



# Democratic Socialists of America

*Greater Detroit Newsletter*

March 2010

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## Call to Action

By David Green

Over 300 people attended the Call to Action Rally at the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 876 Hall in Madison Heights on February 18th. The rally was organized to press members of the Michigan Congressional delegation, particularly in the Senate, to pass key components of the progressive agenda including health care reform, cap and trade energy legislation, immigration reform, and the Employee Free Choice Act. DSA co-sponsored the rally along with 31 other organizations including Health Care for America Now, the UAW, the Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), UFCW, UNITE-HERE Local 24, AFSCME Council 25, Reform Immigration for America, Repower America (the organization founded by former Vice-President Al Gore to promote investment in renewable energy), Gray Panthers of Metro Detroit, Michigan Universal Health Care Access Network, the Arabic Community Coalition for Economic and Social Security, Southeast Michigan Jobs with Justice, MoveOn, and MOSES.

Congressmen Sander Levin and John Conyers, Jr. addressed the audience. In addition, aides to Senators Debbie Stabenow and Carl Levin and Representatives Dale Kildee, Gary Peters, Carolyn Cheeks-Kilpatrick, and John Dingell attended the rally. Representative Conyers told the audience that he supported the health care reform bill in

## **Agenda for March 6th DSA General Membership Meeting**

Join us on March 6th for our next DSA general membership meeting. Our speakers will be Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Mark Brewer who will discuss the upcoming 2010 elections and Dick Olson, former editor of Solidarity magazine, who will discuss the need for a new Constitution for Michigan.

- 1) Treasury Report
- 2) Speaker: **Dick Olson on “The Case for a New Michigan Constitution”**
- 3) Report on Planning for DSA Forum
- 4) Report on Jobs with Justice
- 5) Report on Michigan Universal Health Care Access Network
- 6) Report on Michigan Alliance to Strengthen Social Security and Medicare
- 7) Report on Detroit Area Peace with Justice Network
- 8) Douglass-Debs Dinner
- 9) Motion to Support Labor’s International Hall of Fame 2010 Induction Ceremony—Dave Ivers
- 10) Speaker: **Mark Brewer on “The 2010 Elections”**

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# Democratic Socialists of America Greater Detroit

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Congress, even though it was inferior to the single-payer health insurance bill of which he is the principle sponsor, because it creates a foundation upon which we can build. The bill covers millions of the uninsured, provides guarantee issue (i.e., prohibits insurance companies from denying coverage to individuals with pre-existing conditions), eliminates the “doughnut hole” in Medicare prescription drug coverage, and provides some limited measures to rein in costs.

DSA was well-represented on the dais. DSA member Al Fishman spoke to the audience about how the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had undermined Obama’s domestic agenda in a manner analogous to the way in which the Vietnam War undermined President Johnson’s Great Society programs. DSA Executive Board member Dave Ivers spoke about the imperative for a national jobs program, shared a personal anecdote about how the health care crisis had affected his family, and stressed the importance of Congress passing the Employee Free Choice Act to make it easier for workers to organize unions if they so desire. Other speakers included Chris Michalakakis, Legislative Director of UFCW Local 876, who spoke about the importance of comprehensive immigration reform. Luke Canfora of

Repower America described the huge potential benefits of investment in renewable energy (decreased reliance on foreign oil, reduced emissions of greenhouse gases, and job creation). Marcia Boehm and Altheia Henry discussed the urgent need for health care reform. John Freeman, Michigan Director of Health Care for America Now, moderated the event.

Following the program, members of the audience were invited to comment on the issues raised by the speakers. The organizers erected booths at the back of the hall from which audience members could e-mail or phone their members of Congress urging action on the issues covered during the rally. Several sponsoring organizations staffed literature tables along the sides of the hall.



## The Student Debt Crisis

By Ryan Wyeth, Co-Coordinator MSU-YDS

Many college students today are aware of the fact that there was a time when crippling debt was not an accepted part of college life. In fact, there are even many who realize that there exist places in this world where students, through collective struggle, still maintain this standard of education. And yet each of these examples seems somehow inaccessible: either too long ago or too far away. In the minds of college students today, the concept of crippling debt in exchange for an education is treated as a natural part of life; and this is perhaps

the most worrying aspect of this state of affairs. The current generation of students is the first to internalize the concept of high costs for education. They are far enough removed from previous generations of students that they do not realize just how recently this has become the case. To them, it seems as if the glories of cheaper education are simply a relic of their parents’ generation or a product of foreign and incompetent educational systems. This article will serve two purposes: the first is to remind us of the terrible costs of ever-climbing

tuition and the resultant student debt, to remind us why we must fight for free higher education. The second purpose is to explore the barriers that lie in the way of a modern day radical student movement, and what steps might be taken to overcome these barriers.

Though most people reading this article will already be knowledgeable of the terrible repercussions of student debt, it is nevertheless important to review the full extent of its effects and the full array of reasons for its undesirability.

