

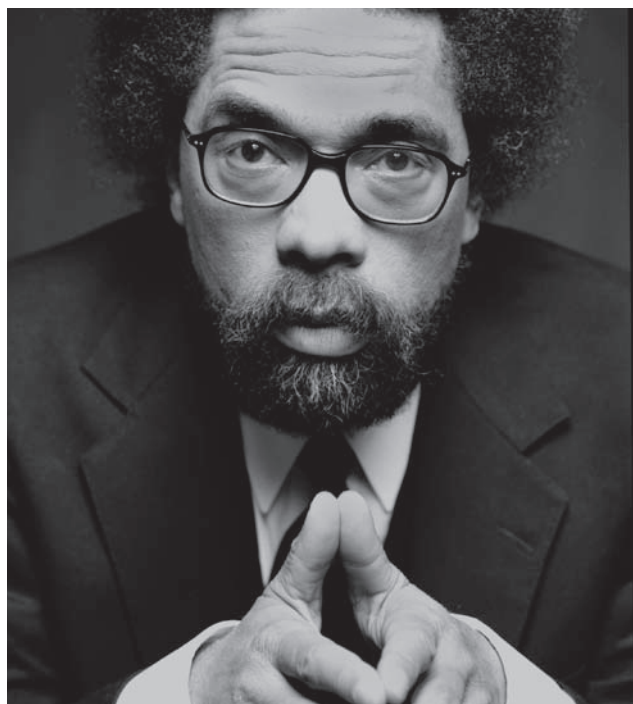
YDS Conference: REAL Change for a change

by Rebecca Kanter and Sean Monahan

On the weekend of March 5-7, over a hundred young radicals from around the country descended on Manhattan for the Young Democratic Socialists' 2010 national conference, *Democratic Socialism: REAL Change for a Change*. The title of the event played to the mood of the young American Left. After enduring eight agonizing years of the Bush presidency, many, led on by Obama's talk of "change" and terrified of a McCain-Palin White House, organized for the Democrats in the 2008 election. Meanwhile, most of the "hope" we were promised has been dashed. Early warning signs came in the President's cabinet appointees, with economic advisers from the neo-liberal Clinton and even Reagan administrations. Since being sworn in, Obama chose not to close Gitmo or end torture, not to withdraw from Iraq, to ramp up the war in Afghanistan, not to end "Don't Ask Don't Tell," not to regulate Wall Street and instead give them \$700 billion (at least), not to protect households in foreclosure, not to include single-payer in the health care debate...essentially he has not done anything we were hoping for. His administration has not meant change, and the American people continue to slide into poverty while the capitalists get richer and more powerful.

In this context, many young people are questioning the Democratic Party establishment for the first time, and many are looking for a way to get organized. Enter the Young Democratic Socialists, bringing DSA's radical reformist political platform and focus on pragmatic organizing to college campuses around the country, and offering (as the conference title suggests) REAL change for a change.

The first plenary session opened with Steve Max, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) vice-chair and longtime community organizer and co-author of the *Midwest Academy Manual, Organizing for Social Change*; and one of Glenn Beck's favorite targets, Frances Fox Piven, the renowned sociologist and author of *Regulating the Poor* and *Poor People's Movement*. Max addressed one of the great dilemmas of being a democratic socialist: how many hours does one spend trying to improve things under capitalism versus speaking out on socialist principles? This, he said, distinguishes democratic socialists from liberals, who do not criticize; and from revolutionary "socialists," who see reforms as futile. He urged the young activists to spend more time discussing socialism and why liberal reforms are not equivalent, "for if this is not made clear, liberal initiatives will never pass."



Cornel West

But "disappointment with the Obama administration is beside the point," said Piven. She argued that meaningful reforms will only occur under his presidency if and when there is mass social pressure from below. Piven held that the Left cannot win with a strategy that empowers communication much more than mobilization for protests and disruptions. She reminded the assembled young radicals, "activists can make a difference. Giving people courage and confidence and defiance is not something to be ashamed of, but something the country needs."

