

Violence or Democracy in the Radical Movement?

Statement of the
National Executive Committee
of the Young Socialist Alliance

A serious and dangerous problem confronts the entire American radical movement. Exemplified by the physical attack on the May 24 Student Mobilization Committee national steering committee meeting by members of the Progressive Labor Party and Students for a Democratic Society, this problem is the substitution of physical violence for political discussion within the radical movement.

The Young Socialist Alliance extends its complete solidarity to the campaign initiated by the SMC to eliminate the use of violence within the movement.

There are four principal reasons for our serious concern about the use of violence inside the movement:

1) We must not lose sight of the real enemy. Our main enemy is the capitalist system and the ruling class, the architects and defenders of the South East Asian war, racism, poverty, and the oppression of women. Any group with which we have differences about how to fight this system is not our enemy. It is self-defeating for the movement to devour itself instead of turning its energies against the enemy we have in common, despite our differing political approaches.

2) Our goal is to reach the masses of the American people. Today the antiwar movement has reached the stage of beginning to draw these masses into active struggle against the war. The employment of violent physical force within the movement can confuse these newly radicalizing forces, and delay their joining in action which they are ready to join in right now. In order for the antiwar movement, as well as the Third World and women's liberation movements, to grow and attract the masses of people, it must be clear that we aim our attack at the government and not at each other.

3) There are many important issues posed before the antiwar, Third World liberation and women's liberation movements today--questions of orientation and program, of strategy and tactics. A free and open atmosphere of democratic discussion must exist for activists to be able to work out and choose the positions they take on these issues. Coercion cannot resolve the differences which exist; instead, it makes such resolution impossible. We cannot allow a climate of intimidation to interfere with the democratic decision-making process of the movement.

4) What is involved here is the democratic right of the various sections of the movement to organize themselves, carry out activities, and, in the last analysis, to exist. While we feel that the YSA has the correct political perspective for bringing about a revolutionary change in this country, we do not feel that any organization has a monopoly of the truth. Only a politically sterile organization needs

to resort to force to convince others of its ideas, or can believe that it can eliminate ideas with which it disagrees through violence.

Any group of people within the movement must have the right to hold its own meetings and to decide how they will be conducted--who will be invited, of what the agenda will consist and any other matters on which it chooses to decide. Even in the case of meetings which practice indefensible exclusion of political tendencies from coalitions or united fronts, force must not be used to break into or disrupt meetings of groups within the movement. All differences within the movement should be settled politically--in debate and practice--not physically.

The YSA urges all organizations in the radical movement to join in condemning the attack on the national SMC meeting in Boston and to join in condemning all use of violence within the movement. Together we must create an atmosphere in which any part of the movement attempting to use violence against any other part of the movement is politically isolated for doing so. We will participate, when necessary, in united defense of the right of the antiwar movement or any other section of the movement to hold meetings, conduct demonstrations and carry out its activities if that right is threatened by physical force.

We call upon members of SDS and PL, as well as the organizations themselves, to repudiate the vicious attempt made by some of their members to disrupt the May 24 national SMC meeting.

May 29, 1970

(Statement to be published in The Militant, June 12, 1970)

FACT SHEET --

ON ATTACK OF SMC NATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

About fifty-five to sixty people from the Progressive Labor Party and SDS, organized in a body, attacked and attempted to storm into a national steering committee meeting of the Student Mobilization Committee in Boston on Sunday, May 24. This violent assault was repulsed and the SMC meeting continued with its business.

The following fact sheet detailing the events was compiled from individual eyewitness reports, a tape recording of the proceedings of the meeting, and from information on the registration forms that had been filled out by the participants in the meeting.

The expanded national steering committee meeting of the SMC on May 24 had been called to discuss the May student strike upsurge and to chart the plans of the SMC for the coming months.

The SMC national steering committee is composed of one representative from each SMC chapter and one representative from each national organization working with the SMC. The May 24 meeting was expanded to include invited representatives of student strike committees. Two hundred thirty six people registered as delegated representatives and observers from local and regional SMC chapters, student strike committees and other antiwar organizations from every part of the country.

Nine of the people who registered identified themselves as members of SDS or Progressive Labor Party. All were admitted into the meeting, although none were delegated representatives from SMC chapters or strike committees. Although both SDS and PLP are politically hostile to the SMC and the two national organizations do not work with the SMC, one each from the two organizations was admitted as a delegated representative. The others were admitted into the meeting as observers.

