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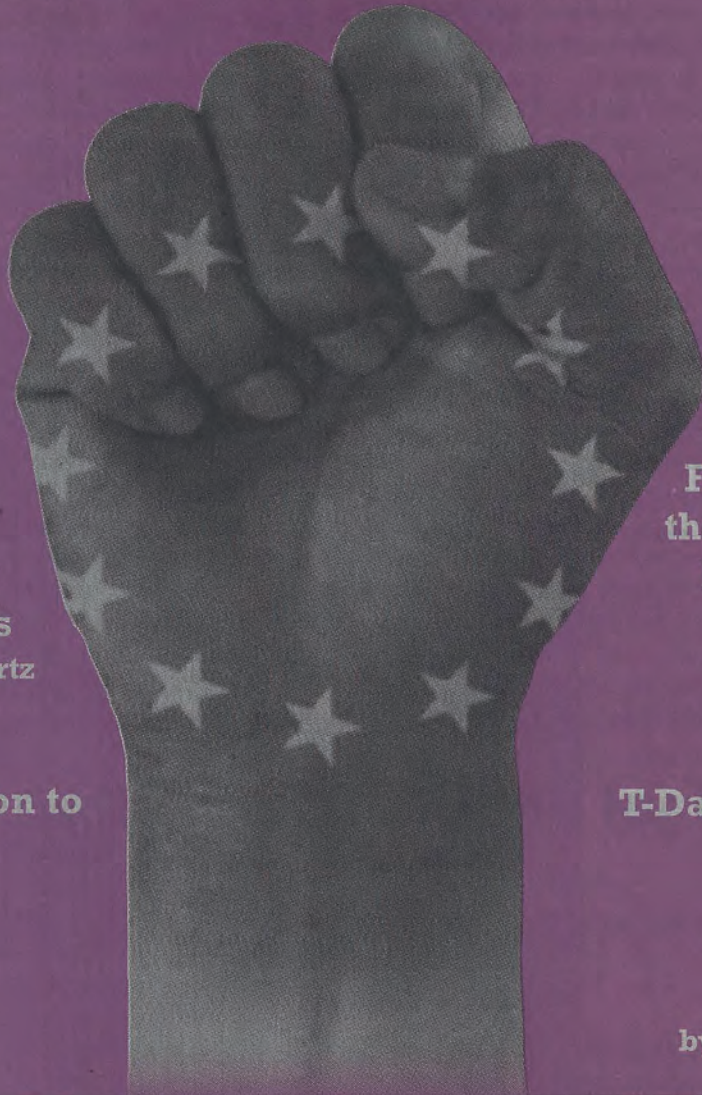
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Make That Leap

By Chris Maisano

In the last issue of *Democratic Left*, Norman Birnbaum, the distinguished academic with a keen eye for European affairs, looked into the future and saw what he called an “asocial Europe” staring back at him. The tone of the article is deeply pessimistic. He concluded, “the socialist and social democratic compromise with capitalism no longer works: the new capitalism renounces welfare.”

The last few years have given us all the evidence we need to recognize the veracity of Birnbaum’s claim. Since the financial collapse of 2007-2008 and the grinding recession it left in its wake, European political and financial elites have taken advantage of the turmoil to impose a savage austerity program on the peoples of the most financially distressed countries in the European Union – Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and above all, Greece, where a book of “starvation recipes” reminiscent of those popular during the Nazi occupation has become a publishing sensation. Of course, this program has not solved the crisis. It has only deepened it and allowed it to spread, threatening the project of European integration itself.

The spirit of revolt that was born last year in the Arab Spring and caught by the throngs who occupied the state capitol in Wisconsin, the public squares of Spanish and Israeli cities, and the citadel of Capital itself in a tiny park in lower Manhattan, has finally made itself felt at the ballot boxes. After a campaign in which he declared war on austerity and the world of finance, François Hollande defeated Nicolas Sarkozy and captured France’s presidency for the Socialist Party for the first time in 17 years (and only the second time in the history of the Fifth Republic). At the other end of the Continent, Greek voters put an end to not only a particular government, but an entire political regime. The center of Greek politics collapsed under the weight of social crisis as voters flocked to anti-austerity parties on the Left – particularly Syriza, the coalition of the radical Left that emerged as the clear winner of the election – and the Right. The Greek situation was incredibly fluid and ambiguous as we went to press, with the inability of the leading parties to form a stable coalition government pointing toward new elections in the very near future. But if Syriza can broaden its base and marginalize a growing threat from the far Right, the Greeks might strengthen the hand of anti-austerity forces

everywhere and show the world that the exit from the crisis is on the Left.

On this side of the Atlantic, the contest between President Obama and Mitt Romney offers no prospect for a similar radical breakthrough in the electoral arena. But as DSA Vice-Chair Joseph Schwartz argues in his comment on the election, an Obama victory would likely result in a more favorable political terrain for the further growth and development of the social movements we need to change American politics.

In recent weeks, two issues have emerged as focal points in the campaign: student debt and women’s reproductive freedoms.

Student debt is on the agenda in no small part because of the rising tide of protest among students and young workers on campuses and in the Occupy movement. Young Democratic Socialists (YDS) activists have been on the front lines of the struggle, and YDS National Organizer Andrew Porter reports on their activities in this issue.

Since the Republicans swept the 2010 midterm elections, they’ve launched an all-out offensive on women’s rights that have restricted reproductive freedoms and cowed women’s ostensible representatives in the institutionalized feminist movement. New York-based YDS activist Amber Frost takes them on and makes the case for a bold and unapologetic socialist-feminism.

“From resistance to counter-offensive, however, is a leap not yet taken.” That’s how Birnbaum concluded his assessment of our political fortunes. I agreed with him at the time, but I don’t think I’m still with him now. We’re poised at the edge of resistance, knees bent, getting ready to finally make that leap. Whether we land on our feet, however, is another question. ■

Chris Maisano chairs the editorial committee of the Democratic Left and is chair of the New York City local of Democratic Socialists of America.



Chris Maisano

DSA National Political Committee Statement

DSA salutes French socialist François Hollande’s presidential victory and the broader European Left’s resistance to the politics of austerity

May 10, 2012

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) welcomes the recent Europe-wide popular rejection of the austerity

politics of the 1%. In particular, DSA salutes the victory of socialist François Hollande in the French presidential election. Hollande ran on a platform that rejected the austerity policies of massive budget cuts pushed by the lords of finance. Such policies only serve to prolong both the Great Recession and the pain it visits upon working people and the poor. Hollande’s program calls for a financial

transactions tax and higher marginal tax rates on the rich to increase investment in education, including the hiring of 60,000 new teachers. His platform also calls for a major rise in the minimum wage and for lowering, from age 62 to 60, the age at which manual laborers can retire and receive full public pensions. To achieve such policies, the broad French Left must now win a majority in parliamentary elections in June and stand firm on its pre-election pledges.

The fight against the global capitalist politics of austerity must be truly international. Thus, the U.S. Left must pressure the Obama administration to work with Hollande to restart the European economy and to propose similar programs in the United States that would highlight the complete failure of austerity policies.