"Hope in each other as one struggles against the grain" would sustain our activism, according to DSA national chair Cornel West, who addressed a crowd of 300 on Saturday's opening plenary. West took the stage to a roaring auditorium and was tempted, he said, to start break dancing – which he sadly did not. He did, however, give us a little hope, but not without great caution. "Instead of a politics of fear, [we need a] politics of hope. Hope is serious work, don't confuse it with optimism. No optimism for 'blues people.' There is no cheap optimism for young democratic socialists. Hope is much deeper; it has to do with struggle, it has to do with

cutting against the grain. It has to do with being wounded, but choosing to be a wounded healer, rather than a wounded hurter...Hope is a blues thing.”

Before hope comes love; or so brother West implied. Imperative to being a democratic socialist is having a love for all people, he asserted. West urged YDSers to issue the following challenge to American society: “Can we treat workers, can we treat poor people, the way we treat investment bankers?”

Two dynamic feminist professors, authors, activists, and moms, Christine Kelly and *Nation* contributor Liza Featherstone, led the third plenary session of the 2010 Young Democratic Socialists of America conference. Featherstone made clear that we must see the campus [of public higher education] as a battleground for struggle. She pointed out that “[Heck], the recent March 4th protests [against tuition increases] were even covered by the mainstream media!”

Currently, both Kelly and Featherstone suggested, public education in America is weak and sickly, or “totally physically decaying,” as Featherstone put it. Higher education is draining family incomes. Federal Pell grants have been cut substantially. There is an increased charter school movement competing with public K-12 education – which inevitably “fuels cynicism about the public sector and makes it harder to fight for anything else.” And constantly lurking right around the corner is the unregulated and highly exempt student loan industry. Together, both massive debt and tuition increases and the inherent partnership between the two, makes the fight for sound loan and public higher education practices even more important. Featherstone urged us to struggle for “an economic bill of rights for young Americans, in which there should be a universal right to higher education.” “You [young people] are cooler than we were,” Kelly said. But we cannot, she told us, keep financing our education with our future and our children’s future and our parents’ future. “The privatization of public higher education is the defining fight of [your] generation.”

Joseph M. Schwartz, DSA vice-chair and author of *The Future of Democratic Equality*, opened the Sunday afternoon plenary on “Progressive Responses to the Global Economic Crisis.” According to Schwartz, the current “Great Recession” is a culmination of 30 years of global neo-liberal capitalism. The neo-liberal attack on the “social contract” of the post-World War II era began in the 1970s, when transnational corporate elites decided that democratic social movements were becoming too powerful, threatening capitalist profit. Thus began neo-liberal policies of “deunionization, deregulation, and privatization” of public goods. Schwartz argued that with the outsourcing of basic

industrial production to non-union areas and the developing world, corporate America increasingly invested at home in “FIRE” – finance, insurance and real estate. Thus, the “booms” of the 1980s, 90s and the first millennial years were “asset bubbles,” rather than a growth in real productive capacity that served human needs.

With the collapse of the financial speculative bubble, not just working people are losing their homes and exhausting their unemployment benefits, so is the middle class. Schwartz contended that unless social protest against the federal government bailing out banks rather than homeowners grows, we will not see a meaningful government response to the housing and unemployment crises. “People [in foreclosure] should have the right to rent homes at the market price,” he said, while advocating a federal program that would force banks to “cram down” mortgage debt to the current market value of homes. Schwartz held that the right attacked ACORN because of its national role in organizing a multi-racial coalition that resisted foreclosure. The trade union movement must organize both the employed and the unemployed. But this is difficult because absent real labor law reform “there is no right to organize in the U.S., and there is a war on trade union rights across the globe.” Schwartz, alluding to DSA’s new “Economic Bill of Rights” project, urged students to defend public education as part of the Left’s historic effort to “de-commodify” basic human needs and fund these public goods through progressive taxation.

