

by Barry McPeake

The West German student movement is no more. As the most articulate and cohesive anti-authoritarian movement in the western world the SDS (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund) formally dissolved itself last February while in reality the seeds of disintegration had been sown some months earlier.

The underlying anticapitalist nature of its theory and its practice had dictated that its actions no longer be contained within the framework of a 'student' organization. Its demands for the 'Critical University' and its solidarity for Third World liberation movements prefigured the transcendence of the traditional reliance upon students as its constituency; of the necessity of creating a working class base. Yet while many other student movements have attained this realization, none have done so with the clarity and uniqueness of the West German left.

With its roots in the youth wing of the German social democratic party (SPD) since the second world war, the SDS found legitimacy in its actions aiding East German refugees, yet criticism in its development as an oppositional force to the increasing nuclear re-armament of the super-powers. In its latter role, it continually came into conflict with the senior section of the SPD who saw the criticism of the U.S. efforts to build a nuclear deterrent as antithetical to the SPD's anticommunist policy and to its attempts for political power. The conflict reached its logical culmination when the SPD, in its efforts to broaden its ideology and to embrace much of the CSU (Christian Democrat Party) expelled the SDS as incompatible to its political aspirations.

This dual critique of the bureaucratic repression in the East European Communist countries and the alienation of capitalism in the western world was characteristic of a strategy which overlaid the unique social conditions of West Germany.

#### RADICAL LIBERALISM

The West German Reconstruction faced with stiff competition from the U.S. found itself placing increasing demands for scientific and technical labour upon the traditional university: institutions which were characterized by their professionalism and which were dominated by idealistic liberal, often elitist, and sometimes anti-capitalist attitudes. The students, who came almost entirely from the upper class, resented such pressures to transform them into a technological working-class.

German liberalism was not, as it is here, rooted in the

economic and political power structures of the society, but was rather a radical idealism which sought individual rights, academic freedom, and decentralized government. Their response to fascism and the extermination of the Jews created a passionate, if often, naive politic. The strong undercurrents of a liberal and idealist resentment were thus coupled with a more open breakdown of the traditional structures, such as the family in a society which had become increasingly consumer-oriented and dominated by the mass media. It was this liberalism, which in North America had been given expression and thus integrated into the power structure, which in Germany sought a radical outlet.

Finding itself in 1960 without the financial support of the SPD, the SDS became introverted and the long theoretical interlude of the early sixties began. Yet the SDS during this period found itself engaged in a theoretical practice in its ongoing critique of the authoritarian university and the ideology it purveyed. This critique was concretely realized in the founding of the Critical University in 1967 in opposition to the Free University of Berlin. The latter had been created as a model of democracy in response to the authoritarianism of the University of East Berlin, but soon found itself fulfilling the ideological and technical needs of West German capitalism with authoritarianism of its own.

#### CRITICAL UNIVERSITY

Clarifying its aims the Critical University stated that the Free University of Berlin must undertake to transform itself by: 1) engaging in a permanent critique of the educational system coupled with the introduction of permanent reforms; 2) intensifying political work with the help of scientific analysis; and 3) beginning political, social, and economic training of students to develop their critical faculties for their professional lives."

It was clear that the critical university was not simply a counter-institution, but nor was it a revolutionary movement. The SDS sought simply to reflect the disenchantment of the mass of students in a radical way. By integrating critiques of bourgeois ideology at the classroom level with contestative politics at institutional level they situated their movement in a strategy of mass politicization. It was linked with the creative notions of developing a psychological and social counter-milieu yet in a constant confrontation with established institutional life.

But this was not the revolution, nor could it be. The SDS had as its goal a minimum political consciousness of the nature of authoritarianism and capitalist relations as manifested in the university.

Implicit in this goal, however, was the necessity for political action outside the rarified air of the German university. This had been explicit as early as 1964-65 when arising from the earlier periods of spontaneous action and its theoretical phase the SDS coupled its critique of the university with a series of issue-oriented protest campaigns. It was part of what Rudi Dutschke had called "the long march through existing institutions in which awakening awareness must be created by enlightenment". For them, the authoritarianism of the university was inextricably bound up with the repression and alienation of capitalist society as exemplified by the Vietnam War and the West German government's support

for the reactionary elements in Third World conflicts. It was revolutionary reformism. Starting with the consciousness of the people rather than imposing a consciousness they thought appropriate the SDS sought reforms in the educational and social structures with revolutionary tactics. On the one hand, such a politics of experience clarified in a mass way the integrative and total nature of capitalist society and its repressive mechanisms. On the other, it became clear that fundamental institutional reform was impossible without revolutionizing the socio-political and economic formations of capitalism. It was in this way that the basis for a future strategy was delineated.

