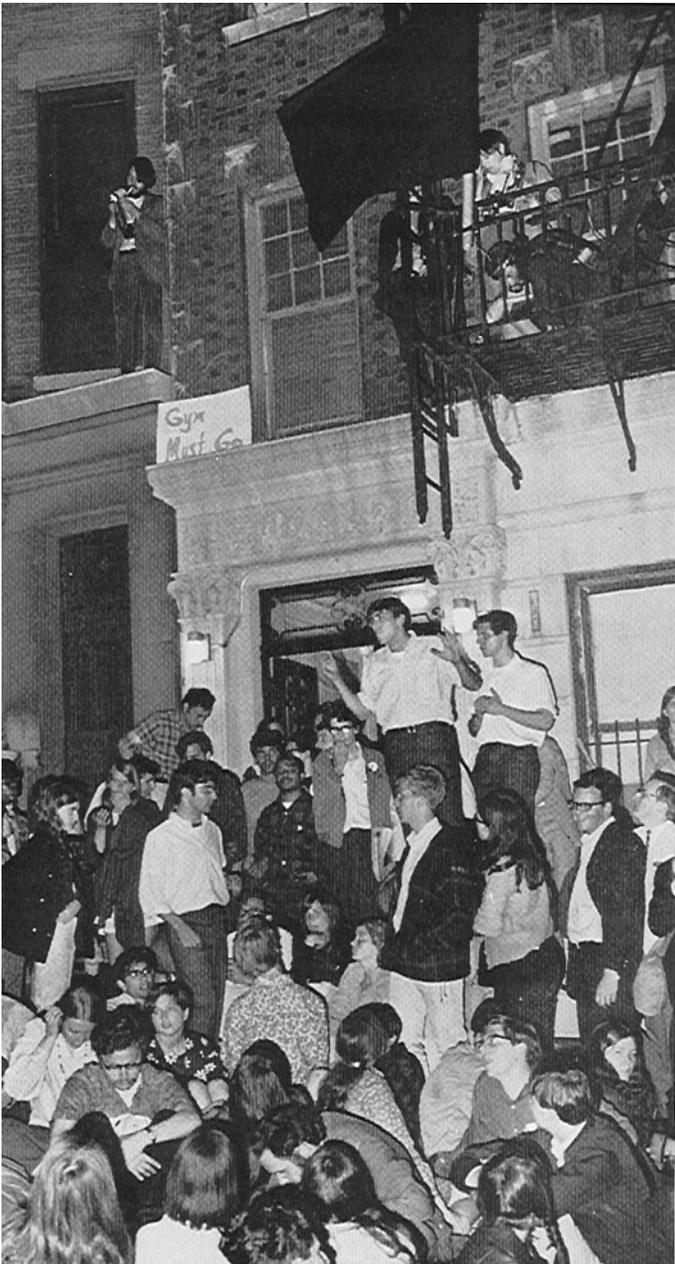


TOWARD A STUDENT SYNDICALIST MOVEMENT, OR UNIVERSITY REFORM REVISITED

In the past few years, we have seen a variety of campus movements developing around the issue of 'university reform.' A few of these movements sustained a mass base for brief periods. Some brought about minor changes in campus rules and regulations. But almost all have failed to alter the university community radically or even to maintain their own existence. What is the meaning of this phenomenon? How can we avoid it in the future? Why bother with university reform at all? **By Carl Davidson [1966]**

Columbia University student takeover, 1968



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

Why university reform?

SDS has named the existing system in this country 'corporate liberalism.' And, if we bother to look, its penetration into the campus community is awesome. Its elite is trained in our colleges of business administration. Its defenders are trained in our law schools. Its apologists can be found in the political science departments. The colleges of social sciences produce its manipulators. For propagandists, it relies on the school of journalism. It insures its own future growth in the colleges of education. If some of us don't quite fit in, we are brainwashed in the divisions of counseling. And we all know only too well what goes on in the classrooms of the military science building.

