

REPORT ON NATIONAL STUDENT ASSOCIATION CONGRESS

by Nancy Strebe and Carolyn Jasin

The 21st Annual United States National Student Association Congress met for ten days, August 17 through August 26, 1968, at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. About 250 campuses were represented by 800 - 1,000 students (some 500-600 voting delegates). Our intervention lasted for the first four days of the Congress. Since our intervention consisted of two comrades, we were limited to concentrating on talking to people and distributing literature on our campaign, rather than attempting to analyze NSA's positions and perspectives. A number of observations were made and some sessions were attended, which will be reported on here.

The National Student Association is generally viewed, especially since the CIA-funding disclosures, as conservative and government-service oriented. While in the main this may still be true, the pressures of national and world-wide events (Vietnam, France, Berkeley, Columbia, Czechoslovakia) have created a mood for change within the ranks; the leadership is being pressed to put forth "radical" proposals in order to remain "relevant" to students in this country. The general feeling of observers and delegates alike was that NSA must move towards the left. The words "revolution" and "basic change" were used very widely and loosely.

Nearly all delegates are officers of their school's student governments, many of them student body presidents and vice-presidents, and, in large part, anxious to institute reforms within the university world. This rather narrow outlook for university reform was broadened somewhat at the Congress by the oft-repeated statement, "You can't change the university without changing the system."

The NSA leadership, particularly President Ed Schwartz, was pushing for a restructuring of NSA into a "dual corporation," by which NSA would lose its tax-exempt status but which would enable it to work for candidates, push for the 18-year-old vote, and lobby for other legislative reforms. This was given primary importance by the leadership, but we are unable to report whether it passed the membership.

The Congress was well organized and had a variety of movies and speakers for the delegates. "The Battle of Algiers," a Czech antiwar film, "Inside Vietnam," "Point of Order," and others were shown. Some of the speakers were Blase Bonpane, Catholic priest recently extradited from Guatemala for his work with revolutionary forces there; Tom Hayden, who urged everyone to come to Chicago for the Democratic convention and outlined troop movements and talked in terms of confrontations; Robert Scheer; Dick Gregory; Michael Ferber on the draft; and Nicholas Katzenbach, on American foreign policy.

There was a "radical" caucus which we attended and, while they discussed a number of issues like "Should we run people for offices in NSA (answer - no, because then we won't be considered radical anymore)," "Should we remain inside NSA and try to change it or should we form another group (answer - remain in)," "Who are we (the radicals) after this Congress (not resolved)," the only decision the group came to at the sessions we attended was to keep on meeting.

There was a fraternity caucus where frat. men worried over fraternities' continued loss of membership (money) and their seeming growing irrelevance to students. The statement was made here that "We cannot change the fraternity without changing society."

NSA brought in five students who have been active in European student movements: one each from France, Germany, Italy, England and Czechoslovakia. They all gave summaries of what was happening in the student movements in their countries at a panel discussion attended by about 300-400 NSAers. The student from France, Marc Levitte, was from the March 22 Movement and wasn't too clear about what had happened after people actually got out on the streets, but did give a good account of how the events chronologically began. He was the one who initiated the oft-quoted at the conference statement that, "We can't change the university without changing the society." The English student, David Triesman, from Essex University, told of reforms instituted at his university through demonstrations, including a workers' school where townspeople could attend practical courses which they decided should be held. He was from the Radical Students Alliance. The student from Germany, Sigfried Fronius of the German SDS, began her talk by saying that they have learned a lot from the American SDS, and then proceeded to give a tactical description of their activities. Carlo Donat-Cattin, the Italian student from Torino University, also outlined student protest movements and stated that they were trying to involve the workers. All of these students considered themselves revolutionary socialists, were trying to involve the workers, and all called for an end to the war in Vietnam. Jan Kavan, a student and writer from Charles University in Prague, Czechoslovakia, had a more difficult task; he was trying to explain what was wrong and how they were trying to correct these wrongs without sounding anti-socialist. Of course, some of the students did take his talk to be anti-socialist even though he said several times he was for democratic socialism. There was a great deal of interest in the Czech situation. At a panel later in the week there were more thorough-going discussions, first of what is socialism and then of how they are trying to achieve democracy. All of the foreign students had declared themselves revolutionary socialists fighting to destroy capitalism and they all met with a good response from the NSAers. The fact that these students were leaders and that they were socialists, and the fact that they all talked about the need to reach the workers were eye openers for the NSAers and started many of them thinking about the U.S. in this context. The following

day there was increased interest in our table, since we were the only socialists there; they also spent some time with us, and we had some fruitful discussions about Trotskyism and other perspectives.

