

How to Make a Revolution

**Liberalism, ultraleftism &
mass action**

Peter Camejo

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How to Make a Revolution in the United States

Revolutionary socialists have been accused for many years of wanting to overthrow the US government by force and violence. When they accuse us of this, what they are really trying to do is to imply that we want to abolish capitalism with a minority, that we want to force the will of the minority on the majority. The opposite is the truth. We believe we can win a majority of the people in this country to support a change in the system. It will be necessary to make a revolution precisely because the ruling powers will not peacefully accept a majority rule which wants a basic change.

How can a revolution involving a majority of the people actually take place in the United States? This is the question I want to discuss today.

First of all, you have to have clear in your mind the meaning of the word “revolution”. Many people have a stereotyped picture of what a revolution is like. They say a revolution is when people come with guns, when they surround a fortress or take over a city. What they do is they confuse revolution with insurrection. Insurrection is just one stage of revolution. Revolution is a lot more. It’s a long process.

In a certain way you can make a parallel between revolution and pregnancy. In the very early stages of pregnancy, if just on empirical evidence you ask whether or not someone is pregnant, the answer will be no. However, with the use of science you can determine whether the person is pregnant very early. Later on it becomes evident for everybody to see.

The same thing is true of social revolution. In the early stages most people don’t see it. You always begin on the assumption that in every society that needs a revolution, the majority of the people don’t think it’s possible. This is most certainly true for the period in American history we are in right now. We’re in the early stages of the third

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American revolution. I say the third revolution because we've had two others — the revolution of 1776 and the civil war.

The contradictions

Why is it that we are in the early stages of a developing revolutionary situation? The reason is most basically because of the contradiction between the fantastic potential for solving human needs in this society and the existing reality. Let me explain.

Everything you use, everything you eat or wear, your car, your housing — you didn't make any of these things. We don't produce these things as individuals. We produce socially. We have a division of work in the United States, and in the whole world for that matter. People in one part of the world make things which people in another part of the world use.

But, even though we produce socially, through cooperation, we don't own the means of production socially. And this affects all the basic decisions made in this society about what we produce. These decisions are not made on the basis of what people need, but on the basis of what makes a profit.

Take the question of hunger. There are people going hungry all over the world, and the US government recently reported that there are a lot of people going hungry right here in the United States. And yet, because of the profit system, the US government is now paying some farmers not to farm. Farmers don't make their decisions by saying: "We need a lot of corn in the US, so I'm going to plant a lot of corn." They never say that. They say: "How much money am I going to make if I plant corn?" Did you know that if decisions were not made on this basis, then the US alone would have the potential to feed the whole world? The economic potential is there.

Take the question of housing. If you took just the money that's spent on the war in Vietnam, you could build beautiful free homes for every non-white family in the US and for 30 million of the poorest whites. They could wipe out every slum in the next four years. The potential exists, not only in the factories and materials for building, but in the potential to build new machines and factories. Yet, they are not going to solve the housing question because it's not profitable to build low cost housing.

Did you know that because of the way the system is structured a large percentage of the people do not do any productive work at all? You have the unemployed who are not hired because it's not profitable to hire them. Then you have the people in the army, not to mention the police, and others who consume a great deal but don't produce anything. Then you have things like the people in the advertising industry. They don't do anything really useful or necessary. In addition, you have a mammoth, organised effort to create waste. For instance, if you designed a car for the Ford

company that would last 50 years, they wouldn't use it. Because that would destroy the purpose of making cars, which is to produce profits.

I'll give you another example of how the potential for meeting human needs is destroyed because of the profit system. Say you are a capitalist, and you're about to build a factory. Do you say: "I'll build it where it's nice, where there are trees and fresh air, and where the workers will have nice homes and will be able to go mountain climbing or hunting or swimming?" No, that's not the way you think. You say: "Well, where's my market, where are my raw materials coming in, how can I make the most profit?" And this means you might build the factory where you will pump even more poison into the air.

Smog is another example of a problem which stems directly from this system. Remember when they first discovered smog. They said: "Hey, look, there's smog." And they warned that if the smog increased to a certain point it would be dangerous. But, when they got past that point, they changed the danger level. And the smog is still getting worse. And now they tell us that all the rivers are polluted. In other words, it's not that they just can't meet the problem that exists. Things are getting worse.

Third world

But, it is in the underdeveloped world — in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Arab countries — where the contradictions of this system are the most clear. To really understand what this system means for third world people, consider this one fact: When a worker finishes working a full day in the colonial world, he produces as much as an average American worker does in 22 minutes. There is no way of solving the tremendous problems, the hunger and the poverty, that exist in the third world unless that figure is raised. In order to raise this figure, you have to industrialise, you have to mechanise, you have to invest.

Well, what happens is that instead of getting help from the industrialised sections of the world, instead of getting capital, third world countries are drained of their wealth by the imperialist countries. More important, the third world countries are blocked from industrialising simply because the advanced capitalist countries will not permit the competition which would result from it. In fact, in terms of the effect such exploitation is having on the world, in terms of people actually dying, starving and suffering, and their whole lives being destroyed by poverty, this is one of capitalism's greatest crimes.

Capitalism doesn't just have general long-range problems like the ones I've just mentioned. It has other contradictions — big crises, like depressions and wars. And specifically in this period, when the colonial world is trying to break out of capitalism,

the wars are directed against the colonial world.

How do we go about changing this situation? How do we make it so that we can really fulfil our potential as human beings?

First, it is necessary to realise that in the United States we have a ruling class. And it's very important that everyone should get to know and recognise their ruling class. The ruling class in the United States is very small. In fact, I think, proportionately, it is the smallest ruling class in the history of any society. Even defined broadly, there are only about 30,000 of them. There are a lot of people who think they belong to the ruling class, but only about 30,000 who have the real power.

Now, there are certain ways you can go about finding out just who these people are. One example is when you pick up your local newspaper and you look at the society page. You can see their children. The newspapers go to their parties and take pictures of the sons and daughters of the ruling class.

In some cities, the people in the ruling class register themselves. Of course, some ruling class people don't make the register, and there are some people who will slip in who aren't from the ruling class. But basically the social registers are a good indication of who these people are. In addition you can read the many books put out on this question. Books like *The Rich and the Super-Rich*. They spell it out.

How it's done

Now, how does the ruling class do it? Here, you've got some 30,000 people running a society of 200 million and most of the people in the society don't even know it. In the past, ruling classes were proud of their role. They would walk around with feathers in their hats, or big robes and things, and when they went down the street, people would say: "Hey, there goes one of our ruling class." Nowadays, they don't do that. Now, they can slip on the campus where you are, and somebody in the ruling class could walk right by, and you wouldn't even know it. They dress just like you. They're incognito.

Rockefeller would never come to your campus and say: "Hi, how're you doing? Are you studying hard, getting your degrees so you can come to work for me and make me richer?" No, they don't do that. They go around saying that there aren't classes in America, that everybody's middle-class, only that some are a little more middle-class than others. In other words, they are ashamed of their own existence. They have to hide it. And there are good reasons for that. One of their problems, of course, is that they're so small. Why, there are more than 30,000 people on just one or two campuses.

Now, how do they maintain their rule? To find this out you can try an experiment. Get all dressed up, put on a jacket and tie, and walk into some corporation and say:

“Hello, I’m a sociologist, I’m here to do a study. Could I just walk around and talk to people?” And then you walk up to somebody and say: “Who’s your supervisor?” And he’ll point to someplace, and you find someone with a little name plate, and it’s a supervisor. And you ask him: “Who’s your supervisor?” And he’ll point to a different place, and you walk in and there’ll be a rug. And you say to him: “Who’s your supervisor?” And he’ll point to a different floor, and you’ll find it gets harder and harder to get in the doors. There’s more and more secretaries, and phones, and the rug gets thicker and thicker. Eventually you have to make appointments. And then you hit the sound barrier. Here is where you switch from the people who carry out decisions to people who make the decisions. And that’s your local ruling class.

The structure

By the way, if you test out any institution in our society, you’ll find they are structured in the same way. A pyramid from the top going down. That’s the way all institutions are structured in this democratic country. This goes for government, for the political parties, the army, the churches, the universities, for every basic institution. And when you get to the very top of these structures, to the most powerful people, you will invariably find people who own big property.