John Pennington, national secretary of SDS, complained about the registration procedure and the presence of SMC ushers, stating to the registrars that "this is the way that fights start."

At the meeting that was just getting underway Nat Goodman, who is a member of SDS and a candidate member of PLP, approached the door and attempted to enter. He was asked to fill out a registration form first, as everyone else had done. He refused and attempted to push his way into the meeting. He was pushed back by the ushers at the door, but was not hit.

At that point, those members of SDS and PLP who had already been admitted into the meeting room rushed out. They demanded that Goodman be admitted without registering although they were familiar with the registration process and knew he would be admitted if he registered. They began a scuffle with the SMC ushers in the hallway in an attempt to force the way in. They were quickly rebuffed and restrained.

When the scuffle was over, those who had left the meeting requested to be let back inside. A discussion took place inside the meeting. The incident in the hallway was described and a history of PL and SDS assaults on the antiwar movement was reviewed. Most recently this included assaults on an antiwar meeting at Columbia during the strike and two assaults in the Boston area: 1.) At the April 15 antiwar rally in Boston, a large PLP and SDS group attacked the speakers platform; 2.) On May 3, after threats had been made against him for days, eight members of PLP and SDS attacked and beat Bob Bresnahan, an SMC activist, who had been a marshall captain on April 15.

Despite the scuffle in the hallway, the meeting decided to let the two delegated representatives from SDS and PLP back in. This would enable them to express their point of view, but would guard against the now-apparent danger of disruption of the sessions. This offer was not accepted. The SDS and PLP group withdrew to the main hall, held a discussion, and threatened to return in force.

After the lunch recess, fearing a renewed attempt to disrupt or break up the meeting, many of the people in attendance joined together to set up a defense. Cooperating in this effort were individuals from SMC, Beacon Hill Support Group, Socialist Workers Party, Citizens for Participation in Politics, Draft Information Center, Workers League, National Organization of Women, Female Liberation, Vietnam Referendum '70, Young Socialist Alliance, International Socialists, and others.

These precautions proved necessary when, after meeting at the PLP headquarters a large SDS and PL group returned to storm the meeting. About 55-60 were observed coming in an organized group. They were met in the hallway outside by the united defense and the two groups stood facing each other. John Pennington and Neil Goldstein of the SDS and PLP group were admitted to the meeting.

Pennington addressed the meeting. He gave his version of the earlier incident and demanded that all the people in the hallway be admitted. He finished his statement by saying that his group was coming in anyway, and that "if people attack us on the way in, we intend to defend ourselves." He passed out a leaflet to the meeting which referred to the earlier incident and which stated, "The SMC Leaders are bootlickers of the ruling class who back the liberal politicians by using force against the radicals and communists. Today's attack will not go unanswered."

Pennington left the meeting room, came out into the hallway and called out to his group to come in. The united defense would not let them through. The PLP and SDS group pushed forward, and started fighting in an attempt to force its way in. A pitched battle ensued. Several people were injured. John McCann, the Massachusetts statewide coordinator of Vietnam Referendum '70 and a member of the SMC defense team, was pulled into the other line and severely beaten by 6-8 people. His head and hands were badly bruised, his nose was broken, and an eye injured seriously. Nevertheless, the defenders were determined not to let their meeting be broken up, and they successfully kept the attackers from accomplishing their purpose. When it became quite clear that they would be unable to force their way through, the PL and SDS group retreated. The SMC meeting then continued with its business. Despite the disruption, discussion of the student strike upsurge continued and plans were laid to build antiwar demonstrations on May 30 and the national antiwar conference in Cleveland on June 19-20.

The first order of business when the steering committee reconvened was a discussion of the attack and the response to it. Two motions were passed:

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1.) The national steering committee calls for a nationwide campaign against the use of violence within the movement and for the right of all groups to hold meetings without disruption. This motion passed unanimously.

2.) The SMC also calls upon members of SDS and PLP to repudiate the attack made upon the SMC national steering committee by SDS and PLP. This motion passed with one dissenting vote.

We, the undersigned, were present at the SMC steering committee in Cambridge, Mass. on May 24, 1970. Although each individual did not witness every event described in the account, our observations coincide with this report, and collectively, we witnessed everything which took place.