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

Furthermore, the corporate presence on campus grotesquely transforms the nature of the university community. The most overt example is the grade system. Most professors would agree that grades are meaningless, if not positively harmful, to the learning process. But the entire manipulated community replies in unison: "But

how else would companies know whom to hire (or the Selective Service whom to draft)?” And we merrily continue to spend public money subsidizing testing enterprises for private enterprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The answer is that we might then have a fighting chance to change that system. Most of us have been involved in university reform movements of one sort or another. For the most part, our efforts have produced very little. The Free Speech Movement flared briefly, then died out. There have been a few dozen ad hoc committees for the abolition of this or that rule. Some of these succeed, then fall apart. Some never get off the ground.

However, we have had some effect. The discontent is there. Although the apathy is extensive and deep-rooted, even the apathetic gripe at times. Our administrators

Greek students march against government proposed education reforms in June 2006.



are worried. They watch us carefully, have staff seminars on Paul Goodman, and study our own literature more carefully than we do. They handle our outbursts with kid gloves, trying their best not to give us an issue.

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

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- 1 Forming single-issue groups. A primary example here is organizing a committee to abolish dorm hours for women students over 21. This tactic has two faults. First, insofar as relevance is concerned, this is a felt issue for less than 10 per cent of the average campus. Hence, it is almost impossible to mobilize large numbers of students around the issue for any length of time. The same criticism applies to student labor unions (only a few hundred students work for the university), dress regulations (only the hippies are bothered), or discrimination in off-campus housing (most black college students are too bourgeois to care). The second fault is that most of these issues can be accommodated by the administration: After months of meetings, speeches and agitation, the dean of women changes the rules so that a woman over 21, with parental permission and a high enough grade average, can apply, if she wants, for a key to the dorm. Big deal. At this stage, the tiny organization that worked for this issue usually folds up.
 - 2 Organizing around empty issues. Students often try to abolish rules that aren't enforced anyway. Almost every school has a rule forbidding women to visit men's apartments. But it is rarely enforced, even if openly violated. Since most students are not restricted by the rule, they usually won't fight to change it. Often, they will react negatively, feeling that if the issue is brought up, the administration will have to enforce it.
 - 3 Fear of being radical. Time and time again, we water down our demands and compromise ourselves before we even begin. In our meetings we argue the administration's position against us before they do and better than they will. We allow ourselves to be intimidated by the word "responsible." (How many times have we changed a "Student Bill of Rights" to a watered-down "Resolution on Student Rights and Responsibilities"?) We spend more energy assuring our deans that we "don't want another Berkeley" than we do talking with students about the real issues.
 - 4 Working through existing channels. This phrase really means, "Let us stall you off until the end of the year." If we listen to it at all, we ought to do so just once and in such a way as to show everyone that it's a waste of time.
 - 5 Waiting for faculty support. This is like asking Southern Negroes to wait for white moderates. We often failed to realize that the faculty are more powerless than we: They have the welfare of their families to consider.
 - 6 Legal questions. We spend hours debating among ourselves whether the university can legally abolish in loco parentis. They can if they want to, or if they have to. Besides, suppose it isn't legal. Should we then stop, pick up our marbles, and go home?
 - 7 Isolating ourselves. Time and time again we fall into the trap of trying to organize independents over the "Greek-Independent split." This should be viewed as an administration plot to divide and rule. On the other hand, we shouldn't waste time trying to court the Greeks or "campus leaders." They haven't any more real power than anyone else. Also, SDS people often view themselves as intellectual enclaves on campus when they should see themselves as organizing committees for the entire campus. We retreat to our own "hippie hangouts" rather than spending time in the student union building talking with others.
 - 8 Forming Free Universities. This action can be a good thing, depending on how it is organized. But we run the risk of the utopian socialists who withdrew from the early labor struggles. We may feel liberated in our Free Universities; but, in the meantime, the "unfree" university we left goes cranking out corporate liberals. In fact, they have it easier since we aren't around making trouble.
 - 9 Working within student government. We should do this for one and only one reason: to abolish the student government. We should have learned by now that student governments have no power and, in many cases, the administration has organized them in such a way that it is impossible to use them to get power. (In a few cases, it might be possible to take over a student government and threaten to abolish it if power isn't granted.) From these criticisms of our mistakes over the past few years, I think the direction we should move in becomes more clear. Also, when we consider the fact that our universities are already chief agents for social change in the direction of 1984, I think we can see why it is imperative that we organize the campuses. (I do not mean to imply that we ought to ignore organizing elsewhere.)
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Toward student syndicalism