Now, how do they keep the structure going? It’s a very subtle thing. In the United States, we have freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and other democratic rights. So, say you go to your job one day and test it. Wear a big button that says, “Vote Socialist”. And watch how fast you get promoted. Watch how you are treated. Formally you have the right to have any political view you want. But, the truth is that in all these institutions there is a very worked out, institutionalised way of going up. And on the way up, you sell your individuality, you commit yourself to the values of the system.

And you learn very fast that in return for full commitment to the system — for personal discipline, for showing up every morning wearing the right clothes, keeping your hair short, and the rest — in return, you get privileges. It’s done on the basis of privileges. That is what holds the society together.

When was the last time you heard someone say: “Capitalism’s a great society”? When did you hear anyone say: “Just think what our 30,000 ruling class has done for us. We should give them our full support.” They never say that. They don’t try to build up an ideological support for capitalism in the sense of telling you the full truth.

All the institutions under capitalism are ideological institutions in the sense that all of them maintain and demand support for the system. So it should be no surprise to you that the higher you go in a corporation, the higher you go in the university structure, the higher you go in the army, the people get more and more reactionary. They get

more and more consciously pro the system; they are more and more for whatever crimes the system has to commit. They simply wouldn't be there if they weren't. This is why you can never capture the existing apparatus and use it for making a basic change.

Workers' power

Today the smallness of the ruling class means that other classes have more power in comparison. We have a working-class army, for example, that has a great deal of actual and potential power. Take the basic production of all goods and services. Have you ever thought what a general strike would be like in New York City? Workers can take over this city in a matter of hours. Because workers run everything — the subways, the trucks that bring food, gas, light, heat — everything.

So you have to ask yourself, why is this power never realised politically? Why don't they just kick the 30,000 out? The reason is simple. The mass of people are under illusions. Now let me repeat this because the whole strategy of making a revolution in the US is crucially dependent on understanding this. The 30,000 can ride only through maintaining illusions.

You see, if tomorrow, President Nixon called a press conference and said: "Okay, I'm going to let you in on it; there's 30,000 of us who are running this country. We're cancelling all elections. We're cancelling freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and so on. So go back to work, back to the campus — and if there is any disturbance we'll throw you all into concentration camps." How long do you think the ruling class would stay in power? They couldn't do it. Their power is already limited by a certain consciousness that exists in the mass of the people. Their power is limited by the fact that the mass of the people believe in free speech, in free assembly and in democracy.

And this, by the way, is the thing that is least understood by the student movement. Many students believe that the ruling class has unlimited power. They think fascism and concentration camps are around the corner. Of course, we cannot be naive about the ruling class. They will suppress opposition to them insofar as they can get away with it. And they will use the most brutal means available if it suits their needs. But they will try to keep the repression in the bounds of what they can get away with without waking up the mass of the people, without destroying the illusions. Because, if the mass begins to wake up, that's a big danger.

Two sides to democracy

There are two sides to democracy in this country, and if you don't understand both sides, you go wrong. One side is that it's phony. There is no real democracy in the

sense that we don't run this country. The elections are totally phony. The ruling class simply gets up and picks two people, or three, and they say: "Okay, everybody, we're having elections. Now you can vote for Humphrey, or for Wallace, or for Nixon."

Then they have their candidates have a debate. But the debate isn't entirely phony. The debate often represents a real living struggle between different positions within the ruling class. The ruling class resolves many of the smaller tactical differences they have among themselves through means of elections.

Obviously, such elections do not in any way mean that the people have a voice in ruling this country. At the same time, the masses of people believe in democracy. And this belief in democracy is something that actually weakens the rulers. And it is something that gives us real power.

There is a power relationship between the masses and the ruling class based on the potential power of the working class. Because of this power relationship, you can do many things. It gives us what we call free speech. It gives us free assembly. It gives us the right to organise the YSA legally. Take for example the underground press. The underground press isn't really underground. These papers are published legally even though they attack the system. They don't suppress these newspapers because they know that the minute they start suppressing papers, it's going to wake people up and bring a reaction.

The only hope the ruling class has is if it can isolate the revolutionaries completely from the rest of the people. That is why the number-one task of all revolutionaries who really want to change the system is to know how to reach the people.

This is one of the biggest problems existing in the student movement at this point. The average student radical does not identify with the American people. In fact, he's hostile to them.

He says: "The American people, ugh, they're against the Vietnamese, they're racist, they're this and that." But you know something? That hate for the American people was taught to the student before he became a radical.

Middle-class prejudice

When you go to school, the whole concept you are taught is that anyone that works with his hands is below you. The average Joe Shmoe is a stupid fool. And they justify the fact that some people have more privileges by saying that it's because they're more qualified.

Everything you learn in the university is calculated to give you that superiority feeling. And when you become a radical, you just turn around and invert it in a way. You keep the same prejudice in your mind and you continue to say: "How stupid the

average American worker is.” He’s no stupider than you were before you became a radical.

Black people used to imitate white people, right? But, with the radicalisation, one of the first things that started happening was that black people stopped imitating the people who oppressed them. It’s the same thing with white workers. The thing that white workers do today is they imitate the people they regard as above them. They try to be like them. They vote for their parties. They support their ideas. But when they wake up this is one of the first things that will change.

Now let me explain something about mass awakening. There’s no way that we radicals can by ourselves wake up the American people. Just forget about that. There is no special leaflet that we could write so articulately and carefully that when you hand it to a worker, he will pick it up and say: “That’s it — I’m with you.” If that were how we could do it, we’d have done it a long time ago.

There is only one way it will happen. Capitalism does it for us. The system creates the situation in which people wake up. Let me give you a few examples. Think about why it is that black people are moving today. Weren’t they black in 1920? Weren’t they actually worse off, if you want to look at objective conditions, in 1910, 1920 and 1930?

Role of Africa

You know that at the beginning of the century, and after that, one of the biggest put-downs they had for black people was to call them Africans. Then came the revolutions in Africa and other parts of the third world. And black people started identifying with Africa, saying: “We’re all Africans.” And the ruling class began to say: “No, you’re Americans.”

At the same time more and more black people were moving to the cities because of the industrialisation of the South. And this concentration of black people living in the cities — this begins to give them a sense of power and is one of the reasons you have the rise of black nationalism today. That is another example of how capitalism creates the basis for radicalisation.

I’ll give you one other example. For those people who were unemployed in the 1930s during the depression, their goal in life was to have a job, to have some stability. If you took a man who was unemployed or who had a lousy job and you gave him a job with fairly good pay, with the perspective of getting continuous increases — that to him was Nirvana. From what he had experienced in life, that was happiness.

But then what happened? His kids grew up. And many of them didn’t have the constant image of the unemployed. There would always be food on the table. They could look forward to going to college. And all of a sudden the perspective of doing

what their parents did, getting a job, working 40 hours a week wasn't so inviting. Consciousness is related to what you have lived. And what you expect.

Anybody would have told you that the many years of prosperity would have completely conservatised the youth. But just the opposite has happened. They grew up totally dissatisfied, to the point that it's becoming a mass rebellion of youth.

The rebellion takes place on all levels. For instance, they start growing their hair long, just because it's supposed to be short. They're trying to do everything that they're not supposed to do, because what they're expressing, unconsciously, is that they're totally aware that there's a potential to have an entirely different kind of life. They become aware of it by the very fact of how they live their first 21 years. They go to the university with other young people. And they want to do something creative. They want to be free. And they realise this is possible. They don't want to just go to work for Standard Oil, which for their parents was a great thing.

Radicalising process

So, all of a sudden, you have an increase in consciousness, an awareness about the problems of society, created by the capitalists. And this awareness can become much more intensified if you have a crisis — if you have a major war, or a downturn in the economic situation. Right now we have opposition, we have a radicalisation, but even this is nothing compared to what can develop in the future.

Now you can have all this spontaneous radicalisation, you can even have uprisings of sorts, but that will never result in a change of the system, unless it's organised, unless there is a concept of how to struggle. Because, the masses of people, when they first radicalise, they don't understand the general problems. They don't understand how to change society. Very few individuals come to this consciousness completely on their own.

Think about the ideas — some of them very complex ideas — which have been a by-product of the accumulation of thought and experience over the long history of revolutionary struggle. It's this thought, this experience which is embodied in what we call the vanguard — organisations like the Young Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Workers Party.

Now, the ruling class has also had experiences, from which they have gained knowledge. They've been running the United States without even any major political opposition for over 70 years now. They know how, when an opposition develops, to try to repress its vanguard, to knock it down, while at the same time how to manoeuvre and absorb it and buy it off. Eugene McCarthy's campaign was an excellent example of this.