DSA recognizes that European (and American) bankers and bond vigilantes will resist such modest efforts to promote both equity and economic growth in France and elsewhere. *The Economist* termed the moderate socialist president “rather dangerous” because he “genuinely believes in the need to create a fairer society.” And the fate of Hollande’s program will not be decided solely in France. The broad Left must not only regain control of the French parliament in June elections. A revived German Left needs to overturn the bipartisan German elite consensus favoring the politics of austerity. Electoral victories by the broad Left in upcoming German state elections could move the German political dynamic leftwards.* A truly equitable response to the European economic crisis depends upon Germany pushing the European Central Bank (ECB) to drop its obsession with a phantom inflationary threat and adopt policies that would restore long-term economic growth. If the ECB used its borrowing power to exchange existing sovereign

debt for ECB-guaranteed Eurobonds, then the fiscal crisis in Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal and Ireland could be eased, thus allowing for the adoption of full employment growth policies. The undemocratic terms of the European monetary union must be renegotiated. As is, the European Union treaty agreements prioritize fighting inflation over promoting full employment and social justice in each member country. Thus, the people of Europe are being crucified on a cross of the Euro.



François Hollande with young socialists.

Any Keynesian economist can explain the irrationality of this politics of austerity – a government cannot cut its way out of a deep recession, in either the U.S. or Europe. But the battle of ideas is won in the streets, not in the halls of think-tanks. Resistance to the politics of austerity has spread from the youthful indignados of Spain to the general European electorate. In the same week as the French presidential elections, the center-Right government of the

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Democratic Left

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Michael Harrington (1928-1989)

Democratic Socialists of America share a vision of a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. Equality, solidarity, and democracy can only be achieved through international political and social cooperation aimed at ensuring that economic institutions benefit all people. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements – of unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color – which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.

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Netherlands collapsed in the face of widespread protest; the British Labor Party won a major victory in local elections; and mass protests threatened the collapse of right-wing governments in the Czech Republic and Romania. On the very day of the French elections, the Greek electorate rejected both major pro-austerity parties, the conservative New Democracy and the patronage-driven, neo-liberal "socialist" PASOK. This led not only to the emergence of "The True Left Party" (Syriza), which significantly outpolled PASOK, but also to massive gains for far-Right, anti-immigrant parties.

DSA recognizes that Right-wing populism represents an alternative, noxious form of popular response to capitalist crisis. We see the politics of Le Pen in France, the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, and the Golden Dawn in Greece replicated in conservative efforts here at home to blame the plight of downwardly mobile native workers on immigrants, rather than on the corporate elites who outsourced workers' jobs. In the U.S., the Occupy movement may organize mass protest at both the Republican and Democratic convention, which is all to the good, but only

a popular Left speaking to the needs of working people of all races can forestall the rise of Right-wing populism.

In the U.S., as in Europe, DSA believes that only a combination of street heat and grassroots progressive electoral activity can displace the bipartisan corporate consensus on economic policy. The bipartisan, neo-liberal obsession with balancing the budget at a time of rampant unemployment threatens to turn the Great Recession into a true Great Depression. And as in the Great Depression, only mass protest from below can force the political class to adopt policies that restore full employment and a modicum of social equality. It is in this spirit, and in solidarity with a revived global Left, that DSA recommits itself to building popular protest movements against austerity while simultaneously working in the 2012 elections on behalf of grassroots progressive candidates who reject the politics of austerity that make working people pay for the blunders of corporate America. ■

**On May 6 and May 13, the German Social Democratic Party and its allies scored key victories in the states of Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia, respectively.*

The 2012 Elections: Tragic Dilemmas, Left Possibilities

By Joseph M. Schwartz

The 2012 presidential election poses a tragic dilemma for the U.S. Left. On the one hand, the Obama administration disappointed labor, youth, and communities of color who mobilized to elect him by failing to advance an anti-corporate recovery strategy in 2009 when the Democrats controlled Congress. More of the same would leave the working class mired in economic malaise, while Wall Street has fully recovered. On the other hand, a victory this fall by Mitt Romney and a Republican party in thrall to the radical Right would threaten all the social gains of the last century.

The first tragedy is that the Obama administration embraced the policies of the "liberal" wing of Wall Street, putting Tim Geithner, Larry Summers, and other Wall Street cronies in charge of economic policy rather than adopting a bold program for rapid economic recovery. Had Obama used his electoral mandate to push for stronger stimulus, a massive public jobs program, tough re-regulation of the financial industry, and major aid to foreclosed and underwater homeowners, the recovery would have been far less anemic. Obama's concern for losing Wall Street alienated much of Main Street; his continued failure to relieve distressed homeowners means that millions of American families will struggle with massive debt for years.

On the other hand, the mass constituencies of the Left (organized labor, feminists, people of color, and

LGBTQs) fear that a Republican presidential victory could roll back the gains of decades of struggle. Much of the fervent hostility to Obama is fueled by a Right-wing racial populism. The Republicans' main electoral slogan will be: "Time to take back OUR country," appealing to vulnerable white working class people's suspicion that their distress is due to an administration that favors poor people of color.

That's far from the truth, but in politics perception is reality. Consequently, some white working class "Reagan Democrats" will return to the GOP fold.

Thus, some of DSA's closest allies may carry water for a centrist Democratic president who failed to lead the country in a progressive direction. This spring, the major international unions dutifully lined up behind Obama's re-election campaign, despite his earlier failure to fight for labor law reform, because Romney actively opposes labor rights in the public and private sectors. Most LGBTQ and feminist organizations will mobilize for Obama, given his endorsement of same-sex marriage and the Republican "war on women" threatening reproductive freedom. Exploiting the gender gap will be



Joseph M. Schwartz

central to many progressive Democrats' fall electoral hopes. Even some healthcare activists will support the President. While "Obamacare" represented a huge subsidy to the private insurance industry, its legislative defeat (or overturning by the Supreme Court) might take the principle of universal health care coverage off the political agenda for another decade.

The weakness of the Left and labor meant that Obama faced little grassroots pressure in 2009 to govern from the Left. Until the Occupy movement emerged in the fall of 2011, where were the movements against foreclosures and unemployment comparable to those of the early 1930s? Even FDR only enacted progressive reforms in response to pressure by mass movements from below.

DSAers can mostly avoid the tragic electoral choice faced by the mass constituencies in this presidential race, as we are a small radical organization which does most of its activist and educational work in social movements. Top-down presidential campaigns are not an effective venue for fighting dominant corporate ideology. But what the Left and popular movements can accomplish is constrained by state power. Thus, many of the mass constituencies of the Left will mobilize for the re-election of the President. Obama still enjoys strong support in the African-American community, despite the criticisms that radio host Tavis Smiley and DSA Honorary Chair Cornel West make of his silence on the inner-city poor or the mass incarceration of African-American and Latino youth.

Until the U.S. Left builds real organizational capacity at both the national and local level, we'll often face unpalatable choices in mainstream politics. How could we begin to redress this situation? DSA and its allies in the labor movement and communities of color must work to link the youthful, disproportionately white, anti-corporate energy of Occupy to a broader anti-corporate coalition. We should press our friends in labor about the importance of building a national political organization that is pro-labor, but not controlled by labor, to engage in not only protest and community organizing but also electoral politics. This movement will need to run its own candidates – in Democratic primaries or as independents – to channel the grievances of underemployed and indebted college graduates, and the multi-racial, de-unionized workers of the new "precarariat" (workers without stable career paths or decent wages and benefits).