There is a common analogy, popular among liberal and leftist circles, which states that student debt resembles a new form of indentured servitude. This analogy is more apt than many realize, though a closer look may suggest that it doesn't go far enough in describing the effects of student debt. Indentured servitude as it existed in 17th and 18th century America brought thousands of young people to America, where they would spend the next four to seven years of their lives using their labor to repay their lenders for the costs of transportation to America. Young people today, on the other hand, spend decades paying off educational debts; a 2006 article in USA Today told the story of a young man who spent ten years paying off \$7,000 in student loans debt, and that was in 2006. Today, in the midst of an economic crisis and one of the worst job markets for job seekers, students have on average more than twice that amount. A College Board Policy Brief released in August 2009 stated that the median loan debt of borrowers after pursuing a bachelor's degree at a public four-year institution was \$17,700.

To take the analogy a little bit further, under the system of indentured servitude lenders "retained their right [...] to sell [their servants] to other masters at any time." The same, unfortunately, is true for young people today, as banks increasingly sell student debt to collection agency in response to increased numbers of students who are forced to default on their loans.

In addition to bearing a striking resemblance to indentured servitude in terms of the mode of exploitation, the student loan system is also an integral part of social control in much the same way that indentured servitude was. The similarities are two-fold. On the one hand, it ensures that while students are still at college they remain complacent and easily controlled, helping to prevent a resurgence of the sort of student radicalism witnessed in the 60s and 70s. After the first year or two, students are already so heavily invested in their education as a result of loans that most feel they must devote all their time to studies in order to maintain the high grades necessary to keep cash flowing. And even many who do feel that they could make time for such activities are deterred from doing so for fear that participation in politics that

challenge the status quo could be damaging to their future job prospects.

This leads us to the second role played by student debt in today's society. It ensures that there is a constantly renewed source of labor that can be dumped into socially undesirable jobs. Every year, thousands of college students graduate and are faced with the daunting prospect of finding employment in a world where job prospects are scarce. At the same time, student loan corporations begin pressuring students to pay off their debts immediately after graduation. These two factors, the lack of jobs corresponding to particular areas of study and the pressing need for money to pay off debts, lead students to accept any job they can find, including positions as waitresses, sales associates, checkout clerks and the like, in order to secure the money necessary to remain in good standing with the banks.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are many who don't even make it as far as the university. As highlighted by Campus Progress's "Debt Hits Hard" campaign, the cost of attending a four-year public university has increased 40% since 2000. While costs continue to increase, college becomes unaffordable for increasing numbers of people from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds and is an increasingly elitist institution, available only to the rich and privileged of society.

According to a 2009 article from U.S. News and World Report, B.A.'s are increasingly becoming the new high school diploma. If this is truly the case, it is easy to see how increasing tuition costs act as a societal gate-keeping mechanism, reproducing the conditions of forced unemployment that prevented many students from attending the university in the first place.

Even those who are able to continue attending college lose out as a result of these phenomena. It is widely acknowledged that the education provided by collegiate institutions comes not only from official classes, but also is the result of day-to-day interactions with people of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints that make up the university community. Therefore, the loss of diversity in university populations that results from their increased elitism leads to a diminution in educational quality.

Obviously the question of whether or not the current system of educational funding "works" isn't much of a question at all. A mere glance at the issues outlined above should be enough to convince anyone marginally concerned with social justice issues that reform is desperately needed in our methods of educational funding. And yet, this leads us to a new and more perplexing question: Where do we go from here? How do students find a way to combat their ever-increasing exploitation at the hands of big capital?

The first and most crucial step seems to be for students

to become convinced of the need to combat this system of exploitation in the first place. In discussions regarding higher education, student debt, and social justice, one oft repeated theme is the “privilege of higher education.” The USA Today article mentioned above highlights the somewhat disdainful attitude taken by older generations with regard to student debt, an attitude containing little sympathy and summed up in the words “quit whining.” And yet, these sentiments are not restricted to people of older generations; many students are under the impression that because their educations could eventually provide them with an office or administrative job, they are “privileged” above those in more dire economic straits. This view, however, is based on outdated enlightenment-era ideas that privilege “mental” over “physical” work, as if it were somehow a luxury to be able to look forward to work in cramped office buildings secluded from the light of day, conditions which promote the development of heart disease and (particularly when coupled with ever-present debt) psychological illness. It is a view that refuses to take into account the character of today’s information-based U.S. economy and the fact that an office worker can be just as exploited as a factory worker or janitor. This concept of the privilege of higher education, when combined with the “American Dream” of integration into the middle class, is the perfect recipe for preventing the growth of any sort of radical student movement; and it is only with the rejection of both these concepts that the American student will become convinced of the need to fight for his/her education.

Even if a massive radicalization of American students does take place, however, the fight for free higher education is one that cannot be won by students alone. History shows us that, regardless of whether their method is reform-based or otherwise, student movements have never been able to achieve the realization of their goals without reaching beyond the borders of the university. The 2006 passage of the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI) is the perfect example of this phenomenon. While overwhelming numbers of students on campuses across Michigan opposed the passage of this piece of legislation, their opposition had little impact on the overall vote, a byproduct of students’ geographical and ideological isolation from the rest of the population. If students are to have an impact, they must recognize the unique characteristics of their own position and find ways to reach out and unite with workers’ and

poor people’s movements in their communities, and the perfect opportunity for creating this sort of unity already exists.