Without a conscious vanguard with a revolutionary perspective it is hard to deal effectively with these ruling-class manoeuvres. It is difficult to do the right thing.

An example of this was the attitude of the early student antiwar movement toward the GIs. When the antiwar movement first began, the students' immediate reaction was to hate GIs, to think of them as killers. I remember in Berkeley they even put up a picture of a GI portraying him as being the same thing as a cop.

Saw ahead

At the same time, the YSA opposed this. We could predict, because of the mass opposition to the war and the fact that young people in general were radicalising, that the GIs would radicalise. So way ahead, before signs of the GI radicalisation could be seen concretely, we urged the antiwar movement to go out and leaflet GIs, and to begin to relate to them.

That's what Marxism is all about. That's what revolutionary politics is all about. It's what has been learned from 100 years of struggle against the system. During this time there have been plenty of examples of how armies radicalise and under what conditions they radicalise.

There is something else the YSA sees, which we have learned from experiences in the struggle. And that is that you mustn't be sectarian. You should try to get everybody who is against the war to work together. The YSA understands that the best way to end this war, and to weaken the ruling class, is to get massive consciousness against the war — and to break the concept that the people against the war are a minority.

And we know from experience that you have to use the most carefully thought-out actions in order to produce that result. And in many cases, such actions are the so-called stupid, peaceful, mass antiwar demonstrations that some people are sick of — and of which we've now had eleven. And after each one of these mass demonstrations the YSA has said: "Okay, let's do it again now." And the SDS leaders say: "Are you guys crazy? What do you want to do that again for?" They look at it subjectively. They are tired of demonstrations themselves and they forget that demonstrations help other broader layers of people to radicalise. They forget about the impact which the demonstrations have on the GIs, on the average person. They forget that the demonstrations are what helped the students to radicalise in the first place.

Now, we've got a double problem in the antiwar movement and in the radical movement in general, and both sides of this double problem are closely interrelated. One is that some people think they are going to solve the problems of society by supporting some liberal.

Let me explain what a liberal is. A liberal is someone who doesn't like what

capitalism does, but likes capitalism. They try to solve the problems created by the system by supporting the system. Now, many students do that too. When they supported McCarthy they did that. What they were looking for was a shortcut. They were trying to change the system from within. They hoped a McCarthy victory would be a substitute for building an independent political movement of the working people, the black people and the students on a mass level, independently and against the ruling class.

On the other side you have the ultraleftists who do the exact same thing — try to bypass building a mass movement. In California we have a bad rash: people walking around saying: “Everybody get guns.” And there is a lot of applauding about guns at rallies.

And then there are those who believe in confrontation as the only method of struggle. By this I mean that the success of an action for them is not measured by how many people are influenced and won over. Their criterion is: “We’ve got to fight the police in the street. Otherwise we aren’t revolutionary.”

What they are looking for is a shortcut. Some are naive about what the cops can and will do to them. They think that if the present vanguard arms itself and takes on the power structure, then they can change society. But they’re not going to change it by themselves. You can’t change it without the American people. And you certainly can’t change it against them.

What is happening is that the ultraleftists are merely expressing frustration. Just like those who supported McCarthy, they don’t have the patience and the understanding of the need to mobilise the people, to win them over, to involve them in the struggle through mass movements.

This is a working-class country. Black people in their great majority are working class. And there are the other oppressed minorities — Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, etc. What you have is an overwhelming mass of people who have objectively no interest in this system. They have to be won over, and our whole strategy, everything we do, has got to be directed at winning them.

French example

Now, how exactly can the American revolution come about? What kind of movements and strategy will allow us to take power? To make this clear, let me tell you what happened in France in May-June of 1968. I said that you need two things to make a revolution — a vanguard and an objective situation in which there is a crisis and a mass radicalisation. Well, in France you had that objective situation — but you had no revolutionary vanguard. Let me show you how, if there had been a strong vanguard,

revolutionaries in France would have led a struggle to take power from the ruling class.

In France you had 10 million workers on strike. You had another two million farmers supporting them. Plus the 600,000 students. Now, since the total population of the country is 50 million, this means that the overwhelming majority of families had at least one if not two people involved in the strike. It was clear that the majority of the people in France were out on strike, making certain demands. You had a majority. There was no need to negotiate with anyone.

What would a Marxist vanguard do in such a situation? First of all, we would fight for the formation of a strike council of the whole country which could simply say: “Well, it’s clear we have a majority, so we are going to have free elections to decide all the questions under demand here. And these elections are going to be run by the strike council because the government has shown itself to be undemocratic.”

Remember, at the time of the crisis, De Gaulle had no real power, except in the sense that there was a vacuum which he filled. Do you know that when De Gaulle wanted to hold a referendum during the strike, it was so unpopular that he couldn’t get any workers in all of France to print the ballots? He had to go to Belgium, to ask the Belgian workers to print the ballots, and they refused too! He had no strength.

One might ask what about the army? But he had no army with him. Maybe the officers, but the soldiers — who were the soldiers in France? They were the sons and brothers of the strikers.

The first thing a strike council would do would be to immediately hold elections in the army barracks for new officers, and any officer that didn’t accept this would be thrown out. And then you would go to the barracks and ask the soldiers to share their guns. The guns would be used to help form militias of the people. Then you would dissolve the police force and have the workers out on the streets patrolling. That could have been done in a number of days under the conditions that existed in France. Just to start with, you had hundreds of thousands of students who would have been immediately willing to participate in the militias and to arm themselves.

Then elections would be held in the factories, and other institutions, and delegates representing the rank-and-file workers in the factories, the students, the soldiers in the army and people in all the various institutions would come together in a central council. And you would put on the floor of this body, which would be the most democratically chosen body in the history of the country, the motion that all industries are nationalised. We would simply pass that, along with other programs which would meet the people’s needs.

When you stop to think about it, what would the ruling class have done? Bombed their own cities?

When you think about it, every step I've outlined, every demand, is based on democratic ideas. The word "socialist" hasn't even been used. Because what socialism means is not simply that socialists come to power, but that a class — the masses of the working people — come to power. That could have happened in France. The objective conditions were there, the radicalisation among the masses. What was missing? There was no sufficiently strong Marxist vanguard. The working class in France was led by a party which supports capitalism, called the Communist Party. So the big problem in France, in order to make a revolution, is to depose the Communist Party from the leadership of the working class.

In the United States, things are going to happen in a similar way to what happened in France. Not the same, but similar. Look what's happening on campus — it's spontaneous; on campus after campus you see radical actions. The same thing is going to take place in the working class. It is already happening with the masses of black people. As these movements develop, the vanguard at first is small, and can play only a limited role. But, out of these actions come young people who begin to understand that you need to think out the whole question.

They learn from experience. Maybe they get busted and they start thinking how to be effective. And someone sits down with them and explains how you make a revolution, how you form a vanguard and slowly build up and participate in mass struggles, how you get an interrelationship between the mass movements and the vanguard, and how you reach a situation where a crisis will develop and the vanguard will be able to lead the masses to take power.

The key to victory is moving the masses. Any concept, any struggle that eliminates this will only end in disaster. Unfortunately, the ultraleft idea that you can go around the masses, or make the revolution without them, is one that is creeping into the thinking of many students and young people today. But there will be a reaction to this. One of the troubles with ultraleftism is, of course, that when people react against it, they sometimes react against militancy in general, and flip over to become opportunists. In fact, you're going to see people who were opportunists yesterday going over to being ultraleft today, and the ultralefts of today flipping over to become opportunists. Because all of them are looking for the same thing — a shortcut. And there is no shortcut to change the system.

It takes a long time. You have to have a perspective of fighting for 10, 20 or even more years. Just like the Vietnamese say they will fight 10, 20, or 40 years — whatever is necessary. You can't walk into the YSA and say: "I want a guarantee that the revolution will happen in five years because after that I have other plans." The revolution doesn't work that way.

So, to end, I want to say this. The ruling class is never going to solve its problems through the capitalist system. Therefore, the objective conditions for revolution are going to rise up over and over again. We don't create these conditions, but there is one thing we can do. That is, we can create the subjective factor — the vanguard. By entering the YSA, by building a revolutionary party, by understanding and participating in the revolutionary process, we can make victory possible.

Are we going to be able to do it? Other generations have failed to do it. Are we going to be able to build a revolutionary socialist vanguard that can lead a mass movement to overthrow the system? That's the great challenge to this young generation. And the answer of the YSA is yes, we're going to do it.