Frank H. Adams, Draft Information Center

Pat Connolly, Workers League

Gus Horowitz, Socialist Workers Party

Mike Kelly, Boston SMC

Gene Lafferty, Boston Female Liberation

Carol Lipman, SMC

Carolyn Lund, Young Socialist Alliance

John McCann, Vietnam Referendum '70

Katherine Page, Beacon Hill Support Group

Susan Steward, National Organization of Women

David Tedesco, Citizens for Participation Politics

Mike Urqhart, International Socialists

Tommyc Weise, SMC

STATEMENT FOR MOVEMENT ENDORSEMENT -TO BE CIRCULATED NATIONALLY

We condemn the violent assault on the May 24 Student Mobilization Committee Steering Committee meeting in Boston by the Progressive Labor Party and SDS. This is not the first such hooligan attack directed at the antiwar movement by a few movement organizations. In fact the instances of hooliganism within the movement have become all too frequent.

We condemn the use of violence as a means of settling political differences in the movement. This must not be tolerated. The free exchange of ideas is vital to our existence. We must be able to hear, consider, and test all points of view. In addition hooliganism is self-defeating for all of us because it lends credibility to the government's attempts to slander the movement as basically violent and destructive.

We express our solidarity with the SMC whose meeting was subject to disruption and hooligan attack. We stand unequivocally for the right of all movement groups to hold their own meetings and demonstrations and to define the character of their own activities. Every group in the movement must have the right to make its own political decisions and statements without fear of intimidation, disruption, or violence.

We call upon SDS and PLP to repudiate their actions of May 24.

We declare our unswerving commitment to the right of all movement groups to hold their own meetings and carry out their own activities without fear of violence from other groups.

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Name (print)Signature.....

Address.....City.....State.....Zip.....

Phone.....Organization.....

Name.....Signature.....

Address.....City.....State.....Zip.....

Phone.....Organization.....

Please return to Student Mobilization Committee National Office,
15 East 17th St. New York N.Y. 10003 Phone: (212) 675-8465

Hurt peace activist reflects on violence

BOSTON GLOBE
5/28/70

By Robert L. Levey
Globe Staff

John McCann is lying in his bed in the Massachusetts Eye & Ear Infirmary waiting for the sight in his left eye to come back and wondering how you stop the internal violence in the anti-war movement.

McCann, a 34-year-old activist who has been working full-time promoting "Referendum 70," was on the receiving end of some of that violence last Sunday in a crowded hallway at M.I.T.

At a national meeting of the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (SMC), McCann and more than 100 people became involved in a brawl.

The opponents of SMC were members of the local Progressive Labor Party

(PLP) and the local Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) chapter — groups which represent the extreme left wing of the anti-war movement.

McCann went down and was kicked and punched in his body and head. The worst blows, probably imposed by a shoe, broke the septum in his nose and the bones above and below his left eye.

The eye itself was hemorrhaging internally and his doctor thought there was a risk that sight would be lost. Now sight appears to be returning.

But whether McCann's left eye recovers fully or not, the issue implicit in his injury has suddenly loomed within the local anti-war movement as a crucial one.

Mike Kelly, a state coordinator for SMC, was at McCann's bedside and put it this way: "We're launching a campaign to prove that this sort of hooliganism must be isolated in the Movement."

Kelly is organizing a meeting of several peace groups for next week with the purpose of coming up with a "united defense policy" that would keep meetings from being disrupted.

"We have to defend the right of groups to hold meetings," Kelly said. He pointed out that the M.I.T. meeting, in spite of the brawl, continued to its conclusion.

An SDS member, contacted at the Boston office yesterday, disputed strongly the SMC story. He said the SMC leaders are trying to use false charges

of SDS violent intentions as a way to intimidate and influence their own membership.

An SDS publication on the MIT incident charges that SMC systematically attacked a handful of SDS members after an argument over admission of an SDS member who refused to register for the meeting.

The announcement harshly condemns SMC for ignoring the three basic SDS goals of fighting racism, linking up with the struggle of workers and working to keep all schools closed until victory is won.

The brawl has raised SMC anxieties. McCann, whose both eyes are covered with gauze pads, has received permission from the hospital to have some of his friends stand

24-hour watch in the lobby of his floor.

"We don't think PLP would do anything here," he said, "but you never know. Their approach is real gangland stuff. They'll walk up to you and say who they're going to get next."

McCann and Kelly said they saw PLP members single out SMC organizers for special treatment during the MIT brawl. "They have a Stalinist method of operating," said McCann. "They act like thugs." We don't intend to fight back on that level. We want to isolate them politically."

Kelly added that the tactics of PLP-SDS pose problems to all peace groups trying to organize meetings. "People don't want to come to a meeting if they think it's going to end up in a fight," he said.



JOHN McCANN RECOVERS IN HOSPITAL (Donald Preston photo)