For most Americans, electoral politics will be the primary form of politics this fall. Therefore, DSA locals and YDS chapters should seriously consider working in progressive Congressional and state legislative races. In Ohio, left-liberal Sen. Sherrod Brown will face a tough re-election battle, as will Sen. Amy Klobuchar in Minnesota. Several DSA locals have been aiding the re-election of veteran leftist Rep. John Conyers in Michigan and independent socialist Sen. Bernie Sanders in Vermont. Most DSA locals or YDS chapters can identify a progressive candidate to work for as an organized, visible DSA group in their areas.

At candidate forums and other public venues, DSA locals can use protest tactics to inject the crucial issues at candidate

forums and other public venues that most candidates will not raise: progressive taxation, public investment in infrastructure and alternative energy sources, and major cuts to the wasteful "defense" budget. Here we can use materials from our educational projects around the massive resurgence of poverty (the 50th anniversary project: *The Other America IS Our America*) and the critique of the bipartisan neo-liberal economic policies of fiscal austerity, regressive tax cuts, and economic deregulation (the GETUP project: *Grassroots Economics Training for Understanding and Power*). Local activists should contact the national office for details about both projects.

The absence of an organized, "federated" Left (with national, state and local affiliates) meant that last year's uprising in Wisconsin was not replicated across the country. If Occupy links up with grassroots movements fighting against state cuts to crucial public goods, such as higher education, then that insurgent energy can be linked to fights over state policies that affect millions.

The future of the labor movement depends in part on state legislative races, as the Right has prioritized passing more state right-to-work laws and attacking state employee collective bargaining rights. ALEC, a Right-wing policy network that focuses on influencing state-level politics, has made it clear that their goal is to kill the American labor movement as well as the right to vote for the young, the elderly and the working poor. We must prioritize fighting voter suppression laws: the Right is trying to deny a basic right won by the sacrifices of millions of abolitionist, feminist, labor, and civil rights activists over the past two centuries.

Whatever the outcome of the 2012 elections, when the automatic cuts to discretionary programs required by the summer 2011 budget agreement hit this December, we should be out in the streets. We will need a powerful mobilization this fall and winter to demand that the rich and corporations pay their fair share and that the hugely wasteful military hardware budget be cut. These revenues could then support not just the funding of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, but also of federal job training and anti-poverty programs, revenue sharing with the states to reverse the brutal cuts to public services, and direct public employment programs to end the ongoing jobs crisis.

Though the presidential election presents DSAers with a difficult choice, we can deepen our commitment to building a multi-racial, labor-based, grassroots progressive coalition that can influence state power and turn back the austerity politics of the center-Right in both major parties. If we do that, we may eventually achieve sufficient strength that we can vote for what we want, rather than having to vote against what we fear. ■

Joseph M. Schwartz is a National Vice-Chair of DSA and teaches political science at Temple University. His latest book, The Future of Democratic Equality: Reconstructing Social Solidarity in a Fragmented America (Routledge, 2009) recently won the American Political Science Association's David Easton Award for the best book recently published in political theory.

From Port Huron to Zuccotti Park: 50 Years of Participatory Democracy

by Dick Flacks

In 1962, politically engaged young people who identified with the Left were looking for new directions. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) conference at Port Huron, Michigan, happened because we were sure that the world we inhabited could no longer be changed by relying on the categories, methods and understandings of a Left still rooted in the 19th century. That Left, constituted by a host of warring ideological tribes, was exhausted. On the other hand, we were also intent on challenging the conventional wisdom of the 1950s, which declared that the entire tradition of the Left had come to an end.

By “tradition of the Left” I mean the streams of action and thought that, over generations, had struggled for a society free from the domination of the many by the few, that envisioned and fought for the rights and dignity of the subordinated, the propertyless, the voiceless and powerless. We identified ourselves with that tradition, even if we strongly doubted the value of particular ideological formulations like socialism, or Marxism, in their many varieties.

The potential for a new politics was inspired by the dramatic movement of students in the South, using their bodies to destroy the system of segregation, dedicating themselves to organizing the Southern Black community for political voice, determined to force the federal government to enforce the Constitution in the Southern states. And, as well it was inspired by the rising protest in Europe and the U.S. against the bomb and the nuclear arms race.

We were attracted to Port Huron by the notion, expressed forcefully by pioneer SDS organizers like Al Haber, that these particular risings were revealing a deep social crisis. The top leaders of the society as a whole were unable, even unwilling, to enforce the rights supposedly guaranteed in the Constitution, and certainly unwilling to end the Cold War and the ever-looming threat of a hot one.

There were less than 60 of us there at that time, but we believed (and we were right about this) that a lot of our peers shared the mood we were in. It was time for a new politics – for new ideas and new coalitions and new modes of action. It was time for a new university – one that treated its students as adults, and that was a place where new ideas could be articulated and debated and acted on and whose student bodies would reflect the population of the country as a whole, rather than a thin, privileged stratum.

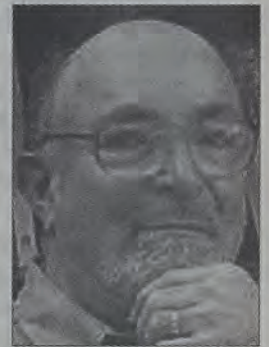
Al Haber, Tom Hayden, and a few others sensed the new mood and had the insight that the new student activists needed a national organization that would create a shared meeting ground. And, equally, the rising activism might benefit from an effort to articulate a common vision and to debate potential strategies for political and social action. And so

they made the daring decision to structure the conference around the creation of a manifesto for a new political generation.

The Port Huronites were widely varied in their personal connection to the Old Left. Some, like my wife Mickey and I, were “red diaper babies.” We were raised by parents who had been involved in political, labor and community organizing initiated by the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s, or at least were sympathetic to the Communist Left. Some others’ families identified with other brands of socialism or liberalism. Probably the majority of those in attendance did not have such Leftist connections. They were instead people who had come to anger and distress when they experienced the collision between the values (religious or secular) they’d been raised to cherish and the harsh realities of race and poverty which the civil rights movement was dramatizing. We all seemed to share a calling to find political roles that could make a significant difference. And we understood that none of the established parties and political identities were at all adequate to that purpose.

The Port Huron Statement provided a foundation for finding that purpose. That foundation can be found in the phrase “participatory democracy.” It’s an unwieldy phrase, but it points toward both a utopian aspiration for a new mode of living and a practical political orientation. Participatory democracy leads us to ask what needs to happen so that all who are affected can have some voice in deciding the rules, allocating the resources, defining the roles in each institutional setting. We’re encouraged to ask such questions not just in the political sphere proper, but in society as a whole – the workplace, the household, the community, the school, and even the prison. The effort to find answers to such questions helps us envision possible alternatives and to investigate why more democratic arrangements are thwarted. And, as we undertake action to promote democracy, we are compelled to figure out how that action itself can be democratically organized.