An almost revolution: Paris, June 1, 1968.

Liberalism, Ultraleftism or Mass Action

The purpose of this meeting is to have a discussion about the present political conjuncture in this country following the May events, how we have to relate to what is happening, and what we have to do to build the antiwar movement and the revolutionary movement.

The main questions I want to deal with are some of the arguments being raised within the radical movement against the orientation projected by the Socialist Workers Party and the Young Socialist Alliance. I want to try to deal with these arguments in a theoretical way. That is, deal with what is basically behind the differences that now exist in the radical movement and what they represent in terms of the problems before the left in the United States.

I want to start by talking about Cambodia. If you read the newspapers of the last few days you will notice that there's a very interesting thing happening in Cambodia. The papers say that the guerrillas are winning ground. Now, you have to be very careful whenever the American papers say that the communists are winning, because sometimes that is done simply to justify sending more troops or more arms.

But when the papers start saying it every day, over and over again, and then they start telling you what areas the communists have conquered, after a while you begin to suspect that it's true. And I'm really getting very suspicious that the people in Cambodia are starting to win.

But, there's more to it than just that. There's something else happening. The United States is not sending in any troops to stop their advance. Well, you may say: "obviously, we all know about that." Nixon says the US isn't sending any more troops.

"Liberalism, Ultraleftism or Mass Action" is the abridged text of a talk given by Camejo at a meeting in New York on June 14, 1970. It is taken from the July 10, 1970 issue of *The Militant*.

The troops are supposed to be withdrawn from Cambodia by the end of June.

But Nixon is pulling them out just when the United States is *losing* in Cambodia!

Now, that's very unusual. We have to stop and think: what's stopping the United States from sending hundreds of thousands of troops into Cambodia right now, to take over the capital and secure all those little towns and cities and roads and everything else they claim they're losing? They certainly don't *want* to lose Cambodia. Nixon has the airplanes, he has the ships. What's stopping him? Russian troops? Chinese troops? Who's in the way?

If you can't answer that question, you can't understand either what is happening in this country or what has to be done. Because if you want to deal with politics, you have to understand that there's some real force stopping the war-makers. It's not just some psychological quirk of Nixon. And it's not because of some resolution that's being debated by the Senate. The power of a class, like the American ruling class, is not determined by some kind of legal paper. It's determined by a relationship of certain forces. In other words, there's a certain power that is stopping them from going full steam ahead with the war. What is that power?

Many of the so-called radicals, or people who call themselves radicals, can't answer this question. Some of them used to say that the reason the United States is not doing more in Vietnam, and is actually starting to withdraw some troops, is because the US has lost the war. Remember that explanation? These radicals used to keep announcing that the NLF had won. I've always asked them to notify the NLF about this, since the NLF undoubtedly isn't aware of it. You don't say you've won a war when there are still 500,000 enemy troops occupying all your major cities.

The fact is, the United States has not lost the war militarily. The United States could put millions more soldiers into Vietnam from a military standpoint.

The US had an army of 15 million in the Second World War, with a population then of some 140 million. With the present population of 220 million, the US could put an army of 22 to 24 million in the field now if it wanted to mobilise on the scale it did for World War II. Which means it could put 10 million into Vietnam.

And it would be economically possible too, if the government was willing to pay the price, in terms of the standard of living of the American people, that it paid in the Second World War.

That is, there is nothing militarily stopping them from escalating. The national liberation forces of Indochina couldn't physically stop them from landing two, three, or five million soldiers.

It's true that one thing the US has to consider in deciding whether or not to send more troops is how China and the USSR would respond to such an escalation. That is

a real consideration, because China and the Soviet Union represent real powers.

Up until now, however, all the Chinese have done when the US staged major escalations is issue their 1829th “final warning”, saying that they take it very seriously and that the US will have to be responsible for the consequences. The Russians have also put out their “warnings”, different only in their wording.

So the restraint on the US government is not mainly due to a direct or immediate fear of China and Russia. That’s one consideration based on real power, but it is not the decisive consideration at this moment because the US has already had a higher number of troops in Vietnam than they have right now. And they’ve bombed further and more intensively than they are right now.

What’s stopping them from moving right now into Cambodia?

Another explanation advanced by some is that the ruling class is reforming itself, changing its mind about how imperialist to be. But that’s not what is happening at all. The American ruling class from McGovern and Kennedy right on down to Nixon would love to have a free hand, a situation where it would be acceptable to send however many soldiers would be necessary to take control of Cambodia and “secure” Vietnam. The war makers haven’t had any change of heart.

The real explanation is that the masses of people in this country have become a force that enters into the balance on a world scale. There is a change taking place in the consciousness of the people of the United States, and this change is altering the relationship of forces. An understanding of this fact is crucial for deciding our strategy and tactics. You can’t work out tactics for how to affect the course of the war unless you understand what *is affecting* it at this very moment.

Failure to understand this leads to all types of dreams, schemes and fantasies which I’m going to discuss.

But first let’s consider why this is true. Why is it that the antiwar consciousness of the masses of people can be such a powerful force affecting what the government can do? The reason is very simply this: contrary to what many people in the radical movement say, the masses of people have different interests than the ruling class and they have independent power.

The ruling class can, of course, influence the working class — through the leadership of the trade unions for instance. But the potential power of the working class, that independent power which was concretely reflected in the postal workers strike and the GE [General Electric] strike, is a power which is so strong that the ruling class has to seriously reckon with it in figuring out its strategy.

The working class in this country, if it so chose, could physically end the war in Vietnam. That’s a pretty fantastic power. Students cannot end it by themselves. Soldiers

could conceivably end it, but you can't consider the GIs in isolation from the rest of society.

There's a general shift taking place in which masses of workers are becoming more and more sympathetic to appeals to stop the war.

Now people say: "What do you mean? There's no sign of that. How many workers have gone on strike against the war? How many workers have thrown their bodies in the way of tanks? How many workers have burnt their draft cards, or even joined a demonstration?"

Such arguments are used to "prove" that mass antiwar sentiment obviously can't be the power restraining the war-makers. But if you look at it this way you're forgetting how this society functions.

You see, if you walk into a store that's selling refrigerators, there's nobody in that store to stop you from wheeling out a refrigerator. How many guards do they have at the door? Probably zero. They have some salesman who walks up to you. It wouldn't take much to get him out of the way. You could wheel out four or five of them.

Now, the reason you don't go wheeling refrigerators out of stores every day of the week is because there's a certain power ensuring that that refrigerator stays inside the store unless they get money for it. There are things like the police, the courts, and jails behind it. But this power isn't apparent when you look at the refrigerator and at the little salesman saying: "You'd better not take that."

In a similar way, when a union bureaucrat gets up at a rally and says, "You'd better stop the war", it isn't some helpless little guy on the street talking. There's a lot of power behind that plea.

If you don't understand the relationships which exist in this society, because they're not apparent at first sight, you can make some tragic errors.

The working class and the oppressed nationalities are mass social layers, and they can only realise their potential power when they organise as a massive social force. The ruling class can deal with any one individual or any small group; it's only masses that can stand in their way. So the potential power of the working class to stop the war is a big threat.

Now, the people who run this country are not stupid. They are not going to continue blindly along a course when they know there are dangers ahead. No one has to go up to Nixon or Kennedy and say: "If the mood that exists among students were to spread to the workers, and instead of a general student strike there was a general strike of the working class, well, then you would lose more than Vietnam and Cambodia."

No one has to tell them that. They know that. And that's why they don't just keep

pushing ahead, saying to hell with the students and workers, send in another million soldiers and invade Cambodia. Send troops into Cuba, send them into Indonesia and into China. Drop the bomb on China.

They know better than to just keep pushing ahead. What they have to do is get rid of that danger, the danger that actions will bring a response from the masses who actually have power to stop them. They're not so stupid as to just go blindly forward. Because where there's real power, and real stakes, people don't play games.

You see, you can take 200 or 300, or even a few thousand people and fight in the streets, throwing rocks at windows, and putting on a big show. You can play revolution, not make revolution. But when you're talking about 15 million workers who control basic industry in this country, you don't play games. Because they don't run around throwing things at windows. They do things like stop production, period.

The postmen, for instance — all they had to do to tie up the economy was to go home. That's all. Just go home. That's power.

A question that's very important in this relationship of forces I've been speaking of is the question of who's got the majority, Nixon or the antiwar movement. The polls are going wild trying to establish this or that, and there are demonstrations and claims and counterclaims back and forth.

