YSAers nationally who are involved in anti-war work. The sole document which the YSA based its actions on was the resolution passed by the Washington Heights Committee to End the War in Vietnam. This document was not distributed either nationally or at the convention and it was only by accident that we received a copy.

The Wash. Heights resolution, even if it had been presented to the convention, does not explain what is needed to be said. It does not explain the relation of the slogan "Withdraw the Troops Now" to the building of a real opposition to the war. The sentiment at the convention was for immediate withdrawal, but the underlying feeling was that this demand was too radical to win people at this time. This attitude should have been systematically dealt with and discussed to show that this demand is the only way to build a real movement against the war and flows logically from the movement's analysis of the U.S.'s role in Vietnam. But the YSA-SWP are incapable of really answering this. The reason that these committees feel that this slogan is too radical is because of the nature of the people whom they are approaching, and the basis that they are approaching them on. They are aiming at the middle class, or "that little old lady from Iowa" as Staughton Lynd said, and on the grounds of morality rather than class interest. The SWP-YSA oppose the introduction of the class issue question into the issue: they refuse to give a working class perspective to the anti-war movement and bitterly fight those who attempt to. This shows the political bankruptcy of the SWP-YSA line.

There has been a basic challenge to the very existence of the independent anti-war movement by sections of SDS which the SWP-YSA has ignored and not answered politically. Paul Booth of SDS, at the Saturday morning session of the convention, expressed the line that the only force that means anything in the struggle against war is the multi-issue community organizations. He all but called for the dissolution of the anti-war committees into community organizing without recognizing the importance of the role of the anti-war movement today. This was and is one of the most important underlying challenges to an independent anti-war movement and the SWP-YSA has not said a word about it.

The YSA & SWP did not give a real perspective for the development of a mass anti-war movement, did not clarify the multitude of questions that were in almost every mind at the convention. The people in the anti-war movement know that the student movement alone is a dead end. Time and again one could hear people discussing and asking where the movement should go. This is the central question for all serious anti-war fighters. The YSA & SWP have answered in two ways: 1) they are organizing a national organization based solely on students and 2) they are in the process of expelling those in their ranks who offered a working class perspective to the anti-war movement.

This approach towards the anti-war movement puts the SWP-YSA in the most anti-working class and petty-bourgeois camp. The completely petty-bourgeois nature of the YSA's position is indicated clearly in the information bulletin put out in Detroit by the Detroit YSA on the events surrounding the convention. It criticized the invitation issued by the NCCEW to certain groups to come to the convention. "Now 'community groups whose main purpose is not peace, but who wish to take part in our convention' (SNCC projects, tenant organizations, trade unions, etc.) were invited." In contrast to this, the SWP-YSA proposes a national organization based on the program of immediate withdrawal, the right of self-determination and "4) the member committees cannot be affiliated to any other national or political organization, although they are encouraged to take part in joint anti-war actions in their areas."

The class issue becomes clear: implicitly the only organizations to be allowed to participate in the immediate withdrawal committee are student organizations. Community and workers organizations which do not agree with this slogan are implicitly requested to stay out of this organization. This is the absurd class logic of the YSA and SWP.

The clearest summation of the political and organizational line of the SWP-YSA in the anti-war movement came on the motion introduced by the delegation from the MFDP to the anti-war convention. Their presence at the convention, one of the healthiest signs both for the development and broadening of the civil-rights struggle in the South and for the anti-war movement itself, was actually contrary to the line of the SWP-YSA which actually wants a so-called mass anti-war movement based solely on students and having no connection with any other type of struggle. But the issue was joined when this group introduced a motion calling for the main slogan for the demonstration on the following day for the NCCEWV convention to be "Freedom Now - Withdraw Now". The SWP-YSA actually joined with the majority of delegates in voting this slogan down. If the majority of delegates were afraid of alienating certain middle class types with the demand for the immediate withdrawal of troops, the SWP-YSA appeared to be afraid of alienating elements who might be for withdrawal, but opposed to Freedom Now. Instead of proposing a transitional approach to the other segments of society, the Negro people and the entire working class, without whose participation the anti-war movement is doomed, the SWP-YSA took the opposite course.

If there had been a political clarification and polarization through political discussion; if the class question and perspective was clear; if it had become clear that a really important section of the anti-war movement was ready to engage in a national organization around the demand for immediate withdrawal while another section was politically and organizationally opposed to such a move, then it may have been proper to move organizationally. First, there should have been an attempt under such conditions of clarification (which do not yet exist) to win over the NCCEWV. If this could not be done it might then be proper to start building an independent organization, depending on the relation of forces and the ability to win over other elements in the NCCEWV.

The path that the YSA and SWP are traveling has led to disaster both politically and organizationally. The YSA and SWP must turn back now before it's too late.

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