Participatory democracy at Port Huron suggested a way to recreate the Left by culling from the Left tradition the kernels of democratic imagination that the old warring ideologies shared even as they fought. It fostered a new vocabulary for defining the Left, which would be more resonant with American culture than the terms imported from earlier centuries and other political cultures. And it pushed



Dick Flacks

us to struggle for a way to set up the new organization as a democracy that could make use of members' initiatives and experience rather than perpetuating conventional modes of hierarchical leadership.

Fifty years later, participatory democracy (whether the term itself is used or not) is defining the programs and practices of social movements everywhere. It's there in the general assemblies of the Occupy movement, and in the very idea of an economy that serves the interests of the 99%. It's integral to the worldwide struggle by communities to defend land, culture, identity, resources and health in the face of corporate globalization. It's embodied in the global movement for workers' rights, for women's equality and autonomy, for student power. When people mobilize to stop war policies, they are demanding a voice in foreign policy decisions hitherto made by politico-military elites. It's there in the Internet, which has created a technological infrastructure for participatory democracy that those gathered at Port Huron never could have dreamed of.

But what has been missing, for the last 30 years, has been coherent articulation of these impulses and practices as ingredients for an alternative social vision. The Left in these years has mainly expressed itself as a force defending government policies designed to offset the ravages of corporate dominance and market dynamics. We try to protect

the remnants of the New Deal social compact, to defend and promote government programs in terms of compassion, fairness, and justice because of the enormous assault on all of these by the Right. In the Sixties, we thought that the New Deal was little more than a technocratic framework for ensuring a smoothly functioning capitalist society. Participatory democracy defines a regulative ideal for rewriting that compact so that elite domination would be replaced by collective deliberation. The New Left aimed to imagine and struggle for alternatives to established policies and arrangements.

The Occupy movement opens up once again the chance to imagine, investigate, and experiment with alternatives. The celebration of the 50th anniversary of Port Huron may, I hope, provide some of the social and intellectual means to engage in that process. ■

Dick Flacks was a founding member of SDS and active in its leadership for several years. His most recent book (with Rob Rosenthal) Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements, is now in paperback. He's co-editing with Nelson Lichtenstein a compilation of recent reflections on the Port Huron Statement and the fate of the New Left.

Frances Fox Piven and Cornel West on Michael Harrington and *The Other America*

(The following remarks are excerpted from a dialogue at the Left Forum, New York City, March 2012)

FRANCES FOX PIVEN – I want to begin by saying a word about Michael Harrington's book *The Other America*, which we are celebrating this year, its 50th anniversary. I may be the only one in the room who was there in 1962 when Michael published that book. Not only was I there, but I was actually working in a poverty program on the Lower East Side of New York, and at that time the publication of the book as well as Dwight Macdonald's article on the book [in the *New Yorker* –ed.] was treated entirely differently; the book was interpreted entirely differently than the way it came to be interpreted in subsequent years.



Frances Fox Piven

What was significant about *The Other America* and about Michael Harrington as the spokesperson presenting the arguments of *The Other America* in 1962 was the spotlight it placed on a problem that persisted in the United States, the problem of a large segment of our people living in poverty, with little hope of climbing out

of poverty, despite our dominant mobility story. What Michael was doing was simply directing attention to America's poor.

Now, at the time, I had some problems with this. He directed attention to America's poor by talking not only about their material hardship, their material circumstances, but also about the culture of marginalization and hopelessness within which they lived. And that was the culture of poverty which Michael understood very much in the terms in which Oscar Lewis, the anthropologist, had understood the culture of poverty only a short while before. What happens to people when they are forever, permanently, consigned to live in ways that are not the ways of the majority, that are not the ways of the dominant culture, when they are consigned to a kind of degradation and hopelessness and so on. Now, Oscar Lewis before him, and Michael as well, really understood culture, the culture that people construct to cope with circumstances that they find themselves in. He understood culture as a reflective and coping constellation of ideas and practices, not as something apart from material circumstances, but in a sense something that was produced by people struggling with material circumstances.

At that moment in 1962 when the book was published and when Dwight Macdonald's article was published no

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one had problems with that understanding of the relationship between culture and structure, culture and material circumstances. It made sense. And you know why it made sense? Because it does make sense. It really does make sense. But then something happened. And it didn't happen on the Left, although the Left was in a way weakened by it, because we were seduced by it. But what happened was that "the poor" was also taken to mean "the minorities," and also meant "those promiscuous women having babies," also meant "those guys who mug nice people on the street" or skip over the subway turnstile, or all those other terrible things "they" do. So "the poor" came to play a central role in the politics of the Right, or I should say the political propagandizing of the Right.

Now, what the Right wanted to do with the poor is hammer the Democrats, because for a brief time in the 1960s the Democrats had – largely against the will or the intentions of their leaders – become champions of America's poor. They became champions of America's poor because of the influence of the Black freedom movement. So we had Lyndon Baines Johnson, a professional politician if ever there was one, calling for an unlimited war on poverty and echoing the refrain of the Civil Rights Movement's "We Shall Overcome" in a big national speech. Democrats suddenly were foot soldiers in the "War on Poverty," and so to gain traction in party competition and interest group competition, the Republicans fashioned a strategy, first known as the Southern Strategy, but then it became a national strategy, in which they singled out and demonized poor people, Black people, and they became welded together. You know, Black people were poor people, poor people were – you could use the one, and it meant the other, and lots of us understood how this language was being contrived, manipulated and used.

Well, in that political context, the understanding by social scientists of the relation between structure and culture, economics and ideas and practices changed. Suddenly structure and culture were torn apart because there was a market created by politics for a different way of understanding the relationship between the two. Culture was something that people constructed, or that they inherited, and then reproduced. And culture was the cause of material poverty. It was not that material poverty interacted with culture, that material conditions were the conditions under which people created culture, but that culture, and especially the culture of short-termism, the culture of being unable to plan for the future, the culture of being unable to defer gratification, the culture of being virtually addicted to sexual promiscuity, the culture of needing drugs, that culture became the force that was creating poverty. And a whole social science grew up around that idea and how culture was reproduced. Thus if Maria [Svart, DSA National Director, seated next to Piven - ed.] and I lived surrounded by people with this culture,

it would be hard if not impossible for us to overcome it. That was actually William Julius Wilson's contribution to this debate.

But when I say that there was a market for that kind of theorizing, I mean that people could get research grants, that they could get appointments at research institutes. The federal government was funding that kind of research. The foundations were funding that kind of research. And it contradicts what we intuitively understand about human nature and human capabilities.

We are all of us mired in structure, mired in material circumstance, and we all of us have the capacity to try to cope with and even overcome those material circumstances. And I am hopeful that we are at a moment in American political history when the millions and millions of people who are still poor, still mired in a structural reality which forces them to think only one or two steps ahead – you can't even buy groceries for the week, because you don't have the money – well, I'm hopeful that we are at a moment in America's political development when those people who are poor will again demonstrate their incredible human capacity for coping and reconstructing their reality by becoming militant and joining the movement.