Bertha Lewis, CEO of ACORN, and Dan Cantor, executive director of the New York Working Families Party, spoke alongside Schwartz.

Lewis started out her speech applauding the audience. “I give you all a hand because saying ‘I’m young and democratic and a socialist’ is a good thing to do; and no light thing to do in this time.” And then she fervently began: “We are in it right now... This is for real;” alluding to the scent of McCarthyism and racism that wafts in the right-wing populist air.

“Economic crisis...What crisis?” Lewis loudly asked. “We have always been in a crisis,” she exclaimed, “this is NOT NEW!” While this may be a crisis for [the elites], we have always been in a crisis if we are poor, working class, and/or people of color, Lewis explained. Moreover, Lewis questioned how the global corporations can still have lots of money and give out big bonuses. “How blatant do they have to be?” she asked. This is “one instance where size does not matter,” for no bank or corporation should be giving or receiving bonuses.

Thus, Lewis urged us to knock on doors, and organize, rather than just advocate for the oppressed. She also urged us to not depend on the kindness of strangers (e.g. foundations,

philanthropies) and to work on building an organization that is self-sufficient and gets into real battles. Lewis believes that the next real battle coming in the United States will be around immigration. As we are “getting ready to have a majority planet of color,” this is how the “fear of the black planet is being played out today.” “The face of immigration needs to be blacker than it is,” proclaimed Ms. Lewis. “Second and third generation blacks here in the U.S. are not marching with other [more recent immigrants]. They need to say ‘I am an immigrant too!’”

When someone asked, “how I, as a white woman, could help fuel this renewed black movement that she spoke of,” Ms. Lewis passionately responded, “Organize white women! Black people need to organize themselves. Keep it simple and organize what you know and then join together, which will just make attacks stronger. This is how you help us and we help you.”

Dan Cantor then spoke about the 12-year-old Working Families Party of New York (WFP-NY). Cantor promotes the WFP-NY because it is a “unique and powerful way to make non-violent change.” The WFP-NY is an example of a fusion voting system, where two parties (a minority and a majority), endorse the same candidate and aggregate their votes. (This is only possible in six states, in one of which, Connecticut, the WFP is currently organizing.) Cantor believes that if one “really wants power one has to scare, not influence, the influentials.” He also wanted us to understand that there are “no shortcuts to doing the work that we do.”

The closing speaker, prominent literary critic Gayatri Spivak (who also runs a rural public school in one of the poorest regions of India), affirmed the importance of language and reminded us that the struggle for democracy and freedom would not end with the abolition of capitalism (which she

affirmed would come someday). The socialist movement, she argued, must be global and internationalist or it will not be a movement at all.

The conference was a resounding success for YDS from an organizational standpoint. In attendance were over 100 young socialists representing 49 campuses and 26 states, from Rutgers in New Jersey to Wichita State University in Kansas, to the University of Oregon. This conference introduced to the national organization the new chapters at Temple University and Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA, and at Sam Houston State University in Texas, while reuniting all of the old favorites as well. Fourteen unaffiliated YDSers said they are interested in forming a new chapter on their own campus or in their own community. Many of them are new faces on the YDS scene (a couple of which have already begun to organize in the few weeks since). The conference brought together a growing community of young radicals from around the country, many of whom will see each other again in Detroit at the US Social Forum in June, and again in New York at the national YDS summer retreat in early August. As Dan Cantor urged, it is time we think critically about new terms and language as eloquent and simplistic as the “living wage;” but at the same time, be careful, do not get stunned by the “paralysis of analysis” (Lewis’ words) and go out there and organize! ♦

Rebecca Kanter, a graduate student at John Hopkins, is a new member who attended the conference. Much of this article is taken from her posts about the conference on her blog at Alternet. Sean Monahan is the Greater Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America, student organizer and the Young Democratic Socialists, northeast regional coordinator.