

# The RED Letter

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## THE YOUNG DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS

### YDS SUMMER Retreat

The 2008 Socialist Summer Retreat held between August 8th and 10th in Wurtsboro, New York, exemplified the resounding success of the work YDS and its activists have done over the past two years. Participants included forty-five youth and students from places as far away as Colorado, Nevada, and Texas, including delegations of five or more from William Paterson University (NJ), College of Wooster (Ohio), and Brown University (Rhode Island). The relatively high number of people of color and working-class youth in attendance reflected an increasingly diverse YDS thanks to national chapter growth.

Saturday's activities opened with an overview of the tenets of democratic socialism by Joseph Schwartz and Michele Rossi. Small group discussions followed. Activists then attended worships with topics ranging from the environment and the current rise of socialism in Latin America to our Activist Agenda (see page four) of student and immigrant rights.

The night ended with the plenary "'YDS and Realities of Hope': the Obama v. McCain presidential campaign and building towards and after Election Day." Sarah Lawrence professor, former NPC member, and veteran activist Komozi Woodard reflected on previous work by radicals in elections. He emphasized how young radicals could use elections as a vehicle for building ties with local communities to create change. Joseph Schwartz touched upon the need to focus on candidates not as individuals but as policy makers. He reminded young students that unless an Obama presidency has a Democratic-controlled senate with near filibuster-proof sixty member majority, serious labor law reform such as the Employee Free Choice Act, which could bring millions of new union members within years, is doubtful. Both stressed that political change is only as potent as the movements that hold elected officials accountable.



*Young Democratic Socialists made it a goal to further educate members about their connections with Democratic Socialists of America.*

Sunday's activities included voting on documents, positions, and volunteer leadership. Coordinating Committee elections, which have been uncontested in the past five years, saw contests for both the Feminist Issues Coordinator and At-Large seats. Today, the Committee is one spot away from being half people of color and women, a welcome change from previous overwhelmingly male and white leaderships.

A healthy Activist Agenda debate narrowed YDS's national priorities to only two. Two proposals were added to existing National Immigrant Rights Project: chapter activism around DSA's "Renegotiate NAFTA" petition and amplifying our socialist solidarity with the Florida based Coalition of Immokalee Workers (representing migrant tomato pickers). We also voted to continue our education and anti-student debt activism and added a new emphasis on K-12 in addition to our existing higher education work.

A new element of the conference was the emphasis on inclusive dialogue about privilege and oppression. No organization, no matter how progressive, is free from societal flaws. YDS made space for queer, people of color, women, working-class, and student caucuses. Each caucus addressed how YDS as a collective could address our personal concerns. In addition, artist Javier Cardona led conference participants to address their own privilege and oppression... **cont'd on page three**

# YDS and Campus Progress

By Morgan Shoaff

For the past four years, the Campus Progress National Conference has brought together a multitude of progressive college students from around the country. The 2008 conference was no exception. Held in early July in Washington, D.C., the day long event consisted of nearly 1,000 students eager for a day of tackling issues and pushing for a year of campus activism.

The conference started off with former Sen. John Edwards giving a keynote speech about the importance of the youth vote and getting involved with the November elections. Other speakers included notable journalists, politicians, artists and policy experts such as Congressperson Linda Sanchez, Congressperson Keith Ellison and Student/Farmworker Alliance National Coordinator Melody Gonzales.

Breakout sessions centered on a variety of topics: civil rights, acting locally, hip-hop in politics, combating climate change, the LGBT and reproductive justice movements, etc., and lasted about an hour each. Outside of the sessions, Campus Progress encouraged self-expression through music, poetry, art and student publications to show that progressive activism comes in numerous forms.

It's no secret the youth have been pushed into the spotlight this election cycle. Emphasis has been placed on the power of the youth vote and the ability our generation has to shape the future of America. Attending the Campus Progress conference made this fully apparent. The willingness and energy from students came not just from returnees, but fresh faces just getting started in the world of activism. In my first year attending the event I know my excitement was shared with many of the participants. As the youth movement continues to develop and students become more politically aware, the Young Democratic Socialists need to consider this gathering as an invitation to network with fellow activists and recruit new members.

The sessions at the conference were well planned, however, I was disappointed they didn't include any sort of discussion on affordable higher education or the student debt crisis. I was hoping they'd push the issue because nearly everyone at the conference was in college. There are number of topics they could have covered: huge budget cuts mixed with unbearable hikes in tuition, The DREAM Act, textbook prices, the dangers of private lending institutions, governmental funding, etc. For instance, even with soaring tuition costs, the Federal Pell Grant (\$4,050) hasn't increased since 2003.

And why is that? These are things students need to know and be acting on. As democratic socialists, we agree that education should be a right, not a privilege. If the conference would have provided information on ways to work in solidarity with our campuses to fight greedy corporate lenders and the broken school system, we would have walked away with a lot more than we did. Aside from that, I felt the sessions could have been longer as time typically ran out before the audience could get through the Q & A portion, the main time allotted for students to interact with speakers and each other.