But what the liberals and the ultralefts don't understand is that what the majority thinks can be decisive. Such things as where the troops can be sent and whether bullets can be fired or not, can be determined by what the mass of the people think. Because their ability to resist, and the potential, the danger of their resistance, is dependent on what they think.

The May events

Now in May we witnessed the general student strike. We should look carefully at what the government's policy, the ruling class's policy, was toward this upsurge because it's instructive.

The answer to the antiwar upswing in the fall was Nixon's claim to have a "silent majority" behind him. That was the gist of the propaganda campaign by the ruling class to try to minimise the impact of the demonstrations on October 15 and November 15.

Then came the general student strike of May, and the massive increase in conscious hostility towards the war in Vietnam, and the invasion of Cambodia.

This strike swept the United States like an ocean wave. It was clear that this time the student-based protest reflected the thinking of millions and millions of Americans, including huge sections of the working class. This time when the students came out,

they all came out. When virtually 98% of the student body is striking in many schools and three-quarters of them are showing up for the mass strike meetings, you know that the movement reflects moods prevalent in the entire population. They are being expressed visually by the student layer.

What was the response to this upsurge by the ruling class? The number one point which they understood perfectly was that decisive power does not lie within the student movement, but that the student movement is a direct danger because it can act as a catalyst, spreading ideas and setting other forces into motion.

If you were to look at the students in isolation, you would say they don't have any real power. But put the students into the actual network of society — the interrelationship with their parents, the interrelationship with society as a whole, the interrelationship between each university and other universities and schools and the community around it — and the ruling class can see an immediate threat.

The goal of the ruling class was to prevent this strike — this infection, as they saw it — from spreading beyond the campus throughout the population as a whole.

They saw the student strike taking place, and they didn't want it to spread because they saw that the student strike was starting to weaken the fibres of this class society, and that if workers got involved in this movement and it began to spread, this whole society might be torn apart. So they were consciously trying to save their system, which they think is the most wonderful thing of all creation.

What did they say in the newspapers? "It's terrible. America is divided. We have to come back together." And then they started saying: "It's too bad that our children are this way." You see, it's just the kiddies. It's the generation gap. On television they say to the workers: "You're older, and this strike isn't for you. It's just our kids, and we've got to try to understand them."

Or: "It's a white strike. It has nothing to do with black people. And it certainly has nothing to do with unions or workers!" That's the general campaign they put on.

This campaign was expressed, for instance, by Roy Wilkins, who made his famous statement about how the student strike has nothing to do with black people. And also in the way the papers played up the May 20 pro-war demonstration in New York organised by the trade union bureaucrats and the bosses.

The May 20 demonstration

I want to say a few things about that demonstration. There are very few demonstrations that take place in the United States where people are paid to show up. Well, these demonstrators were paid to come out. They got a day's pay only if they turned up. So this was a demonstration financed by the bosses and organised by the trade union

bureaucracy for the purpose of trying to pose the working class against the antiwar forces. They wanted to make a dichotomy between the two because they understood the danger.

Of course, they had to pick a section of the working class from the aristocracy of labour, among the most highly paid and conservative. But I will make a prediction here that the trade union bureaucrats and the ruling class will live to regret the day they called that demonstration. Because those construction workers and other workers in New York City realised something important in the course of that demonstration. That is, they saw their own power.

Now, it's a basic rule that you shouldn't show people their own power when you're trying to rule them. But the ruling class was so desperate that they had to do this.

The reason I say they're going to regret that demonstration is that as this inflation continues and real wages start dropping for construction workers some are bound to get up in a union meeting and say: "Hey, remember what we did a year ago? We all went out on that big demonstration and threatened everybody in the world. Why don't we do that again demanding better pay? Why don't we go down and beat the hell out of the mayor?" If you're a ruling class, it's a very dangerous thing to play with masses in motion.

In fact, we saw the response to this pro-war demonstration the very next day, when trade unions organised their first antiwar demonstration. What was new in May was not pro-war attitudes among the trade unions but a split in the union movement with unions breaking from Meany and declaring against the war. It's very dangerous for the ruling class to encourage any kind of mass mobilisations of workers, because when they see how they can exert their power through demonstrations they will begin demonstrating in their own interests.

The general policy of the ruling class is to divide the movement, divide the students from the workers and the blacks, and conquer it that way. Keep it divided. Keep it from spreading until the spontaneous upsurge and the student strike eventually cool off.

The 'responsive' image

Now, while the ruling class was trying to prevent the movement from spreading, they launched a gigantic campaign to convince the students that the government was listening to them, that the government was responsive.

This was a very important aspect. They told the students over and over again: "We are listening, we're listening, we hear you, we hear you." More and more of the politicians announced that they were against the war. Nixon said he'd get the troops

out by the end of June. He even got up at 5 am on May 9 to speak to the students, remember?

Meanwhile they were campaigning to tell all the young people: “Get back into the system! This system works! Look, we’re listening.” They launched a gigantic campaign to co-opt this movement, saying: “Come back into the fold. Thank you so much for striking. Thank you, but now we’re past that stage. We’re past demonstrating and striking. We’re now at the stage for knocking at doors and getting votes for me, and I’ve just discovered that I’m against the war. We’re all Americans; we’re going to pull our country back together. Our system is very responsive; it will correct itself.” That was the position they took.

Now, keeping this whole framework of the relationship of forces in mind, let’s look at the various orientations that are being presented to us for what to do next. There are basically three of them. One is what I call liberalism. Another one is ultraleftism. The third one is what I call independent mass action.

Orientation number one

First the liberal approach. Liberals reject the concept that there is a relationship of forces between classes. They can’t understand it. If you walk up to a liberal and say, “Right now the working class is protecting your civil liberties”, he would break out laughing. He’d roll over on the floor, saying: “What are you talking about? Meany’s for the war; the unions never do anything!” They don’t understand the fact that the American working class believes in its civil liberties. If the ruling class tried suddenly to take all civil liberties away, the American people could physically stop them.

So then you ask the liberal who is protecting his civil liberties? He will say: “Well, it’s because our system allows it. Our system works to a certain degree.” Since they have confidence that the system basically works, the only problem is to find members of the ruling class who are responsive and will help protect civil liberties, and get them in power. They continuously look for a more liberal wing within the ruling class to support.

They don’t at all see that the way to change society or affect the course of events is to go to the masses. On the contrary, they accept the general bourgeois ideology of deep cynicism toward the masses. The average person in the street according to them is stupid. He can be easily manipulated. “Look, the average person in the street believes the politicians are corrupt, yet he votes for them every year. Isn’t that true? Haw, haw, haw”, he says.

And all the liberal “intellectuals” read the *New York Times*, and they say: “Look at what the masses read, the *Daily News*! How can you possibly expect anybody who reads *that* paper to be an effective force for social change?”

So the liberals don't look to the masses. They look directly to the ruling class and try to affect the course of events by relating to any differences within the ruling class.

This ideology of liberalism, finding a politician who's responsive, represents the ideology of the overwhelming majority of the student movement. Most students on the campus are suspicious because of the war in Vietnam and because of the radicalisation that's affected them. Nevertheless, they're still willing to give the politicians — the McGovern, the McCarthys and the Kennedys — another chance.

Orientation number two

There's another point of view, and that is ultraleftism. This represents a small section of the student movement, but a much larger proportion of those who call themselves radicals or socialists.

Now basically an ultraleft is a liberal that has gone through an evolution. What happens is this. They start out as liberals, and suddenly the war in Vietnam comes along. Now, what does a liberal believe? He believes that the ruling class is basically responsive to his needs. So he demonstrates.

You know, in the beginning when the antiwar movement first started there were very few ultraleftists. Most of the ultraleftist leaders of today were people who were organising legal, peaceful demonstrations back around 1965.

But after they called a few demonstrations against the war, they noticed something was wrong. The ruling class was not being responsive. Not only that, they understood for the first time that the US was literally massacring the Vietnamese people. This frightened them. It was as if you all of a sudden found out that your father was really the Boston Strangler. That's what it was like for these people. They were liberals, who believed that Johnson was better than Goldwater, who had worked and voted for him only to find out that he was the Boston Strangler.

Now, since they had no confidence in the masses as an independent force that could stop the ruling class, since they had no confidence that the stupid worker was actually a force protecting their civil liberties, they said: "Wait a minute. If the government is being run by wild maniacs and butchers, what is stopping them from killing me tomorrow?"