CORNEL WEST – I do want to say just a few words about the past. I take the Sankofa bird seriously. We really got to look first at the best of the past before we move forward. Which is to say just a brief word about who Michael Harrington was. We were blessed to know him. He was my dear brother. I traveled the country with him, year after year. And yes, 1962 was the text that he wrote that had tremendous impact on the mainstream, but for young people, it is very important to have a sense of what it is to be a Leftist.



Cornel West

He was born in 1928 in Saint Louis. He's an Irish brother, and he was deeply shaped by the Catholic Church, the Left wing of the Catholic Church. He was a Catholic up until his 20s. He became a religiously musical atheist in his 20s and 30s. But he was shaped by that Catholic tradition that talked about labor, reactionary on women, but has something to say about working people, something to say about the dignity of labor. He went on to work with a legendary figure named Dorothy Day. And he was the editor of their newspaper from 1951 to 1953, went on to join the Socialist Party of Norman Thomas, the Shachtmanites – we won't get into sectarian history of the Left, but very important – working within the Democratic Party, was still a socialist, and then he decides, after going to the College of Holy Cross, University of Chicago MA, Yale Law School, he wants to be a democratic intellectual, a radical democratic intellectual.

Now in 1962, and Fran has got it so right, it was rare to talk intellectually, analytically about the relation of poor people to capitalism. We had C. Wright Mills and a few others out there, but they were renegades; they were iconoclastic thinkers at that time. And he does get tied into the culture of poverty thesis. There's no doubt about it. And we need to radically call that into question, but at the same time, he was also somebody who had people like Dwight Macdonald sitting around and writing a review in *The New Yorker* called "America's Invisible Poor" in '62, and we had presidents who read the *New Yorker* [audience laughter]. No, I'm sure Brother Barack reads it too, but that's rare. But it was in the White House, when he [Johnson] read Dwight Macdonald's review of Michael Harrington's text, that Michael Harrington then had that kind of impact on the mainstream. And in '82 he then founded Democratic Socialists of America. We have been members ever since. That's when we first met, I think, probably, about 1982, 30 years ago.

Brother Harrington wrote a book in 1984 called *The New American Poverty* that we'd have tremendous discussions about, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, a major text on poverty. Tavis Smiley and I – we did this book, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*, to be out in about three weeks. And doing what? Building on precisely both the legacy of Harrington and others but also in a very different framework. Look at the title: *The Other America*. I never liked that title. 'Cause that's my America. And I used to talk to brother Michael about that when we traveled, especially when he'd drink beer and I'd have cognac, because we had some magnificent moments of ecstasy...but I would tell him: Why would you even mention a title like *The Other America*? Don't otherize poor people. They are us and we are them. The difference has to be maybe materially. But once you otherize poor people, and then it is tied into the otherizing of people of

color, it's going to be very difficult to generate the kind of connection, generosity, the kind of bonds, to recognize they are us and we are them.

No, that's when Brother Tavis and I said, no, it's *The Rich and the Rest of US*. The oligarchs and plutocrats – and us. The oligarchs and plutocrats are human, but they got wealth, power, status, and too many are driven by greed, tied to a system that's rigged in such a way that the one percent owns that 42 percent, and the top 400 individuals have wealth equivalent to the bottom 150 million. There's something morally sick and obscene about that. Profoundly so.

And it's not just a political issue. It's a moral issue, it's a spiritual issue – I say that as a Christian. And I have great respect for my atheistic and agnostic brothers and sisters who want to talk morality. Morality is real. But poverty is not just a political issue. It is not just a matter of economic calculus. It is not just a matter of the survival of a democratic experiment, even though it is. It's a state of emergency; it's a matter of national security. We need a sense of urgency, yes. But it's also a deeply moral and spiritual issue. Who wants to live in a community, a society, a world, where you don't have significant persons fundamentally filled with righteous indignation about the level of social misery of fellow human beings? ■

Frances Fox Piven and Cornel West are both Honorary Chairs of the Democratic Socialists of America. Piven is a professor of political science and sociology at The Graduate Center, City University of New York, and author of many books on poverty. West is a professor of African American studies at Princeton and Christian studies at Union Theological Seminary. His latest book, Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir, with David Ritz, is reviewed on page 15.

It's the Economy, Stupid

by Jack Clark

Review of Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010* (Crown Forum, 2012, 407 pp., \$27).

Charles Murray specializes in big, provocative books with large policy implications. His book *Losing Ground* argued that policies to alleviate poverty created poverty, providing the intellectual ammunition for the push to end welfare as we knew it. In *The Bell Curve*, Murray and co-author Richard Herrnstein created a firestorm of controversy with dubious arguments about the natural distribution of intelligence by race.

With *Coming Apart*, Murray can avoid the accusations of racism that greeted *The Bell Curve*. Murray now focuses on the great gap between the white elite and

the lower reaches of the white working class. There's some irony here. A central conceit in *Losing Ground* concerned white working class bars, representing their patrons as clear-headed and intelligent enough to advocate getting rid of the whole mess of government programs: food stamps, cash welfare assistance, Medicaid, disability payments, and unemployment insurance.

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Coming Apart draws a portrait of a well-educated and extremely well-compensated elite constituting roughly the top 5 percent of the population. He focuses on CEOs, top policy makers and opinion shapers, chronicling their lifestyles and identifying their “SuperZip” codes. These people at the top take an enormous share of national income because, as Murray explains, their IQs are so high and there is such a high economic premium for intelligence. Without irony, Murray lauds the complex financial transactions this new elite manages. Recall that this book is published in 2012 and was clearly written well after these financial transactions nearly destroyed the world economy.

Murray does express concern about the great gap between this affluent elite and the rest of white America. No, he’s not concerned about the income and wealth gap; that’s just the inexorable result of market forces. Murray does fret that the white elite and the white working class live apart geographically and culturally. Unlike the elite, the white working class is literally coming apart in Murray’s narrative, suffering from extreme social dysfunction that parallels the fraying of the social fabric in African-American communities. Unlike other scholars examining this dynamic, Murray finds no economic cause for the unraveling of white working class communities. Cultural norms or more precisely the lack of enforcement of cultural norms explain all.

Identifying “four founding virtues” of marriage, religiosity, industriousness, and honesty, Murray looks at how well these virtues are lived in Fishtown, a white working class inner-city Philadelphia neighborhood, and in Belmont, an affluent white Boston suburb. In Fishtown, marriage is in decline, and out-of-wedlock births are increasing. Despite the popular view that lower-income whites are more religious, church attendance is also down. Participation of prime-age men (30-49) in the labor force is much too low. On all these measures, Belmont residents hew more closely to the four founding virtues. As Murray sees it, the white elite lacks the self-confidence to preach what it practices. We need stronger social norms supporting work, marriage, religion, and honesty.

He dates the sharp break in American life from the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963, managing all sorts of popular-culture references to the era. *Coming Apart* brings us to familiar territory for the right-wing narrative: The awful, disruptive 1960s caused all of today’s problems. Just marshal some pop culture references, crunch the data, and we can conclude the case. His prodigious data doesn’t fit the time frame, though. White out-of-wedlock births, which loom large in Murray’s argument, show only a slight uptick in the 1960s, with a much sharper increase in the 1970s.