Particularly sharp was the other edge of their anti-authoritarianism. This was reflected most directly in their responses to the repression of the Polish student movement and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. In an analysis of the latter event, the SDS ferreted out the roots of the invasion criticizing both the political, economic, and social liberalism of the Czech leaders and the social fascism of the Russian bureaucracy. They posted an alternative strategy for national liberation. And it is in precisely such responses that the SDS demonstrates its uniqueness as a student movement.

#### THEORETICAL PRACTICE

The theoretical clarity with which they sought to define the forces impinging upon the development of socialist organization gave them the sense of history with which to view their movement as a changing reflection of the conditions which they in part had created. Refusing to conceive of themselves statically in a final state, politically and organizationally, they avoided the cathartic ideological debates which in North America have culminated in a factionalization of the movement which is more antagonistic than it is cooperative. While even today where the SDS finds itself dissolved and re-created in small autonomous groupings who are strategically antagonistic there exists a relatively high level of cooperation in joint efforts.

When in 1965, the U.S. was well on its way to a massive buildup of troops in South Vietnam, the SDS had begun to extend their theoretical understanding of the university in society to concrete protests. They linked the authoritarianism of the university with an opposition to U.S. imperialism. Through 1966-67, the SDS moved from passive protest to resistance and revolutionary political action. The police killing of the student Benno Ohnesorg, the sit-in by 3,000 students at the Free University, and the set-up of the Critical University in the Fall of 1967 signalled the development of active confrontation with the authoritarian institutions in the society. Their position on violence was clear; it was a violence against institutions, not against human beings. Yet they could no longer allow the police brutality unleashed on the demonstrators to go unabated. The right to self-defense and to resist, the SDS pointed out "stands above the legal framework of the state".

The shooting of Rudi Dutschke on Easter 1968 touched off a series of student actions and demonstrations which was met with a violence unknown since the second World War. The response of the police, the press (mainly the Springer empire) and the West German politicians created a backlash which, in turn, gave rise to the passing of the Emergency Laws by the federal parliament. Opposition to the Emergency Laws was widespread, coordinated by the efforts of a previously existing coalition known as the extra-parliamentary opposition (APO).

While the SDS had played a role within the APO before, and were continuing to do so during the current crisis, there was strong opposition to SDS tactics and strategy from the APO and even from within the SDS itself as well as from traditional sources.

It had always been clear to its members that SDS was not homogenous or monolithic, but in fact, it was precisely this understanding which allowed them, through a delineation of the strategic elements within SDS, to attain a unified opposition. Yet the concrete practice of the recent past had put the SDS in close contact with all segments, both progressive and regressive, of the West German Society necessitating a re-clarification of their politics. Within the SDS, it was clear that, if and when Dutschke returned, he would assume a position based on a politic other than one of a personality cult and charisma.

It had become increasingly necessary to integrate working-class politics and articulate demands which were not simply confined to the student movement.

The expulsion of the communist youth from the SDS after the former's opposition to an SDS-led demonstration against the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia was part of the clarification of their politics. While the move was explicitly anti-Stalinist and formed their response to orthodox communist policy, it did not extend beyond the student movement to include an analysis of East German society so crucial to any strategy in West Germany. This was the first split within the SDS, and to an extent prefigured the dissolution of SDS as a student movement.

#### The Politics Of Experience

This was the Fall of 1968. The last six months had seen a world of revolution and counter-revolution in France, Czechoslovakia, Italy and the U. S. Yet, while traditional politics were being challenged around the globe, SDS once again became introverted. The struggles of a large number of students in an ongoing way had now forced them to look at the kinds of relationships that had evolved in their own movement. Previously their anti-authoritarianism had been directed almost solely at the institutions of the society — outside of their movement — while within its own creation the SDS had developed informal power relationships. These relationships, left unexamined, had become increasingly oppressive. Coupled with the traditional rigid individualism of German liberalism, the movement found itself in tension with its avowed social communism. The hippy movement, whose life-style the SDS had increasingly integrated, paralleled this development and tensions were further exacerbated.

The Winter of 1968-69 found the SDS in disconnected "base groups" internally examining the relationships that had grown up among themselves. This psychoanalytic interlude, while providing a critique of male chauvinism, authoritarian dominance, and an understanding of collective relationships, was intensely microscopic and later led to a dogmatic rejection of anti-authoritarianism. The sexual experimentation, the communization of private property, and liberated human relationships did not develop just among the university students but in fact included high school students and young workers.