1968 Elections

The button most in evidence was McCarthy's. A number of McCarthy supporters whom we spoke to said that if McCarthy lost the nomination to Humphrey at the Democratic Convention they would either 1) not vote at all or 2) support and vote for us. There was also a large "Dump Humphrey" movement. In fact, at one of NSA's plenary sessions, President Ed Schwartz was criticized for letting the Dump Humphrey group use NSA offices and facilities.

Our campaign was looked upon with interest and was taken seriously. A great many of the students present, probably a majority, had heard of our campaign, and many told of hearing the candidates and other SWP speakers on their campuses during Choice 68. We were not red-baited at any time, although we had hung up all the posters we have and were the only socialists there. The most common questions asked were "What's your position on the Czech student movement?" and "What did you think of the Communist Party's role in the French revolt?" Our responses were well received. The only other presidential candidate who had a table there was Nixon, which was largely ignored.

Vietnam War

There was no sentiment for the war, although the Nixon supporters did want an "honorable" (read victory) settlement. Others were for withdrawal of American troops, even though many were unclear as to how this should be accomplished. The Congress passed a resolution calling for a national draft card burning on November 14. NSA is on record as against the draft and the draft resistance people there got a good response. We sold out of "Bring the Troops Home Now" and "Bring Me Back Alive" buttons.

Who Was There

SDS - had a table but did not man it and had very little literature on it. The NSA had asked for a \$50 fee from all student exhibitors, but at the beginning of the Congress SDS had protested so effectively that this was reduced to \$1.

Resistance - attracted quite a few people to their table with their anti-draft literature and posters.

Nixon for President - was largely ignored.

AVILA - Another Vietnam in Latin America received a fair amount of interest.

YNA - Youth for a New America, which had a button reading "Kennedy, King, McCarthy," and posters calling for "new politics" and for action, "pick up glass on a West Side playground," "teach a kid to read," and "wear a button," did not receive much attention, except in their call for a women's caucus in which they were joined by SDS.

YSHB - Our table received the most interest of all there. Students wanted basic socialist writings and wanted to know where we stood on current and past issues. We sold \$57 worth of literature and campaign materials the first 4½ hours we had the table set up.

Afro-American Struggle

Most blacks there (and there were probably not more than 50-75) wore naturals and dashikis and were generally nationalistic (except for one young black student who worked the Nixon table until two brothers talked to him, after which he was no longer seen at the Nixon table and no longer wore his Nixon button). They held black caucuses and we understand that after we had left the Congress, the black students walked out in a body. There was a panel on White Racism, which demanded that all NSA decision-making halt while the credentials committee checked to see if racism had influenced the selection of delegates to the Congress. This took up hours of debate in the Congress' plenums, and was not resolved by the time we left. We sold out of "By Any Means Necessary" buttons and Paul Boutelle picture buttons the first day. All Malcolm X literature and the "Black Control" stickers went as well.

Conclusion

NSA is obviously in the throes of change and that change is very definitely to the left because of the pressure that has been exerted on NSA and the desire of the leadership to keep NSA from losing its influence. I think we can expect to see more dissension within and disaffiliation from NSA this coming year as many student leaders feel it is not moving far enough fast enough.

Our Intervention

Nancy Strebe and Carolyn Jasin attended from the Minneapolis local and stayed for the first four days of the Congress, August 17 through 20. Over \$100 worth of literature was sold at our table. Three NSAers endorsed the campaign, including one Afro-American and five combination subscriptions were sold. Fifty-seven NSAers signed our mailing list, including the five foreign students, and 11 wanted the candidates or socialist speakers to come to their schools. The best-selling literature was all Malcolm X and Che, Zionism and the Arab Revolution, Wretched of the Earth, L'Enrage, Should the U.S. Be Partitioned, and Black Nationalism and Socialism. A number of those who signed the mailing list are excellent contacts who are ready for our ideas.