Then you started hearing them all talk about imminent fascism. The underground papers discovered that there were concentration camp sites in this country, and that some of them were being cleaned up and gotten ready. They would say to each other: "See you next year in the concentration camps." This was a very common attitude, because they couldn't see any force around that was protecting their civil liberties.

Then what they began to develop was the thesis that civil liberties, elections, courts,

all bourgeois democratic forms are a gigantic put-on, a fantastic manipulation. That it is all a ruling class trick. So, these people concluded that the elections and civil liberties are unreal, and the people who run the country could call them off tomorrow. Elections and civil liberties, they said, “have nothing to do with reality”.

Then came the instant fascism theory. We are about to have fascism any moment now. But this is a very confusing theory. Somehow the rallies and demonstrations continue year after year. They don't put us in the concentration camps.

This theory is actually a mixture of deep cynicism, thinking that the ruling class is all-powerful, but it always is combined with a last hope that maybe they aren't completely bad. Maybe there is still someone who will listen.

Sometimes a liberal becomes frustrated not getting the ear of the ruling class, and he concludes that he's been using the wrong tactics. So he adopts a lot of radical rhetoric. He says this ruling class is apparently so thick headed that what we've got to do is really let loose a temper tantrum to get its attention. The politicians won't listen to peaceful things, but if we go out and break windows then Kennedy will say: “Oh, I guess there is a problem in this society. I didn't realise it when they were just demonstrating peacefully. I thought everything was OK because they were in the system, but now they're going outside the system, they're breaking windows, so we've got to hold back.”

These liberal-ultraleftists think that's what moves the ruling class. Actually they come close to a correct theory when they say that if people start leaving the system the ruling class will respond. *But they don't believe that the masses can be won.* They think it is enough for them to leave the system themselves, small groups of people carrying out direct confrontations.

For example, let me quote a thing from the *New York Times* that illustrates how this type of idea develops. A girl from Kent [State University], after the killings there, was asked what she thought could be done about Cambodia and what she thought about the use of violence. This was a person who is just radicalising, a liberal, just beginning to oppose the war.

She says: “I'm really dead set against violence. That's also a cop out. But it's the only way to get the government's attention. What you're doing is drawing their attention to you, by using the same methods they use. I'm really against that. It's horrible that the only way you can get people to listen is to have four kids killed. There was really no blow-up over Cambodia until four kids were killed. You can have all the peace marches that were peaceful and quiet, and everyone would pat you on the back and say ‘good little kids’, but nobody would do anything.”

Now, what's in her mind? She doesn't see any independent, mass force that's

standing in the way of the ruling class. She's looking at the ruling class and asking: "Are we affecting them or not? Are they being responsive?" And if not, maybe the way to get them to pay attention is to go out and break some windows and use violence. It's a very natural conclusion when you don't understand that there's a class struggle, a class relationship of forces.

Having given up on the masses, the ultraleft super-revolutionaries are really trying to influence the ruling class. A classical example of this unity between the liberal and the ultraleft approach was the Chicago demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Party convention. The leaders of the demonstration came from the National Mobilisation Committee. They were revolutionary. Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden, Dave Dellinger and Rennie Davis were on hand, and their rhetoric was as radical as you can get.

But while the "militant" demonstrations were in process, Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis were apparently closeted with McCarthy's supporters working out an agreement to help McCarthy.

According to an article in the Jan. 22, 1970 *Washington Post*: "[Sam] Brown [Vietnam Moratorium Coordinator] said [Tom] Hayden suggested ... that if McCarthy appeared to have a good chance by Monday or Tuesday — and if that chance might be hampered by public activity [demonstrations] — then we could meet to decide whether to go ahead with the public activity." Hayden has never denied this account.

Another example of this type of ultraleftism was a full-page ad which appeared in the *New York Times* June 7. It was placed by the New Mobe and signed by guess who? Rennie Davis, Dave Dellinger, et al. This ad announces in big letters at the top of the page: "It's 11:59." 11:59 to what? It's 11:59 to 1984. Fascism is due in one minute.

This is another thing that these ultraleft-upside-down-liberals have: the panic button. Since they don't see any countervailing force, they think at any moment the whole country could just go BANG! At any moment the ruling class can make a move to the right, and they don't see any way to stop it, so they throw in the towel, they just panic. The ad says: "If you're reading this — don't kid yourself any longer. Big brother is making his list. *And you're on it.* Can we stop 1984? It's 11:59 pm now. The clock is ticking loudly. What in hell are we going to do about it?"

Well, what solution do these ultralefts have? What do they project should be done to stop imminent fascism? In this ad they have a five-point program.

Number one, sit in at your congressman's office. With just one minute until 1984! Really effective! I guess their reasoning is that if you're in your congressman's office when 1984 arrives at least maybe they'll be a little more lenient with you!

The second point is you should sit in at your draft board and turn in your draft card.

Number three is a standard paragraph that you find in all the leaflets put out by ultraleftists, which simply says: “Do something quick.” “Organise antiwar actions where you work, each week. Interrupt the work day for peace. Wear black armbands. Wear peace buttons. Hold a discussion or teach-in. Have a work stoppage, a campus strike!” Anything! Just do something, everybody! For Christ’s sake!

Point four, they announce a demonstration is going to be held on June 19 by the Black Panther Party.

And in point five they tell you about a conference in Milwaukee, but they assure you it won’t be thousands of people; just several hundred community activists will meet to plan future actions. I suppose this future action will take place under fascism, unless they think two sit-ins, a conference and a rally will stop fascism.

Anyway, that’s their program of action and their analysis of what to do, because they believe the invasion of Cambodia isn’t a tactical move, limited by a relationship of forces, but a deliberate and final plan. A final solution has begun.

Now, you can see very clearly that there’s nothing very different about this; it’s just classical stuff like Martin Luther King did: have a sit-in or some sort of civil disobedience confrontation to try to affect the moral conscience of the ruling class.

We’re not opposed to sit-ins *per se*; many of us in the SWP and YSA have participated in sit-ins, such as during the early stages of the civil rights movement. We’re not opposed to any specific tactic. But we look at the whole political context, the relationship of forces, what is possible, what potential exists for mass action, and we decide on that basis what tactics we should use at the moment.

Orientation number three

Let me go on to the third choice: independent mass action. What I mean here is a general strategy of trying to build movements which reach out and bring masses into motion on issues where they are willing to struggle against policies of the ruling class, and through their involvement in action, deepen their understanding of those issues. This is the fundamental strategy we’re after.

We’re not interested in moving 20 or 200 or several hundred community organisers to engage in some sort of civil disobedience, window trashing, or whatever. We say that is a dead end, because it doesn’t relate to the power that can stop the war — the masses. You can’t ask the 15 million trade unionists to sit in at a congressman’s office. There just isn’t enough room. Of course, the ultralefts know that 15 million workers aren’t going to do that, so that call is clearly not aimed at involving workers.

This is the key thing to understand about the ultraleftists. *The actions they propose are not aimed at the American people; they’re aimed at those who have already radicalised.*

They know beforehand that masses of people won't respond to the tactics they propose.

They have not only given up on the masses but really have contempt for them. Because on top of all this do you know what else the ultralefts propose? They call for a general strike! They get up and say, "General Strike". Only they don't have the slightest hope whatsoever that it will come off.

Every last one of them who raises his hand to vote for a general strike knows it's not going to happen. So what the hell do they raise their hands for? Because it's part of the game. They play games, they play revolution, because they have no hope. Just during the month of May the New Mobe called not one but two general strikes. One for GIs and one for workers.

That is the big difference between the perspective of the ultralefts and our perspective, because we DO want a general strike. We DO want a real strike. We do believe you can win the workers, so therefore we don't just raise our hands in games, we raise our hands for what really can be done, for what can begin to move masses of people.

The independent mass action concept does not just mean demonstrations against the war. It's a general strategy with many aspects to it.

One aspect is to build a mass independent black political party. It also means, for instance, organising to mobilise masses of women against the institutions, social norms and practices that are used to oppress them. It's a strategy that calls for doing things like building the Chicano Raza Unida Party, which is growing in the Southwest.

This is the concept of getting people into motion, into action. Not talking down to them, but organising actions which are able to give expression to the mass opposition to the policies of the ruling class, at the level of understanding that people have reached about what's happening in this society. It's the concept of bringing masses into motion, but at all times keeping the movement independent of the ruling class.