Yet the "Commune Movement" was in reality isolated from the rest of the West German society. Its development had been internal and had yet to manifest itself in political organizing at a societal level. And it is precisely this disjointedness which set the wheels of dissent in motion.

#### The Psychology of Dogmatism

The late Spring and Summer of 1969 saw the SDS as a movement unto itself, yet internally crumbling. The ongoing analysis of personal relationships was viewed by many as a bourgeois diversion and irrelevant to the present needs for political organizing. Yet, for many more, this was an over-reaction. The transcendence of a student oriented movement was a clear political necessity. But, the forms of a future politic had to be based on an understanding of their past experiences and the nature of internal political power. And for those who had rejected that development, the subsequent forms which gave expression to their politics could only be understood in social-psychological terms.

The most avid supporters of anti-authoritarianism in its earlier stages had been able to submerge their personal insecurities uncritically in a mass oppositional organization; insecurities which were exposed in the intensive group sessions of the "Commune" period. Their response was characteristically dogmatic: the socialist revolution can only be made by the masses led by a tight, well-disciplined organization. Thinking that the masses of workers were only waiting for a central committee to lead them they embarked on a course of mass pamphleting and mass demonstrations on issues so universal as to be meaningless. Their pseudo-Maoist rhetoric had little to say to the people they were supposed to lead. While such a subjectivist (we are the center of the world . . .) strategy failed miserably in its initial attempts, it continues, even today, although in a modified form, and as such remains one of the two major sectors of the left wing in West Germany.

The largest section (now distinguished as the non-M-L groups) had also begun to respond to the challenge of re-inserting itself into the mainstream of West German life. The need for political consolidation gave rise to the "Active Strikes" in the universities in the Fall of last year. The withdrawal of students from classrooms throughout the country and organized into "base groups" was to be the spark for revolution in Germany, similar to that of May 1968 in France. But the disenchantment with "student" politics and the consequent splintering into groups no longer involved in the university could not be overcome. The strike faltered and the dissolution of SDS, which had in reality occurred some months earlier, was formalized in January of this year.

Before the consolidation of SDS in the "Active Strike", a number of groups outside the M-L factions had sprung up seeking to root themselves in long-term organizing in the community. Disengaging themselves from the struggles in the classrooms they had, on the one hand, considerably weakened the forces in the university, but on the other hand, had provided the basis for the kind of political work which is presently being carried on in the community.

#### The Politics of Production

Outside of the M-L groups and a self-proclaimed anarchist wing engaged in "Weatherman-type" tactics, there exists an ongoing process of reconstitution. It is a process of uniting the left-wing in small active groups into one of the two spheres outside the university. In the production sphere — industrial organizing — a plethora of groups are experimenting with various strategies. Some concentrate on a single large factory, organizing for political power in opposition to the unions. Others cover a large number of factories organizing around issues common to all workers, such as the recent nationwide wage negotiations.

Although the strategies are different and in many instances antagonistic there is a noticeable lack of sectarianism. In a kind of politics which is historically noted for its heated polemics there exists a high degree of cooperation in such projects as the Frankfurt workers newspaper, jointly published by three of the industrial groups.

In the consumption sphere — community organizing — groups of students and young workers, such as the Red Panthers, have been mobilizing people particularly in the working sectors of the city around rent-control, welfare, unemployment, etc. Such organizing attempts to show the links between exploitation at the work-place and exploitation in the home and that power rests not in the parliaments but can be exercised only in a process of collective organizing.

The formation of day-care centres, for instance, has posed very concretely the right of women to work. And in turn, the right to equal work has exposed the wedding between capitalist unemployment and male dominance in our society.

Paralleling the movement in these areas is the growth of technical based groups, such as the lawyers' collectives, which provide free legal aid to working-class organizations while attempting to expose the political biases of West German jurisprudence. In medicine the attempt to break down traditional hierarchical decision-making between doctors, nurses and other medical personnel has led to the formation of some para-medical groupings.

#### History As Present

Thus a movement once based on the rejection by a large number of students of the increasing de-personalization and authoritarianism of the university by its own internal dynamic, and by the inability of capitalism to meet its demands, has evolved into a movement, if somewhat disconnected, firmly rooted in the fabric of West German society. It is no longer a politics of mass demonstrations and widespread publicity but a politics of experience which seeks to unite a working-class in the fight against their common oppression and exploitation.

The SDS has left a political tradition which seeks to clarify their theoretical understanding by means of their political practice. It has by no means been a smooth development, but it provides by far the best and most coherent example of the kind of transition that most student movements in the world today are trying to effect.

# West Germany: The revolutionary experience