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

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

What is to be done?

Obviously, we need to organize, to build on the campuses a movement that has the primary purpose of radically transforming the university community. Too often we lose sight of this goal. To every program, every action, every position, and every demand, we must raise the question: How will this radically alter the lives of every student on this campus? With this in mind, I offer the following proposals for action.

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

2) That the student syndicalist movement take on one of two possible structures: a Campus Freedom Democratic Party (CFDP) or a Free Student Union (FSU).

a) Campus Freedom Democratic Party. This is possible on those campuses where the existing student government is at least formally democratic (that is, one student-one vote). The idea is to organize a year-round electoral campaign for the purposes of educating

students about their system; building mass memberships in dormitory and living-area “precincts”; constantly harassing and disrupting the meetings of the existing student government (for instance, showing up en masse at a meeting and singing the jingle of the now-defunct “Mickey Mouse Club”); and, finally, winning a majority of seats in student government elections. As long as the CFDP has a minority of seats, those seats should be used as soapboxes to expose the existing body as a parody of the idea of government. It should be kept in mind that the main purpose of these activities is to develop a radical consciousness among all the students in the struggle yet to come against the administration.

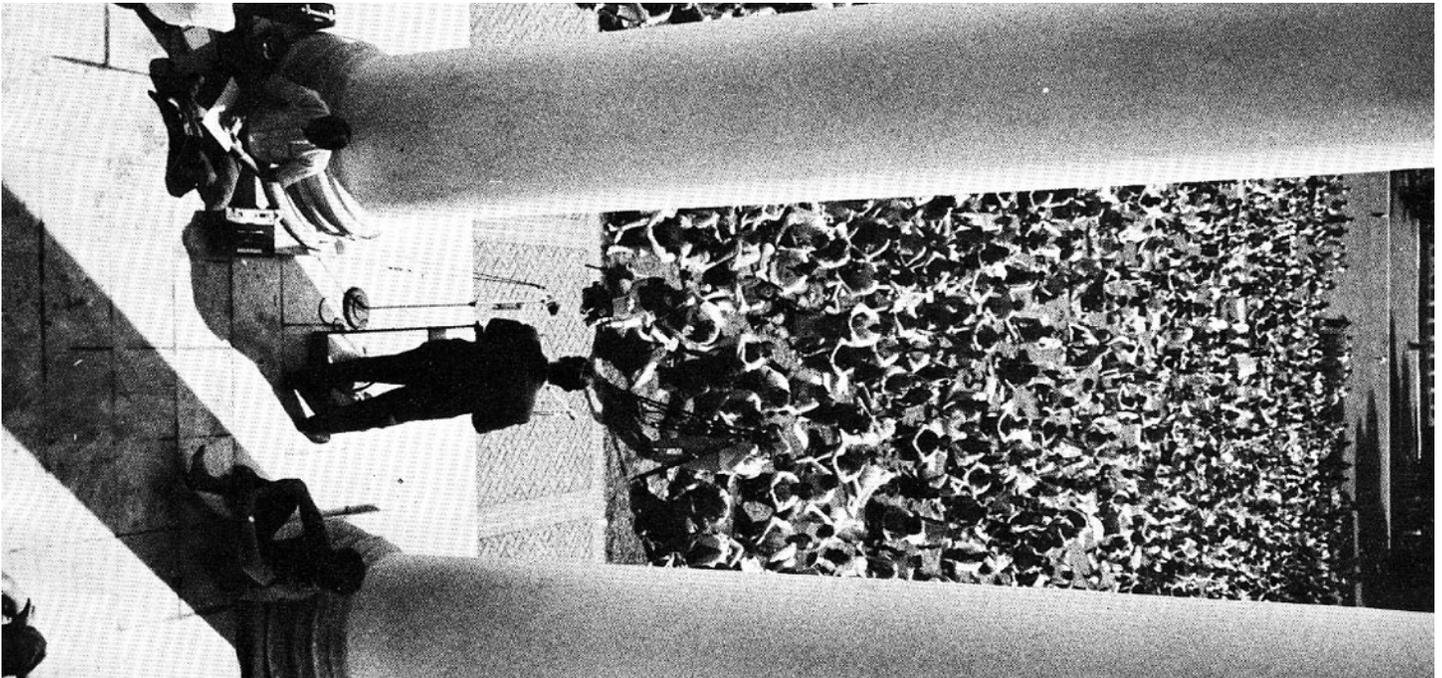
What happens if a CFDP wins a majority of the seats? It should immediately push through a list of demands (the nature of which I will deal with later) in the form of a Bill of Rights or Declaration of Independence or both. The resolution should indicate a time-limit for the administration (or regents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