Now, what is the best way we can implement this orientation at this point? We follow a general organisational type strategy which is simply this. You get the issues around which people are moving against the government and create a unified movement around them, in order to maximise the *numbers* that will come into motion.

This is the same strategy which is used by a union when it carries out a strike. When a union calls a strike, it calls it on certain demands. Higher pay, better working conditions, whatever the demands happen to be for that struggle. If a majority of the workers agree, they take a vote, and then everybody strikes together, and they put a very heavy emphasis on keeping it together.

The workers don't say: "Why don't we also take a stand on the Arab Israeli conflict? Or on housing, or on the last bill passed in Congress?" as a prerequisite to participate in the strike.

You've got to deal with people where they're at. When a woman comes along and says, "I'm against the abortion laws; I want to see them abolished", and she wants to join a demonstration for free abortions on demand, but she still has illusions about the war in Vietnam, still supports Nixon, what is our attitude? Do we say: "You're an imperialist pig! Don't you know what's happening in Vietnam? You can't go on this demonstration. Keep away from us. We understand these things — we're the elite. We don't want to taint ourselves by letting someone who's for the war in Vietnam join this demonstration."

The way people radicalise

Our concept is to unite people in action around the issues on which they're moving. Not because we're single-issue fetishists. Our aim, in fact, is to move people around broader and broader issues, but we've got to deal with reality, not with abstractions.

We advocate many things, but we try to put into practice those things the masses are prepared for. We advocate general strikes, but we don't call them, because we're not fools. We know there cannot be a general strike, on any issue right now, given the present level of consciousness. And you won't get to the point where there can be general strikes unless you put people in motion, precisely because when they start to move on any one issue, whether women's liberation, the war or racial oppression, people begin to question the whole society, and to see the interrelationship between the different issues. In fact, it is *the* way people radicalise.

People don't suddenly understand everything at once. Think about your own political development. There's always one issue or another, depending on the objective conditions, which tends to wake a person up. As we've said over and over again, at the present stage the most effective weapon to stop the ruling class from moving to the right is to get masses of people in motion. The most effective way to do this, at this stage especially, is mass, peaceful, legal demonstrations in the streets.

Now, if we want to build a movement against the Vietnam war, it can not, by definition, be multi-issue. That's like saying we want a single issue movement that's multi-issue. The "multi-issue" antiwar movement is the trick which is the key to how the liberals and the ultraleftists can get together organisationally, politically, socially, etc. — get married, and live happily ever after.

The trick is to make the issues non-issues. Make them so nebulous that they have nothing to do with concrete realities. Instead of demonstrating to bring the troops home from Vietnam now, which is very concrete, they call for "Stop imperialism". Nothing like an abstraction. Even Nixon can say: "I'm against imperialism too — that's what Britain and France and Holland did in the 18th and 19th centuries." But Nixon

can't say: "Bring all the troops home now."

Or they say we should raise the demand "End racism". Isn't Nixon willing to say "End racism"? Don't black Democratic politicians say "End racism"? So they make a real multi-issue program: end racism, end repression, end imperialism, end male chauvinism.

What we want is to call for concrete demands and *mobilise people to win them*. Demands like Get Out of Vietnam, or Black Control of the Black Schools, or concrete campaigns around specific cases of repression. But that's not what the liberal-ultralefts do. What they call a multi-issue program is a list of abstract reforms.

Slogans like end racism and end male chauvinism are not only abstract in their political meaning, they are also abstract because the antiwar movement cannot organise the struggle to win them. The antiwar movement cannot replace or substitute for an independent black liberation movement, or an independent women's liberation movement, for instance. Black people and women — not the antiwar movement — must decide which concrete demands will best further their struggle and how best to organise around them.

Many students may agree with the slogan End Racism, but how many of them understand the right of black people to self-determination, the need for an independent black political party, and the demand for black control of the black community? PL-SDS, for instance, screams "smash racism" — I mean screams — while they oppose black nationalism, an independent black party, black studies programs, black control of the black community, open admissions, etc.

The fact that many radicals do not understand black nationalism is evident in the expectation that if the antiwar movement adopts the slogan End Racism, then blacks will immediately begin to join the movement. Blacks are going to be drawn to black organisations, building a black leadership and formulating a program for their liberation struggle.

If you have a program of a lot of reforms and abstractions, it means that you can go right back to the liberal wing of the ruling class, because that is just what their program is also. You can go right back to Senator Kennedy, who can get up, as he did in his speech accepting the Democratic Party nomination for Massachusetts senator, and come out against racism, repression, poverty and many other things.

This is precisely the orientation of the Communist Party. Get the antiwar movement to approve an abstract program which will be just like the programs of the "peace politicians. Then there will be no problem in getting the antiwar movement to support those good Democrats.

If you look back to 1966 and 1968, you'll notice that every election year the antiwar coalitions split. Multi-issue groups were formed that ended up supporting the

Democrats, and the demonstrations got smaller.

Now we're going through the same process once again, but within a different context. The great difference is that the depth of the antiwar movement is qualitatively greater than it was in '66 or '68. Deep mass antiwar sentiment exists, and it offers the possibility, even during an election period, of building mass independent actions against the war, and therefore actually holding back the war effort.

What's happening right now is that the involvement of people in mass actions is radicalising them on other issues as well. The antiwar movement, for example, has helped lay the basis for the tremendous growth of the women's liberation movement and it has created a greater responsiveness to certain aspects of the black struggle. The black struggle itself helped to inspire the antiwar movement.

A good example of this process was during the May strike movement. Many students who helped build the antiwar universities became really aware for the first time of the repression against the Black Panthers and raised concrete demands to free the jailed Panthers.

At the University of California at Berkeley during the strike, a mass meeting of 12,000 voted to set up a child-care centre on campus and to institute a women's studies program. Many campuses adopted and attempted to institute concrete demands raised by the black students. All types of radicalisation took place within the context of the strikes.

Just think of a strike situation. When there is a strike for higher wages where a big struggle takes place, masses come into motion and people begin to question all types of things. What's the response among the workers, after a single-issue strike, to someone who says: "Look, none of the Democrats and Republicans supported our strike. Yet we voted for them last year."

Obviously in the context of struggle many possibilities for radicalisation open up, and who is going to the masses with a concrete program of action around all these issues? The YSA and SWP. Who's pushing an independent mass black political party? Who's helping build a Chicano party? Who's building the women's liberation movement? What other organisation is working in all these fields with the aim of mobilising masses in struggle against the ruling class?

Our Socialist Workers Party election campaigns are going to be very much a part of this whole radicalisation and especially of the antiwar movement. The alternatives we create through our socialist election campaigns are going to be a part of the antiwar movement, a part of the whole context in which the antiwar struggle is taking place.

So we have to launch an offensive. The Socialist Workers Party candidates are going to get a bigger hearing than ever before, because there are now tens of thousands of young people who are looking for antiwar candidates. Many of them, it's true, will

support “peace” candidates from the Democratic or Republican Party, but with a certain fear and suspicion. Many young people will start out supporting a Democratic Party candidate, and when their candidate makes one slip and takes a bad position they’ll quit the campaign and be ready to turn to socialist candidates.

In our election campaigns we’ve got to emphasise that it’s not the individual candidate that is decisive but his or her party and which social layer the party serves. That is the real question: which social layer, which class, rules? And the Socialist Workers Party campaigns will be saying clearly: “Don’t vote for the parties of war! We in the SWP, our program — not the Democrats’ — represents the interests of the masses of people.”

Our campaigns speak for the full program necessary to mobilise people in struggle to do away with war, poverty, racial oppression and the oppression of women. They point the way to the goal of our struggle: socialism.

But at the same time we will unite on any issue around which people are willing to struggle against the ruling class, no matter what their level of understanding of this society. This is the way to move masses in this country, to build a revolutionary party, and not only play but *make* a revolution.

‘[Independent mass action means] organising actions which are able to give expression to the mass opposition to the policies of the ruling class, at the level of understanding that people have reached about what’s happening in this society ... but at all times keeping the movement independent of the ruling class.’



Protest against the Vietnam War, New York, April 15, 1967.

