

“New Left” (October 4–5, 1962)

Abstract

Hoping to constitute a “New Left” distinct from the old labor movement, the 17th Delegate Conference of the Socialist German Student League (SDS) discussed the need to drastically reform university structures and to modernize Marxist theory in order to overcome the democratic capitalism of the Federal Republic.

Source

Conformism and Nonconformism

Social Democratic university groups independent of the SDS had already been founded in Heidelberg, Cologne, and Saarbrücken in late summer 1959. On March 26, 1960, the SDS federal board decided to accept the petition by the Saarbrücken Social Democratic Student Association (SHB) to join the SDS under the condition that it accept the resolution on the incompatibility of membership in [other student] associations with SDS membership. Since the SHB group rejected this, it was not admitted. On May 2, the SDS federal board also suspended the Saarbrücken SDS group because it had refused to exclude members Gerhard Lambrecht and Hans Schurze from their association. (Both were accused of having contact with the German Communist Party [KPD], which had been banned. At the time, both had already been excluded from the SPD.) Consequently, there was no longer any SDS in Saarbrücken.

Then, on May 6, the Albert Schweizer Group in Bonn decided by majority vote to withdraw from the SDS and no longer participate in the delegate conference in the future. Some of the members left the Bonn group and remained in the SDS. Just one day after the secession of the Albert Schweizer Group, two representatives from the Bonn SHB participated in the conference of the SDS state association of North Rhine-Westphalia in Düsseldorf. There they voted—along with the Düsseldorf delegates and Heinz Niedrig, the chair of the state SDS group, and against the Cologne delegates and the rump SDS group from Bonn—for the state association to secede from the SDS and join the SHB. The delegates of the SDS university groups in Cologne and Münster protested the decision since the Bonn SHB members had also voted, although they had just decided to secede a day earlier.

The conflict between the SHB, which conforms to the [official SPD] party line, and the SDS had organizational consequences in other state associations, too. For example, the SDS group at the Otto Suhr Institute (OSI) of the Free University of Berlin voted out its previous first chairman Manfred Geßner on May 6, 1960, because of “undeniable incompetence.” Subsequently, on May 7, former SDS members Manfred Geßner, Waldemar Ritter, Hans Adolph, Hermann Klag, and Udo F. Löwke founded an SHB group at the OSI. Geßner was named provisional first chair of the planned SHB state association in Berlin, Ritter became a delegate of the not-yet-formed federal board in Bonn, and Löwke became the OSI group chairman.

On the morning of May 9, 1960, Jürgen Maruhn announced to the press the founding of the “Social Democratic Student Association” (SHB) in Bonn by “fifteen Social Democratic student groups throughout the Federal Republic and Berlin.” Jürgen Maruhn (Bonn) was named provisional chair. His two provisional deputies were Waldemar Ritter (Berlin) and Peter-Paul Henckel (Saarbrücken). The SHB founders expressly declared their support of the new statement of principles of the [Social Democratic] party. In addition, the SHB wanted to be involved primarily with practical higher education policy and to participate in the political education within the party. Basic educational goals were “a critical discourse on communism,” on the one hand, and “spreading the idea of democratic socialism,” on the other. The

SHB initiators had grown weary of the eternal carping of left-wing intellectuals. They demanded something positive.

At the time, the splinter group could not have imagined that the SDS, through its resistance, would soon become the initiator and interpreter of a student revolt. The SHB goal was basically to establish at the university a Social Democratic study group that aligned with the party. Radical nonconformists were not welcome in the SPD in the early 1960s. Nonetheless, the prevailing anti-intellectualism within the SPD leadership at the time does not explain the tactics of open defamation and accusations directed against the SDS at the SHB press conference in Bonn. The newly named SHB federal chairman claimed, for example, that there were people in the SDS, who had “direct relations with the SED.”^[1] In Berlin especially, it was alleged that there was “close contact” between some SDS groups and “communists from central Germany.” And the Berlin state association of the SDS supposedly also frequently supported actions that had “previously started in East Berlin.” In addition, SHB functionaries spoke out against the continuation of “elaborate conferences of uninfluential people on major political questions.” According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the SHB would not “wander between two worlds,” but would instead work “resolutely for the cause of the free West.” The provisional SHB federal board expressly supported “national defense while at the same time safeguarding the right to conscientious objection to military service.”

Rarely had a majority Social Democratic leadership—and a middle-class, conservative press—been so mistaken about the general mood among left-wing students than in the early 1960s. Although leading SPD functionaries, such as Fritz Erler, Waldemar von Knoeringen, and Willy Brandt, had themselves been part of the rebellious workers’ youth in the late 1920s, they now demanded the unconditional subordination of the SDS to the long-term federal policies of the SPD, which had never even been discussed fully within the party. A dialogue about goals, strategies, and tactics remained taboo.

At the SHB press conference, Maruhn implied, as Wehner had earlier in an interview, that the SDS was a fellow traveler of the communists. Both Wehner and Maruhn themselves, of course, spoke in the estranged language of Stalinist bureaucracy about the supposedly infiltrated, externally controlled SDS. The coming years would show, however, that an infiltration of the SDS by dogmatic party communists was out of the question. Instead, a focus on new kinds of actions and theoretical contexts of communication developed within the SDS. The SDS succeeded in temporarily translating politics into the everyday affairs of students and young people. As a result, an alternative lifestyle developed in the mid-1960s among major segments of West German youth that was characterized by a fascination with autonomous politics beyond the classical mass organizations of the workers’ movement and by cultural and political defiance. But the rebellious subjectivity of the antiauthoritarian student and youth movements had nothing to do with communist party discipline, Stalinist despotism, or Soviet security and power interests. Not until the tiny Maoist parties were founded in the early 1970s was this antiauthoritarian consensus revoked from within. From a sociological perspective, the withdrawal into a borrowed proletarian discipline meant a return to familiar petit-bourgeois notions of discipline and order. Even now, there has never been any self-critical reflection on German Maoism from within, so this subject finally needs to be researched by outsiders.

NOTES

^[1] *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* or East Germany’s Socialist Unity Party—trans.

Source: Sigward Lönnendonker and Tilman Fichter, *Kleine Geschichte des SDS. Der Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund von 1946 bis zur Selbstauflösung*. Berlin, 1977, pp. 75–78.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: “New Left” (October 4–5, 1962), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-889>> [May 06, 2024].