Much of his argument about the dissolute behavior of the white working class revolves around the numbers of labor force dropouts. He charts national unemployment

rates and labor force dropout rates among males with a Fishtown education (i.e., no more than high school completion), yet his chart actually shows labor force participation rising between 1960 and 1970, (i.e., the line for dropouts is down). A similar increase in labor force participation occurred again in the 1990s when unemployment fell below 5 percent for the first time since the late 1960s. These data points don’t fit Murray’s argument, so he ignores this evidence. Really, Murray assures us, the problem is the culture.

Critics rightly faulted him for not looking at how economic transformations affected the white working class. In his *Beat the Press* blog for the Center for Economic and Policy Research, Dean Baker picked apart Murray’s case:

First Murray does a bizarre comparison by looking at real wages between 1960 and 2010. This is bizarre because wages rose rapidly through the sixties and into the early seventies, then largely stagnated. ...we might think that relative income means something. In a 30-year period where per capita income more than doubled, we might expect that workers would have at least something to show. The fact that the wages of white males with just high school degrees has barely budged in three decades indicates that their situation has deteriorated seriously in relative terms.

The analytical problems caused by Murray’s periodization repeatedly mar his argument. He notes that the 1960 unemployment rate was close to that of 2008, so there’s no excuse for white working class men to be out of the labor market. The proverbial reader from Mars, relying on Murray, would never guess that between 1960 and 2010, millions of well-paying manufacturing jobs were lost.

Baker’s example of stagnating wages uses manufacturing jobs as the base. That’s the best case. Male wages in real terms declined overall between 1973 and 2010. Working class family incomes remained stable because more women entered the paid labor force.

Starting in the mid-1970s, factory closings devastated working class communities, and large numbers of workers never got back to work. For those who did, wages dropped dramatically. Suicides occurred among men who couldn’t face not supporting themselves or their families. The academic literature on what happens to the victims of plant closings is voluminous, and the conclusions are uniformly grim. Yet with all his data, charts and footnotes, Murray shows no interest in that literature.

Here’s the real story. Idleness grew not from lack of industriousness but from lack of industry. Good jobs left, and men who had difficulty finding replacement jobs drifted into long-term unemployment. Then they stopped looking for work. Their sons grew up not knowing men with good and steady jobs. Sociologist William Julius

Wilson traces the same pattern in the African-American South Side of Chicago in *When Work Disappears* – and even anticipated that the story would repeat itself in white working class America.

Murray acknowledges that a social democrat might read some of his data and see a case for redistribution of wealth, but then he knows that distributive justice is folly, because the distribution of income perfectly reflects the distribution of talent. Trying to adjust the distribution will only make things worse. Lower wages in Murray's world should make the poor work more, but higher tax rates make the rich work less.

It's odd, too, that in a book crammed with data, Murray supports some of his strongest policy preferences with nothing more than opinion. In discussing how unworkable he believes social democracy to be, Murray claims that generous unemployment insurance is a disincentive to work. He does not need to prove his point. His is an ironclad case so long as you don't bother to pay attention to actual policy. In the weak U.S. welfare state, unemployment compensation is not particularly generous, but it does compensate people for searching for and not finding work. On the other hand, in Germany, the unemployment rate throughout the Great Recession was substantially lower than the US rate, in large part because the Germans used part of their unemployment fund to subsidize worksharing. Instead of a firm laying off 20 percent of its workforce, the work week could be reduced by one day. With the government subsidy, workers made about 90 percent of their pay for a four-day week. Middle-sized firms, the core of the German manufacturing sector, strongly supported this policy, maintaining their full workforce throughout the downturn. In the Netherlands and Scandinavia, the unemployed receive subsidies to learn new skills and work in new occupations, sometimes in new industries; the subsidies do not allow them to remain idle. Northern European nations have lost substantial industrial

sectors like textiles and clothing, but without the social devastation that occurs here.

Murray does elaborate on his own vision of the good life. For industriousness, Murray substitutes "vocation." That calling usually is associated with career, but it can be associated with devotion to a cause or to an avocation, too, and Murray makes a good case that the residents of Belmont are far likelier than the residents of Fishtown to lead lives that are happy and meaningful.

Still, we're back to Murray's point that the American elite needs the self-confidence to preach what it practices. They need to employ stern language and real consequences for behavior that undermines social norms. The American elite needs to be judgmental again.

So is he just talking about talking tough? No.

Murray gives the game away in talking about falling wages: "Insofar as men *need to work to survive* – an important proviso – falling hourly income does not discourage work" (emphasis in original). For all the talk about meaningful vocation, for all the veneer of concern and the exhortation that the good people of Belmont preach what they practice, Murray does not advocate moral suasion. Nor is he addressing the need for self-fulfillment in places like Fishtown.

His policy preference is unambiguous: lower-income men of all races will work – at whatever wage is available – or they will starve. ■

Jack Clark served as the first national organizer of DSA's predecessor, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), from 1973-1979; the first managing editor of its newsletter; and as a national and local leader of both DSOC and DSA for nearly 20 years. He is Deputy Director of the Transportation Learning Center, which works with transit worker unions to improve front-line training.

No More Apologies: Socialist-Feminism and the Struggle for Reproductive Freedom

By Amber Frost

In the wake of the Susan G. Komen Foundation's idiotic decision to withdraw its support for Planned Parenthood, a number of revealing themes became prominent in the discourses of the organization's critics. One of the most telling was the argument that Komen should have "kept politics out" of its funding decisions, the insinuation being that offering breast cancer screenings and health education at a public clinic is not a political act. Of course, there are many potential options when it comes to defining what constitutes politics. The "art or science of government" is admittedly a bit vague, but it works in this case; funding

decisions made by organizations like Komen, after all, govern women's access to these crucial services. If anything, this is why socialist-feminists have long touted the preferability of formulations such as "reproductive liberation" or "reproductive freedom" over the liberal concept of "choice."

If the personal is political, then Komen's very existence is political. After all, the funding and provision of health services, whether for women in particular or not, is an inherently political question. Komen's politics are emblematic of a liberal conception of feminism – helping the poor women

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who can't afford treatment or testing, all while putting a pink ribbon on known carcinogens to generate revenue for the organization. The choice of the color pink to symbolize women's health is telling. It wraps our ethical consumerism in an unthreatening "traditional" conception of maternal femininity. It's so flimsy that we're able to look right through it.

Many of us were not surprised by Komen's decision to pull its funding for Planned Parenthood. It has had some bad press among feminists in the past, and it doesn't take a lot of Internet searching to turn up some less than flattering information about the organization. So perhaps it's time to turn the spotlight on Planned Parenthood itself. In recent years, Planned Parenthood has adjusted according to the same sort of apolitical discourse its supporters employed during the Komen controversy. They reflect the current political culture rather than try to shape it. Their rallies and marches are just as unthreatening and contentless as any "'Blank' for The Cure" event. When one attends a Planned Parenthood rally, one almost never hears about abortion. Their platform speakers tend to stress that abortion services actually constitute a very small percentage of what they do, and they do indeed. When the matter of abortion is raised at an event organized around the watchword of "choice," we're frequently served up the saddest rape story imaginable to remind us that Women Who Have Abortions have values you can connect with. They talk about how emotionally difficult it is for women to choose an abortion, and about how no woman takes it lightly, and about how it's always a last resort.