Glossary

- Black Panther Party** — Militant black party founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Active in 1960s and early seventies; stood for independent political action and armed self-defence. The target of a sustained FBI-police campaign to disrupt and destroy them; by the end of 1969 some two dozen Panthers had been killed in cop raids.
- Davis, Rennie** (b. 1941) — A leader of SDS; prominent figure in radical and antiwar movements. Defendant in 1969 “Chicago Eight” conspiracy trial (accused of fomenting “riots” outside 1968 Chicago Democratic convention).
- Dellinger, Dave** (1915-2004) — Radical pacifist and anarchist. Prominent activist in anti-Vietnam war movement; advocate of individual resistance. Defendant in Chicago Eight conspiracy trial.
- De Gaulle, Charles** (1898-1970) — French general and politician. Wartime leader of bourgeois Free French and head of first postwar government. As a result of crisis of Algerian war, became prime minister of Fourth Republic (1958) and then first president in Fifth Republic (1959-69). Negotiated Algerian independence (1962). Responsible for development of independent French nuclear force and withdrawal from NATO. Survived massive May-June 1968 worker-student revolt and won following elections but resigned next year.
- GI** — US army soldier, usually as distinct from officers.
- Goldwater, Barry** (1909-1998) — US Republican politician noted for rightist views. Ran against Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 presidential election and was heavily defeated.
- Hayden, Tom** (1939-2016) — Early activist in SDS; elected president 1962. Prominent in antiwar movement. Defendant Chicago Eight conspiracy trial. Became involved Democratic Party politics.
- Humphrey, Hubert H.** (1911-1978) — US Democratic politician. Vice-president under Lyndon Johnson (1965-69). Strong supporter of Vietnam War. Following Johnson’s political retirement in 1968, Humphrey defeated McCarthy for Democratic

presidential nomination; defeated by Republican Richard Nixon. Sought nomination in 1972 but defeated by George McGovern.

Johnson, Lyndon B. (1908-1973) — US Democratic politician. Became senator 1949, vice-president under John F. Kennedy (1961-63), then president (1963-69). Defeated Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964 presidential elections. His “Great Society” program was scuttled by the massive Vietnam War buildup. In face of escalating antiwar protests he did not seek another term in 1968.

Kennedy, Edward M. (1932-2209) — US Democratic politician. From prominent ruling-class family; brother of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. Longtime senator from Massachusetts. Career clouded by 1969 Chappaquiddick scandal.

May events — Nixon’s April 30, 1970, announcement that US forces had invaded Cambodia touched off a huge antiwar upsurge on campuses across the country. The widespread anger was intensified when four young demonstrators at Kent State University in Ohio were shot and killed by National Guardsmen on May 4. Massive protest actions took place in hundreds of cities and towns the next weekend (100,000 turned out in Washington, 30,000 in Seattle, 60,000 in Chicago, 50,000 in Minneapolis, etc.). While college and university students were the backbone of these actions, many others were involved. Further killings of black demonstrators at a southern college fanned the widespread anger. The unrest spread to army bases. The government was forced to make a speedy retreat from Cambodia.

McCarthy, Eugene (1916-2005) — Democrat senator from Minnesota. Contested Democratic primaries to select party’s 1968 presidential candidate. Sought to draw antiwar forces into the mainstream behind “peace” candidate. Defeated by Hubert Humphrey at August 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago (while Mayor Daley’s cops beat up protesters outside).

McGovern, George S. (1922-2012) — US Democratic politician. Campaigned for presidency in 1972 on platform promising peace in Vietnam; sought to draw antiwar sentiment into mainstream politics; discouraged antiwar demonstrations; defeated by Nixon.

Meany, George (1894-1980) — US labour bureaucrat. President American Federation of Labor (1952); after 1955 merger with CIO (Congress of Industrial Organisations), first president of AFL-CIO (1955-1979).

NLF — National Liberation Front. Formed in 1960; the leadership organisation of the liberation forces in South Vietnam during the war against the US aggression (1959-1975).

Nixon, Richard M. (1913-1994) — US Republican politician. Elected to House of Representatives in 1946; played prominent role in witch-hunting House Un-

American Activities Committee. Vice-president under Eisenhower (1953-1961). 37th president of the United States (1969-1974). Ended US involvement in Vietnam but was responsible for spreading the war to Cambodia and the heaviest bombing of North Vietnam during entire conflict (December 1972). Resigned under threat of impeachment following Watergate affair (espionage against Democratic opponents and subsequent cover-up); given full pardon for any crimes he may have committed by his presidential successor, Gerald Ford.

PL — Progressive Labor. Founded in 1962 in a split from the US Communist Party. Soon adopted a Mao-Stalinist outlook. In 1966-67 PL supporters entered SDS; operating there as the Worker-Student Alliance it recruited strongly. Following the 1969 SDS split, it moved away from Maoism and denounced all workers states, including China, as “revisionist” and “capitalist restorationist”. Criticised the Vietnamese liberation forces for negotiating with the US; physically disrupted a number of antiwar conferences.

Rich and the Super Rich, The — Ferdinand Lundberg’s 1968 book was an update of his 1937 work, *America’s Sixty Families*, which documented the existence of an economic oligarchy in the US, headed by 60 immensely wealthy families.

Rockefeller, Nelson A. (1908-1979) — Prominent member of leading US capitalist family. Governor of New York state (1959-1973) and vice-president under Gerald Ford (1974-1976).

Rubin, Jerry (1938-1994) — Early activist against Vietnam war. Moved into countercultural activities; founder in 1968 (with Abbie Hoffman) of Yippies (Youth International Party). Defendant in 1969 Chicago Eight conspiracy trial.

SDS — Students for a Democratic Society; began as youth arm of the social-democratic League for Industrial Democracy but became independent in mid-sixties. Instrumental in launching the mass anti-Vietnam war movement in early 1965 but played no central role thereafter. Attracted radical youth and at height had 30,000 members. Mao-Stalinist Progressive Labor forces entered SDS (1966-67) and recruited heavily. Unable to counter PL arguments, the SDS leadership group (Revolutionary Youth Movement) allied with another Mao-Stalinist group, the Revolutionary Union. The ninth national convention in Chicago in June 1969 split between PL and RYM-RU factions. The latter spawned other Mao-Stalinist groups as well as the Weatherman group which carried out ultraleft and terrorist actions, many of its leaders spending years underground.

SWP — Socialist Workers Party; formally founded in 1938; the continuator of the US Trotskyist movement launched by James P. Cannon in 1928 following his expulsion from the Stalinised Communist Party. Despite its tremendous record over the

decades and its key leadership role in the movement against the Vietnam war, in the early 1980s it made a sharp sectarian turn under its leader, Jack Barnes, and underwent a massive decline, losing most of its members and influence. Continues to be associated with newspaper *The Militant* and publishing house Pathfinder Press.

Vietnam War — Following the defeat of French colonialism in Indochina (1954), the US took over role of containing the liberation forces in the south. The Second Indochina War lasted for 15 years: from 1959 when the first US soldier was killed, to 1975 when Saigon fell to the liberation forces. After staging the phony Tonkin Gulf incident (1964), US president Lyndon Johnson began a large-scale military buildup. Despite commitment of huge forces and massive bombing, the US was unable to crush the National Liberation Front (formed 1960) and North Vietnamese forces. Over three million US personnel served in Vietnam; 60,000 were killed and 300,000 wounded. The Pentagon dropped a greater tonnage of bombs on Indochina than had been dropped in all previous wars combined. Vietnamese losses were probably one to two million dead and hundreds of thousands maimed, their country devastated and condemned to poverty and misery for decades. Laos and Cambodia were also devastated; the Pol Pot nightmare in Cambodia after 1975 can be considered a further consequence of the genocidal US war.

Wallace, George C. (1919-1998) — Democratic governor of Alabama 1962-1966, won further term in 1970. Racist and arch-segregationist; aggressively opposed 1960s civil rights movement, especially school desegregation. Sought Democratic presidential nomination; shot and partially paralysed 1972.

Wilkins, Roy (1901-1981) — Black activist; began working for NAACP in 1931 and became its executive director (1965-77). Helped organise the 1963 civil rights march on Washington.

YSA — Young Socialist Alliance; formed in 1958, the youth organisation associated with the SWP.

Capitalism is in crisis. The greed of the mega-rich and their corporations is reaching truly insane levels. The system is becoming increasingly disastrous for the mass of ordinary people across the world. Profit-driven austerity and climate change threaten the lives of all of us.

We need a sharp change of direction, towards a society that puts the needs of people and the environment first and foremost.

But what is the road to fundamental social change? How can we win mass support for socialism? These two talks from the period of the struggle against the Vietnam War in the United States make a persuasive case for changing the system and also outline a realistic approach to mobilising the mass public support necessary to achieve this.

Resistance books