If educational debt is the major source of financial concern for young people today, it finds its parallel for older generations in the housing crisis. In 2009, Michigan ranked eighth in the nation in terms of foreclosures, “with 118,302 or 2.61 percent of its homeowners battling foreclosure.” Similarly to the case of students and education, even those not in this worst of all possible positions are still affected; as more and more people are expelled from their homes, those left behind find the values of their homes, their lives’ investments, declining in sync with the populations of their communities. As stated, there is an uncanny parallel between the student debt crisis and the housing crisis: and coalition movements are built around common situations.

In short, the construction of a successful student movement is dependent on two key developments. The first of these is the ability of students to radicalize themselves. The second: Their ability to reach beyond the boundaries of the university and create coalitions with working class people. It will not be easy work, and it will require the suppression of certain age-old debates that have divided the working class from student movements; debates such as those over religion in which one side views the other as “backward,” “ignorant,” and “counter to progress,” while they in turn are seen as “immoral deviants” and “blasphemers.” It will require the rejection of such ideas as that of “educational privilege,” which contributes to feelings of noblesse oblige among students and thereby further alienates workers. And yet, despite these difficulties, it is only through achieving this synthesis that either side can truly achieve its goals.

“Young People Struggle to Deal With Kiss of Debt,” [www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)  
“Policy Brief: How Much are College Students Borrowing?” <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/cb-policy-brief-college-stu-borrowing-aug-2009.pdf>  
“Indentured Servitude,” [u-s-history.com](http://u-s-history.com)  
<http://debthitshard.org>  
“No Jobs Without College as Employees Treat Degree as a Minimum,” <http://www.usnews.com/articles/opinion/2009/03/27/no-jobs-without-college-as-employers-treat-degree-as-a-minimum.html>  
“Michigan Foreclosures Reflected Highest Unemployment Rate,” <http://www.bankforeclosuresale.com>

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**[Check out Detroit DSA’s new facebook site](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Greater-Detroit-Democratic-Socialists-of-America/309348951359?v=app_2309869772#!/pages/Greater-Detroit-Democratic-Socialists-of-America/309348951359)**

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## **COURT SLAMS ELECTION REFORM**

By Ken Jenkins

I would like to express my deep concern regarding the decision the Supreme Court rendered in the case Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission.

The government that we, the people, elect is supposed to be “of the people, by the people and for the people”. With the narrow 5-4 decision to allow corporations unlimited campaign donations, this statement has been rendered redundant. Corporations do not vote for our elected officials; people do.

The 5 conservative justices-Roberts, Scalia, Kennedy, Thomas and Alito (all of whom were appointed by

Republican presidents), have ensured that big business has every opportunity to buy the government, and my voice has been made silent. This decision continues the record of the aforementioned Supreme Court Justices to side consistently with big business over middle class citizens.

I wonder how the court can possibly believe that this decision was the best decision for the country.

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### **CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

#### **March**

**Saturday, March 6**—DSA general membership meeting from 10 AM until noon at the Royal Oak Senior/Community Center, 3500 Marais Avenue, Royal Oak

**Saturday, March 13**—“Let’s Fix the Broken Immigration System for American Workers and Families,” a forum sponsored by the Michigan Coalition on Human Rights, from 1-3 PM at UAW Local 22, 4300 Michigan Avenue, Detroit

**Friday, March 26**—“Forgotten: The Murder at the Ford Rouge Plant”, a jazz opera, at 7:30 PM at the Albert L. Lorenzo Cultural Center at Macomb Community College, 44575 Garfield Road, Clinton Township. Call 586-286-2222 for further information.

#### **April**

**Sunday, April 11**—DSA executive board meeting from 10 AM until noon at the home of Helen Samberg, 30785 Hunters Drive, Apartment 23, Farmington Hills

#### **May**

**Saturday, May 1**—DSA general membership meeting from 10 AM until noon at the Royal Oak Senior/Community Center, 3500 Marais Avenue, Royal Oak

**Saturday, May 8**—The Frederick Douglass-Eugene V. Debs Dinner from 6-9 PM at UAW Local 600 10550 Dix, Dearborn

**May 11-13**—Hold these dates for a DSA Forum featuring Jeff Faux, Senior Fellow at the Economic Policy Institute, who will discuss the economic crisis—Exact dates and locations to be determined

#### **June**

**June 22-26**—U.S. Social Forum at Cobo Hall, Detroit

DSA  
DOUGLASS-DEBS  
DINNER

Saturday May 8 at 6 p.m.

UAW Local 600  
10550 Dix Avenue.  
Dearborn, Michigan 48120

Honorees

**Sandra Williams**

President, Detroit Metropolitan AFL-CIO

**Jimmy Settles, Jr.**

UAW Vice President

Keynote speaker

**Bill Fletcher, Jr.**

Dinner Co-chairs

**Rory Gamble**

UAW Region 1A Director

**David Hecker**

AFT-Michigan President

Tickets are \$35 a piece or \$350 for a table of ten.  
Please contact David Green 248-761-4203  
or Helen Samberg 248-539-3019