I think YDS benefited from tabling and had a strong representation at the conference. Student traffic was high between sessions and many were interested in YDS literature. Most students were interested in learning about our political platform, main priorities and involvement nationwide. Compared to the other groups tabling, YDS helped break up the monotony of numerous "green group" clubs, each doing the same things on campus, sharing the same goals and ideology. Since YDS doesn't revolve around one single-handed issue, we're a more diverse and active organization.

I left the conference imagining all the activities YDS could do on campuses this year. As YDSers, we have more opportunities than ever for chapter growth by working with other groups on local and national levels.



Wichita YDSers were awarded high honors by Campus Progress for their activism (Morgan is far right).

With one of our main priorities working in solidarity with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and pushing workers rights, it'd be great to team up with organizations like Student Labor Action Project, Student Farmworker Alliance and Campus Progress to create bigger, more powerful events this year. As we learned at Wichita State, utilizing resources and attacking issues from different angles creates a more powerful

message - the kind of message that turns heads and gets recognized. Since forming in 2007, my chapter, Wichita State University (WSU) YDS has turned into the largest political organization on campus, having a strong base of support and receiving regular coverage in newspapers. I'd like to see more chapters have this affect on their campuses. Also, as chapters continue to grow in numbers, it's important that we work more internally. We need to be pushing each other, sharing ideas and giving members a chance to network with each other outside of the biannual conferences.

Young Democratic Socialists are in good position this year. We have a strong Activist Agenda, which gives us the opportunity to make a lasting impact on campuses across the nation and we have the unity and determination to make it happen. It's going to be a great year.

**Morgan Shoaff, senior in Integrated Marketing/Public Relations, PR executive director of Wichita State University (WSU) YDS, member of WSU Campus Progress, vice president of WSU Public Relations Student Society of America**

# YDS Fall Semester: events and organizing

The dawn of a new academic semester is upon the Young Democratic Socialists. While many of our twenty plus chapters and organizing committees have just begun their activities, *The Red Letter* was able to catch a few stories of the great work already happening on campus. Please enjoy the mini-reports below and always feel free to send in your group activities to [yds@dsausa.org](mailto:yds@dsausa.org).

**Brown University:** The newly founded Brown chapter held their first event: a talk with Dr. Corey D.B. Walker titled "Untimely Socialism." Dr. Walker, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America National Political Committee and recent delegate to the 23rd Socialist International Congress in Athens, Greece, spoke about the continued relevance of socialism today and movement for social justice in the 21st century. The discussion was attended by over thirty people. The Brown Chapter also hosted a talk by YDS national organizer, Erik Rosenberg.

**Michigan State University:** MSU YDS hosted an open house with the W.E.B DuBois Society, a progressive black student association. They are planning public socialist education, community service, and prison awareness for the coming weeks.

**Butler University:** President Dakota Manuel is currently reaching out to local groups such as United for Peace and Justice, Black Student Union, and LGBTQ alliance.

**Stuyvesant High School:** Members are planning an introduction to democratic socialism teach-in for new recruits.

**New York City:** YDS's only community chapter continued its

work off campus with an organized public hearing on the transformation of two city-wide non-profit healthcare insurers into a for-profit company. The event was co-sponsored with NYC Democratic Socialists of America, Coalition Against Privatization, Progressive Democrats of New York – CD 14, and Democracy for NYC.

**Wooster College:** Wooster YDS screened films, circulated the "Renegotiate NAFTA" petition as part of YDS's national Activist Agenda, and are working towards having an event every week. The chapter actively engages with other progressive forces to mobilize against the right-wing for the presidential election in a vital swing state of Ohio.

**Wichita State:** This heartland chapter is busy building both YDS and the broader movement for social change. The WSU YDS hosted a talk about the Employee Free Choice Act, a law to make it easier for workers to form unions, with Maria Escobar (national coordinator of the Student Labor Action Project). They are also, working with the Kansas University YDS organizing committee, and hosted their own ice cream social(ist) – a new tradition stated by the Wooster College chapter of welcoming the new year and members over dessert.

**William Paterson:** The William Paterson chapter has been holding regular meetings twice a week, each attracting nearly twenty students. Because of their educational activism and engagement with the administration, the chapter successfully reduced their school's tuition increase to 5% while all other New Jersey public universities received 10% increases. The group shall host a YDS regional conference on Saturday, November 22nd. The gathering will be an opportunity for YDS members and student activists to network and strategize post-November 4th, whoever the president may be.

**University of Central Arkansas:** The oldest YDS chapter is set to work both on and off campus. They have plans to move against local gentrification, push for the Employee Free Choice and work for progressive victories at the ballot box this November.



*YDSers enjoyed the more intimate setting of the mountains of Wurtsboro*

## Summer Retreat, Continued from 1

...through honest artistic questions and theatrical dialogue. Students enjoyed the safe spaces provided by the caucuses, which allowed them to express their feelings in private, and everyone came away having learned more about themselves and their comrades from Cardona's theatre.

