



# **To Disrupt Education:**

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**Pitt Students for a Democratic Society**

**A Publius Foundation Special Report**

**By  
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## Executive Summary

In its six-month history on campus, Pitt Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) evolved from an organization that hosted lectures and film screenings to one that participated in and trained other students to conduct disruptive protests on Pitt's campus. Pitt SDS is clearly in violation of at least two student organization guidelines and, for this reason, should no longer be eligible to use University resources or apply for Student Government Board allocations.

This report documents the organization's violation of University guidelines and presents the reader with the facts necessary to fully understand the organization, its purpose and future aspirations. Such a full understanding must include the following information:

- **Namesake:** Pitt SDS takes its name from the 1960s Students for a Democratic Society – a radical student movement whose tactics included building occupations and hostage taking. It is impossible to understand Pitt SDS without examining the violent past of its namesake organization.
- **SDS On Campus:** Pitt SDS has existed on campus since November 2009 and has evolved since then into a student group dedicated to disrupting University educational activities. Pitt SDS changed over a period of months from a student group in compliance with University guidelines to a student group that flagrantly violates the letter and spirit of those regulations.
- **The Freedom School:** This Pitt SDS-organized conference should be understood as a turning point in the group's activities on campus. Scheduled to take place in University buildings, Pitt SDS moved the Freedom School off campus when the conference's plans to train students to occupy buildings and blockade roads became public.
- **Language of Nonviolence:** Pitt SDS is careful to always describe its group activities as “nonviolent” but it is clear that the group's definition of this word falls radically outside of the mainstream and includes the destruction of property.
- **Future Aspirations:** Recent group activities and interviews with group leaders indicate that Pitt SDS is prepared to illegally disrupt activities at the University of Pittsburgh if it feels that such disruption would further its goals. Such disruption could include building occupations and road blockades – tactics covered by the Pittsburgh Freedom School.
- **The Case For Removal:** The activities of Pitt SDS and the actions of its individual members clearly violate two provisions of the Student Code and two guidelines of the University's “Guidelines for Student Group Certification.” University resources and student tuition dollars should not be used to support the activities of an organization in violation of University guidelines and regulations.

## What's In a Name?

It is impossible to understand Pitt SDS without understanding the original SDS that they emulate both in their name and actions. Founded in 1959, SDS grew out of the Student League for Industrial Democracy -- a branch of the socialist League for Industrial Society. In a matter of years, SDS built a major student movement around a loose set of Leftist/socialist values.

In the group's early years, SDS members dedicated themselves to the struggle for civil rights, women's rights and taking a stand against the Vietnam War. They took part in some of the most celebrated social movements of the 20th century and worked to expand the rights of students on campuses across the country.

But while SDS contributed a great deal to the positive struggles that changed our country for the better, it also represented a radical assault on some of this nation's founding values: free enterprise, limited government and a respect for private property. By 1962, when the group formally adopted a political manifesto known as the Port Huron Statement, SDS wasn't just a group of students allied with the civil rights movement; it was an organization that defended the Castro Dictatorship and called for an end to the American capitalist economy.<sup>1</sup>

Even with this radical ideology underpinning their organization, SDS protest activities took years to escalate and turn violent. Indeed, throughout the early to mid 60s, SDS largely participated in peaceful protests, teach-ins and pickets. But by 1968, SDS protest tactics caught up with their radical rhetoric and SDS chapters around the country began to use the occupation of university buildings as a tactic of protest.

The archetypal SDS building occupation occurred on the campus of Columbia University when, beginning on April 23, 1968, Columbia SDS occupied Hamilton Hall. Led by Mark Rudd, Columbia SDS initiated the occupation in order to protest ties between Columbia and a military-oriented think tank as well as the construction of a new gymnasium in adjacent Morningside Park.<sup>2</sup>

Protesters ultimately occupied a total of five University buildings in a series of protests that lasted until the New York City Police Department broke-up the protests on April 30.<sup>3</sup> The police arrested more than 700 people and a number of protesters and police officers were injured in the process.<sup>4</sup> In addition to occupying University buildings, the SDS protesters held Columbia's acting dean, Henry Coleman, as a hostage during their protest.

When SDS splintered in June of 1969, Columbia ringleader Mark Rudd became one of the founding members of the Weather Underground – a terrorist organization that bombed private and public buildings around the country in, according to the organization's declaration of war against the United States, “an attempt to lead white kids into armed revolution.”<sup>5</sup>

In spite of SDS's peaceful founding, its lasting legacy is the violence of the university occupations and the Weather Underground. For this reason, any attempt to resurrect the organization or piggyback off its name should be understood as a paean to unconstructive and ultimately violent radicalism.