But that's not true, is it? Any woman who's talked frequently and frankly on the subject knows that a lot of women have no difficulty making that decision. In fact, many women are quite frank about knowing immediately that abortion was the right decision for them. DSA Honorary Chair Barbara Ehrenreich, who recently wrote *Bright-sided*, a delightfully bitter little book about her battle with breast cancer and her hatred of Komen's marketing, famously said she had no difficulty making the decision to get either of her two abortions. "The one regret I have about my own abortions is that they cost money that might otherwise have been spent on something more pleasurable, like taking the kids to movies and theme parks."

So why does Planned Parenthood say that it's always a hard decision? Why is their defense of reproductive choice always couched in such defensive and regretful language? From Planned Parenthood's perspective, it seems like talking about abortion as little as possible is the path of least resistance, and that when they need to talk about it, sympathy born out of horrible experience would garner them the most support from public opinion. However, when we are forced to rely on the rhetoric of the experience, our political position becomes vulnerable to the emotional appeals made by the opponents of reproductive freedom. Just look at Norma Leah McCorvey, the "Roe" of *Roe v. Wade* who morphed into a vociferous anti-abortion activist, or the children of rape who look mournfully into the eyes of politicians and ask, "Isn't my life worth saving too?"



Amber Frost (middle) and and YDSers.

The current discourse advanced by supporters of abortion is organized around a defensive plea, not a bold declaration in favor of reproductive freedom: Women feel really, really bad about the decision they have to make, and they only have to make that decision under dire circumstances, and you can tell they are absolutely tortured in making that decision, so abortions are (sometimes) Okay.

Not only is this position insulting, it's a lie, and, perhaps even more importantly, it does not demand the establishment and protection of women's autonomy in the decisions that affect their health and their bodies.

I do not for a minute question Planned Parenthood's commitment to helping women, but their rhetorical appeals are an effort to appeal to the public's emotions, not to establish a clear political position. When advocates of reproductive freedom adopt this approach, all the "difficult" abortions become fodder for anti-choicers, as they use that "difficult decision" as evidence that abortion is not good for women, and all the experiences of women who don't regret their abortions are negated by the ones who do.

It's time to bring some clarity to this debate. It's time to say clearly that there are those of us who trust women with their own bodies, and those of us who don't. At the same time, we need to reinvigorate our struggle for universal single-payer health care. Planned Parenthood has weaknesses that a universal system does not, and a universal system has the ability to solidify reproductive freedom as policy in a way that a nonprofit can't.

What is the liberal alternative to a radical socialist feminism? A concessionary feminism. An apologetic feminism. A feminism whose gains are built on unstable ground. It's time to return to "on demand, without explanation, without apologies" and let it be known that no patron, no matter how benevolent, is a substitute for liberation and democracy. Re-radicalizing our rhetoric is the only way to reinvigorate the feminist movement with our socialist-feminist values. Fighting for the decoupling of capitalism and health care is the only way to put these values into practice. ■

Amber Frost is a former YDS organizing intern and recently accepted a position on DSA staff in New York City.

T-Day: As Student Debt Hits \$1 Trillion, YDS Swings Into Action

by Andrew Porter

On April 25, outstanding student debt in this country hit the astonishing figure of \$1 trillion, exceeding all other forms of consumer debt in the U.S. In response to this growing crisis, Occupy Student Debt called for a national day of action on “T-Day” to raise awareness of the issue, which Young Democratic Socialists (YDS) on college and university campuses across the country endorsed and joined.

Access to affordable higher education in the U.S. has slipped out of reach for millions of students, and the steady expansion of the student debt bubble is the most visible symptom of this crisis. For the past 30 years, federal and state funding for public higher education has been declining. The public share dropped from 50 percent in 1979 to 35 percent in 2000, and continues to fall in the wake of a weak economy. To fill that gap, colleges and universities have relied primarily on shifting the costs to students and their families. In 1985, the average public college or university derived 23 percent of its revenue through tuition; by 2010 that figure climbed to 40 percent.

The rate of inflation in the price of higher education has been nothing short of astronomical, outpacing inflation in the cost of housing and even healthcare. From 1985 to 2011, the consumer price index rose by 115 percent, while college tuition and fees rose almost 500 percent. As tuition has increased, wages and incomes for most workers have remained stagnant, forcing students and their families to take on ever-higher debt burdens in order to meet the cost of a college education. Enrollment in four-year colleges among academically qualified low-



YDS Vassar May Day 2012

income students dropped from 54 percent in 1992 to 40 percent in 2004.

Federal and state governments have not simply disinvested from public higher education. They have also shifted the balance of financial aid awards away from grants and toward loans. According to a recent report by the left-liberal policy organization Demos, “in 1980, 39 percent of federal financial aid to undergraduates was in the form of loans, and 55 percent was awarded in grants. By 2008, this had shifted to 64 percent of the funds awarded as loans and only 26 percent as grants.” The federal government has also encouraged students to take out loans by creating new tax breaks for paying off student loan debt. The federal government currently spends approximately \$22.75 billion in tax expenditures to make student debt repayments slightly more manageable for borrowers.

These trends in government spending and financial aid awards have, unsurprisingly, produced a generation of college graduates who will begin their adult lives with significant debt burdens that will take decades to pay off. According to the Project on Student Debt, the average graduate in 2010 left college with \$25,250 of debt, which was five percent higher than the previous year’s average. About two thirds of all students graduate with some sort of debt, but the burdens are not evenly distributed among students from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. As is the case with so many other indices of social misery in the U.S., student debt burdens tend to be higher among students of color than they are among their white counterparts.

Student loan debt is different from almost all other forms of consumer debt in that it is nearly impossible to discharge through bankruptcy. In 1998, Congress passed a law exempting federal student loan debts from discharge through bankruptcy unless the borrower could demonstrate in bankruptcy court that their repayment would



We presented five GET UP workshops, a popular-education-style training on how the economy works and the democratic socialist alternative to unfettered capitalism, at the Left Forum conference in New York City in March. Above, Madison DSAers collect petition signatures for the Student Loan Forgiveness Act after a GET UP training on higher education.

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constitute an “undue hardship.” In 2005, Congress passed a bankruptcy “reform” law that further tightened the screws on student debtors by applying this rule to previously excluded private loans. Unfortunately, Congress never established a uniform standard of what constitutes “undue hardship,” allowing the courts to establish a threshold of distress that has proven very difficult for student debtors to meet. They’re in hock to their creditors until they finally manage to pay off the loan or until they die.

The problem of student loans might not be so troubling if graduates could find well-paying employment relatively easily after leaving school. But the ongoing economic crisis has hit young workers particularly hard, and even those with college degrees have not managed to escape its terrible grasp. A recent study showed that one out of two recent graduates were unemployed or underemployed. Unable to service their debt or discharge it, students’ debt burden continues to spiral out of control.

If young workers are to be freed from student loan serfdom, we must organize, educate, and agitate around the issues of bankruptcy reform and the restoration of public investment in higher education. This spring, YDSers on campuses around the country were on the front lines of this struggle.