But it wasn't all work: throughout the weekend, YDSers watched movies, played sports and music, and sang together. By giving us the chance to be friends as well as comrades, the retreat fostered the deeper connections that are the mortar of our movement.

YDS members know we have come a great way from when we barely had chapters, much less could put on national coordinated actions. Although YDS still has a good amount of work to do, it's readier than ever to build with DSA and the student Left. This fall, YDS will hit the ground running with both our new Activist Agenda and a readiness to bring a democratic socialist viewpoint about the election to the campuses. After November 4th, we'll be working with other progressives to challenge any reactionary policies coming from politicians and the right-wing base. Re-elected at-large Coordinating Committee member Andrew Porter said his goal for the year is to see YDS in a major newspaper. Let's make it happen!

# *YDS at International Union of Socialist Youth - Mediterranean Committee Meeting*

*By David Duhalde*

The International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY) Mediterranean Committee Meeting was held on the small rural Greek island of Skiathos. The event was hosted by Greece's Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) youth at a local school. Representatives came from across the Mediterranean from places such as Malta, Italy, Israel, Lebanon, the Balkan States, and Cyprus. In a region with a history of conflict, building friendship between young activists is a vital way to foster better relations between their people in the future.

As the delegate from the United States, I represented one of three organizations in attendance not from the region. There was serious interest in the US presidential elections and an incredible desire to see a Barack Obama victory. It was important for me to explain the ideological difference within the Democratic Party and that lack of social democratic, much less socialist, politics in America's largest party. While I agreed that defeating McCain was an urgent political task, I did have to break down illusions about what an Obama presidency might bring. Especially in regards to slow withdrawal from Iraq and the weakness of US social movements (particularly labor), I emphasized the need to put pressure on Obama in order for him to be a catalyst for change after election day (if he wins).

While much of the discussion was regional, the topics of Israel/Palestine peace and student power were relevant to American progressive activists and YDS members. Sadly, the representative from Fatah Youth (the political wing of the Palestinian Liberation Organization) was unable to attend. The dialogue between Israel's Meretz and Labor parties with Lebanon was marked with disagreement over issues of Iran and a proper response to Islamist Hezbollah (an organization opposed by all sides for markedly different reasons). The roundtable reflections on the conflict led me to joke that my country was more pro-Israel than Israel, a line that received laughs from nearly everyone. The discussion between divergent views about the peace process appeared more open and healthier than the same conversation would be in United States politics.



The heavily subsidized and accessible educational institutions of Europe and other states with strong social democratic movements had long been a model that American leftists could point to as an example for reform in US higher education. Foreign universities, however, are not immune to neoliberalism's cutbacks and the growing power of corporate globalization. IUSY has now established a Student's Working Group to deal with educational affordability and opportunity. With their student unions and progressive parties, they want to create an international campaign to protect student rights. This is an excellent opportunity for YDS to both learn from and contribute to a student social movement. We face similar challenges (budget cuts, denied opportunities, inequality within/between institutions) and can introduce IUSY to our own unique problems (lack of student unions, federal vs. local funding, education viewed as privilege) in dialogue.

A continued relationship with IUSY has the potential to remain a great opportunity for YDS and our activists. YDS is in the unique position to connect our politics with international successes that can be duplicated in the United States. However, the goal of YDS should always be to bring these politics home. While I enjoyed attending the meeting in Greece, we should invite our friends from overseas to our chapters and communities. Both IUSY and YDS have a great deal to offer the American left and bringing the conversation here can only help us advance our own progressive agenda.

## **Activist Agenda Explained:**

The 2008 YDS national conference updated our national priorities in an open and democratic process. Because the Activist Agenda is too long to publish in this issue of the Red Letter, we wanted to make sure members and chapter activists have a sense of how the conference reached its decision.

The first major decision was how many Activist Agenda items YDS would take on for the year. There were two national priorities, Immigrant Rights National Project and Campaign Against Student Debt, in 2007-2008. Those were reintroduced, along with three new proposals: Renegotiate NAFTA, Socialist Solidarity with Farmworkers, and Voter Rights. In a close decision, the conference limited the Activist Agenda to only two items. While there was strong support for three items, there was negligible want for one or four items.

During the subsequent debate, it was moved on the floor to combined the Democratic Socialists of America (YDS's parent organization) petition to Renegotiate NAFTA and the proposal to do solidarity work from a socialist perspective with the Florida based Coalition of Immokalee Workers into Immigrant Rights National Project (IRNP). The prior was seen as a way to link DSA and YDS's activism. The latter campaign with farm workers was to amplify our existing work on corporate accountability in the food industry.

The major debate was whether we should adopt voter protection of communities of color and other historically disenfranchised groups. While everyone concurred this work is needed in the upcoming election year and promotes anti-racist activism, there was serious concern that we were ill prepared to aid in the voter protection and that existing groups would do a better job. Ultimately, the concern over readiness led to the conferences participants to choose to continue our higher education campaign with minor changes and more extensive IRNP for a third year.