## A New SDS at the University of Pittsburgh

On the campus of the University of Pittsburgh and at 150 other campuses around the country, SDS is back. Founded in 2006 and calling itself New SDS, it uses much the same language and tactics as its 60s namesake.

Pitt SDS has existed on-campus as a University-recognized student organization since November 4, 2009. In its official statement of purpose and activities, Pitt SDS gives little indication of its radical roots.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, the group's official description of their activities as a University-recognized student group states: "We will host speakers and events to offer alternatives to traditional politics and encourage students to interact with their community. These may include but are not limited to group meetings to build trust, social events, food and book drives and community networking."

For the first few months of their existence as a University-recognized group, Pitt SDS mostly did what they promised to do in their official description of activities.

One of Pitt SDS's earliest and most high-profile events that perhaps deviated from the group's official statement of activities occurred December 3, 2009 when the group dropped a banner from the balcony of the Cathedral of Learning to protest Barack Obama's winning the Nobel Peace Prize. The University alleged that the protest was illegal but no one involved was ever charged with a crime and it appears that no law was actually broken.<sup>7</sup>

After this one, largely unobjectionable public protest, the group's activities faded from the public eye and Pitt SDS devoted itself to hosting film screenings, lectures and potlucks.

Another such event occurred on March 3rd, when Pitt SDS hosted a lecture by Weather Underground terrorist Mark Rudd. Although The Publius Foundation objected to the use of student funds for such a lecture, the lecture itself conformed to the above educational description of Pitt SDS activities.<sup>8</sup>

However, comments made by Pitt SDS Manager Jordan Romanus in reaction to the Rudd lecture foreshadowed recent developments in the group's activities. In an interview with the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, Romanus said, "'we brought him in to talk about student organizing. We don't advocate bombing or killing anybody,' said Romanus. 'Shutting down Columbia (University) for four days was effective.'" In the same interview, Romanus said that his organization was not planning similar actions at Pitt because he wanted to graduate.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of Romanus's comments in March, Pitt SDS recently demonstrated that it is no longer dedicated to acting with respect for the rights of fellow Pitt students when, on April 14<sup>th</sup>, Pitt SDS participated in a disruptive protest inside Market Central.<sup>10</sup> Part of a broader campaign by the Service Employees International Union to expand its reach and power, Pitt SDS and Students in Solidarity with Service Workers stormed Pitt's main dining facility during normal operating hours to demand increased wages and benefits for non-unionized employees in Pitt's dining halls.

## **The Pittsburgh Freedom School**

After the Market Central protest, Pitt SDS's next event was the Pittsburgh Freedom School. Described as a continuation of "the Freedom School tradition from the civil rights movement," the Pittsburgh Freedom School was sponsored by Pitt SDS and scheduled to take place in University of Pittsburgh buildings.<sup>11</sup>

Ranging from workshops on the socialist history of Pittsburgh to breakout sessions on gender roles, many of the activities scheduled for the Freedom School were benign. But what made the conference controversial were plans to hold an un-permitted protest at a CMU building as part of the Freedom School and the existence of one specific workshop – "Non-Violent Direct Action Training." This workshop purported to teach participants "how to prepare and execute civil disobedience including affinity groups, blockades, lock-downs, street marches, dealing with police, and building occupation."<sup>12</sup>

When this information became public a day before the conference was scheduled to take place, the University became concerned, the group's adviser withdrew his name from the organization and Pitt SDS Manager Jordan Romanus canceled the conference.<sup>13</sup> The conference was then moved off-campus to the Thomas Merton Center.

Importantly, the Pittsburgh Freedom School and its workshop training students to take part in building occupations demonstrated that Pitt SDS is not committed to peaceful protests but instead to disruptive and potentially illegal ones.

## **Organization and Procedure of Pitt SDS**

Beyond demonstrating that Pitt SDS is committed to pursuing disruptive tactics, events surrounding the Freedom School exposed the group's lack of organization and the problems that this lack of organization causes not only for Pitt SDS but also for the University community.

At the root of this organizational problem is the fact that Pitt SDS considers itself non-hierarchical and therefore does not invest its officers with the ability to represent the group either in conversations with the media or with the University. Leadership appears to constantly shift at Pitt SDS and this grants the organization a sort of plausible deniability in its interactions with the community. For instance, in conversations with the media, Jordan Romanus represented himself as the president of the group but claimed to be the group's manager in paperwork filed with the University. Then, when Romanus canceled the Pitt SDS-sponsored Freedom School, Pitt SDS disavowed his remarks and held the event at the Merton Center.