The Ohio University chapter has been extremely active this year around budget issues. They protested a proposed 3.5 percent tuition hike on the heels of previous tuition increases.



In May, they confronted the school’s board of trustees, who were meeting to vote on the proposed tuition increase. At the meeting, students held signs

expressing their plight – one read “I make \$98.18 a week, look me in the face and tell me that I can afford \$10,215 for tuition” – and stood silently behind the trustees. The board voted for the tuition increase, but the students remain committed to fighting tuition hikes the next year.

The University of California-Davis chapter held their T-Day action a few days early by attending a rally in support of the “Banker’s Dozen” and hosting me for a public talk. The Banker’s Dozen were 11 students and one professor who staged a sit-in at a US Bank branch on the UC-Davis campus and are being charged with 20 counts each of obstructing movement in a public place, with one count of conspiracy. They face up to 11 years in jail and \$1 million in fines. After the rally, I gave a talk on higher education



DSAers around the country helped redirect the narrative from blaming the victims of rising poverty and inequality, to blaming the real culprits. Above, DSAer Coleson Breen leads a direct action planning breakout at 99% Spring Washington, D.C.

and student debt titled “High Tuition is No Accident: The Crisis in Higher Education as a Product of Neo-Liberalism.”

The University of Kansas chapter hosted me on T-Day. We ran a table on student debt, distributed information, and got contact information from scores of interested students. I gave the same presentation I gave at UC-Davis and led a discussion about what kind of campaigns against debt students could lead on their campus. The event was prominently featured in the student newspaper the next day. I wrapped up my tour in Columbia, Kentucky, where the Lindsey Wilson College chapter hosted me for a day of action and education.

In New York, the Vassar College chapter participated in the T-Day actions by hosting a forum with DSA Honorary Chair Frances Fox Piven. Around 70 people showed up to hear Piven talk about the history of socialism and how socialists should relate to the Occupy movement. Through this event and additional outreach the group was able to identify over 30 new people interested in joining Vassar YDS.

But YDS isn’t satisfied with lightening the debt burden on students and their families, as important as that is. In the long run, we demand nothing less than the establishment of free public higher education in the U.S. That’s the struggle of our generation, and it will be the focus of the upcoming YDS annual summer conference, scheduled to take place from August 9-12 in Wurtsboro, N.Y. ■

Andrew Porter is the YDS National Organizer.

Socialist Summer School
August 9th-12th
The Valley Brook Inn, Wurtsboro, NY
ydsusa.org/sss2012

The conference will focus on organizing skills that students can use next year to continue to build the socialist movement. YDS members will also vote on the new national leadership, national campaigns, and our two-year strategic plan. Register today!

Cornel West: Long-Distance Runner for Justice

A review of *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir* by Cornel West with David Ritz (Smiley Books, 2009, 288 pp., \$25.95)

By Duane E. Campbell

This fascinating memoir of a life on the run by Cornel West, one of the Honorary Chairs of Democratic Socialists of America, begins in Sacramento and continues through the election of Barack Obama. It is the tale of a self-described “blues man in the life of the mind,” a renowned public intellectual who wears his politics and faith on his sleeve.

Readers will likely know West from his many books, including *Race Matters* and *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. Many of us have had the experience of hearing him deliver lectures and sermons as he travels, speaks, records on radio and appears on television. He is a popular and even theatrical performer who never fails to remind us that “Justice is what love looks like in public, just as deep democracy is what justice looks like in practice.”

Cornel West lives his life with a deep commitment to the prophetic Christian tradition he learned from his family and as a youth in Sacramento’s Shiloh Baptist Church. In *Brother West*, he shares and describes his commitment to this Christian tradition that confounds and confuses many of his comrades on the Left.

I had the good fortune of meeting Cornel way back in 1983, at a DSA meeting of some 100 activists and scholars of color in 1983 organized by Manning Marable at Fisk University in Tennessee. That’s where we formed the Anti-Racism and the Latino Commissions of DSA. For his part, Cornel was the first chair of the DSA African-American Commission after the merger of DSOC and the New American Movement in 1982.

The memoir, written in collaboration with David Ritz, is more personal and less analytical than many of West’s academic writings. He tells of his several wives, his children and his family ties. Cornel tells his own story the way he wants it told and he tells it with rhythm and grace.

He describes his intellectual life as “the way I sing my blues.” At times, his choice to engage with

popular culture by appearing in movies and cutting rap albums has led to some consternation in the more austere precincts of academia. Reflecting on his time at Yale, West notes the somewhat contradictory nature of his public persona: “the academy was my source of income, but the academy often clashed with my own sense of integrity.”

West has been a teacher and a professor at some of the finest universities in the country as well as in churches and prisons. He acknowledges that “the college professor as bluesman isn’t a concept easily embraced by the college president,” and then goes on to describe his view of the much-publicized 2002 conflict with former Harvard University president Larry Summers that led to his return to Princeton, where he had earned his Ph.D. in 1980.

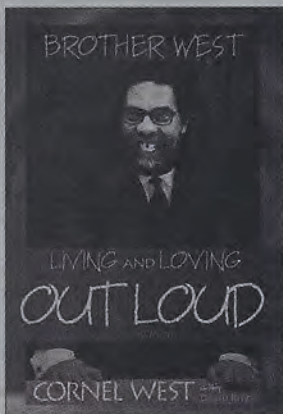
“Reaching and teaching is my greatest joy,” says West. “To be teachable is to muster the courage to listen generously, think critically, and be open to the ambiguity and mystery of life.” He says, “the way I sing the blues – in lectures, and books, on hip-hop albums and TV shows, in adult education classes and prisons, in college auditoriums and church pulpits – well, that is unusual.” His memoir testifies to a strong commitment to a radical democratic tradition that leads him to confront power and to criticize those who do not use their power to help the “least among us.”

He has reached and inspired many of us in DSA and millions in the U.S. and around the world. The memoir is a delightful read, with surprises and profound reflections on a life lived fully.

Readers can stay current with Cornel West and Tavis Smiley on their regular program on Public Radio International where they comment on the issues of the day. Smiley and West just published a new book, *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, which reports on their recent tour highlighting the shameful depths of poverty in the contemporary U.S. As West never tires of arguing, if we do not deal with the still widespread poverty and racism in our midst, we will lose our democracy.

It is a privilege for many of us in DSA to have known and worked with Cornel. We are certainly encouraged and blessed by his work with us, just as the entire nation is better off for his articulate and prophetic voice. ■

Duane Campbell is a professor emeritus of bilingual multicultural education at California State University-Sacramento and the chair of Sacramento DSA. His most recent book is Choosing Democracy: a Practical Guide to Multicultural Education (Allyn & Bacon, 2010). He blogs on politics, education and labor at www.choosingdemocracy.blogspot.com and www.talkingunion.wordpress.com.



Celebrating 40 Years of Democratic Left

DSA is proud of *Democratic Left*, and we think you are, too. For 40 years, nearly a decade longer than DSA's existence, *Democratic Left* has been a magazine of the Left firmly rooted in both the principles of democratic socialism and immediate struggles for reform and empowerment.

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- Religion
- Youth
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