b) Free Student Union. The difference between an FSU and a CFDP is mainly tactical. On many campuses, existing student governments are not even formally democratic; rather, they are set up with the school newspaper having one vote, the interfraternity council having one vote, and so on. In a situation like this, we ought to ignore or denounce campus or electoral politics from the word go, and, following the plan of the Wobblies, organize one big union of all students. The first goal of the FSU would be to develop a counter-institution to the existing student government that would eventually embrace a healthy majority of the student body. It would have to encourage non-participation in student government and to engage in active, non-electoral, “on-the-job” agitation. This would take the form of organizing and sponsoring the violation of existing rules. Such violations might include staging dormitory sleep-outs and “freedom” parties in restricted apartments, nonviolently seizing the building that houses IBM machines used to grade tests, campaigning to mutilate IBM cards, disrupting oversized

classes, and nonviolently attempting to occupy and liberate the student newspaper and radio station. All this should be done in such a manner as to recruit more and more support. Once the FSU has more support than the student government has, it should declare the student government defunct, make its demands of the administration, and, if refused, declare the general strike.

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

Student Strike, University of Virginia, 1970



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

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

b) As an issue to organize around, the presence of the grade system is constantly felt. Hour exams, midterms and finals are always

cropping up (whereas student government elections occur only once a year). Every time we see our fellow students cramming for exams (actually, for grades), we can point out to them that they are being exploited and try to organize them. In every class we take, throughout the school year, every time our professors grade our papers and tests, we can agitate in our classrooms, exposing the system and encouraging both our classmates and our instructors to join with us to abolish that system.

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

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

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

- a)** Approach students in teachers' colleges with a counter-curriculum that is based on the ideas of Paul Goodman and A. S. Neill for the radical education of children.
- b)** At the beginning of each semester, request (or demand) of the professors that you and your fellow classmates participate in shaping the structure, format and content of that particular course.
- c)** Sign up for, attend, denounce, and then walk out of and picket excessively large classes.

Pace University SDSers at City Hall, March 2006



d) Organize students and liberated faculty members in certain departments to work out a model counter-curriculum and agitate for its adoption, mainly because students participated in shaping it rather than because of its merits.

e) Hold mock trials for the dean of men and dean of women for their 'crimes against humanity.'

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

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

Position paper delivered at the August 1966 SDS Convention