This lack of accountability is troubling in a group that receives student money and is eligible to use University resources. The group also doesn't appear to have full control over its University passwords with Romanus claiming that a "shadow faction" comprised of non-Pitt students reserved space in a University building using Pitt SDS's password.<sup>14</sup>

This lack of organization and the group's unwillingness to follow University procedure not only allow University resources to be used by non-Pitt students and unrecognized groups, its also led

to the group being heavily influenced by non-Pitt student, Alex Lotorto. A graduate of Muhlenberg College and a national SDS organizer, Lotorto wields significant power over the group's direction – some members even thought he was their official adviser.

This is particularly worrying because Lotorto is something of a professional troublemaker. He helped organize the 2009 occupation of an NYU cafeteria, an un-permitted G-20 protest and the Pittsburgh Freedom School.

Clearly, Pitt SDS isn't organized and doesn't follow University procedure in the way that more than 300 other student organizations at Pitt do. This leads to the misuse of University resources and opens the group to negative outside influences.

### **The Language of Pitt SDS**

Importantly, Pitt SDS also doesn't operate under the same definition of the word "nonviolent" as other students and student organizations at Pitt do.

Understanding their definition is important because, in interviews with the press and in statements posted online, Pitt SDS consistently identify themselves and their activities as "nonviolent." This self-identification is key to their survival on campus as well as to their success in avoiding greater media scrutiny.

But recent group activities and interviews with group leaders reveal that the group's use of the label "nonviolent" doesn't fully describe their actions and their aspirations. For instance, in a recent interview with PittBriefly.com, national SDS trainer and Freedom School organizer Alex Lotorto said that the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle conform to his definition of nonviolence and that he considers the recent University of California tuition protests to be "socially acceptable."<sup>15</sup>

It's important to understand that both the protests in Seattle and California were notable not as peaceful instances of civil disobedience but instead as protests defined by violence against property. The tuition protests in California, for instance, involved the occupation of academic buildings and the blocking of streets. These protests culminated in an attack on the home of UC-Berkeley Chancellor Robert Birgenau where a mob of students and activists chanting "no justice, no peace" broke windows and attempted to set the house on fire.<sup>16</sup>

It is troubling that an individual heavily involved in both the regular operations of Pitt SDS and the organizing of the Pittsburgh Freedom School would identify either of the above protests as "nonviolent" or "socially acceptable." Indeed, one Pittsburgh Freedom School workshop in particular, the "Nonviolent Direct Action Training," should be recognized as building on the history of illegal protests seen in California and Seattle. Its description promises that attendees will "learn and practice how to prepare and execute civil disobedience including affinity groups, blockades, lock-downs, street marches, dealing with police, and building occupation."

Although Pitt SDS and the Freedom School identify their purpose as nonviolent, their definition of what exactly nonviolence means is radically outside of the mainstream. Thus, when Pitt SDS claims that an action will be nonviolent, the community should understand that that action could

include everything from attempting to set a home on fire to physically preventing citizens from using streets or buildings.

We should recognize that truly nonviolent protests do not use force to either destroy property or prevent members of the Pitt community from accessing roads and educational buildings. While we can all agree that a group adhering to genuine nonviolent principles can be welcomed as an active member of the University community, a group that, although claiming to embody nonviolent principles, employs violent tactics to accomplish its goals should not enjoy the support of either student tuition dollars or University resources.

### **Future Aspirations**

Continuing to hide behind the rhetoric of nonviolence and enjoy the material support of the University of Pittsburgh, Pitt SDS is moving toward the confrontational and illegal tactics of disruptive protests that define the national history of SDS.

Based on Pitt SDS's last protest in Market Central, the curriculum of the Pittsburgh Freedom School and comments made by group leaders, it's clear that the organization accepts the use of disruptive and illegal protests as means to accomplish group goals. Asked if Pitt SDS would actually be occupying buildings and blockading roads during the weekend of the Pittsburgh Freedom School, conference organizer Alex Lotorto said, "I don't think we're at the stage where that would be strategic ... yet."<sup>17</sup>

What is troubling is that a group operating on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh is contemplating the occupation of University buildings and that the only reason that they have not yet done so is that they don't believe that it is "strategic" at this moment.

### **A Case for Removal**

Undeniably, Pitt SDS is an organization that has participated in disruptive protests, organized a conference that trained others to participate in illegal protests and is open to further disrupting University activities through actions such as building occupations.

The conference prompted the Office of Student Life to examine the activities of Pitt SDS and, in spite of the fact that the group trained students to occupy University buildings and participated in a disruptive protest in a University dining facility, Director of Student Life Kenyon Bonner concluded that Pitt SDS violated no University guidelines.

Admittedly, the University's task in investigating Pitt SDS was not an easy one and there is certainly a fine line between protected speech and actions that violate University guidelines but the existence of Pitt SDS as a University-recognized group is not about their right to free speech, it's about whether or not their speech should be supported with University resources.

Looking at the University's "Guidelines for Student Organization Certification," it is clear that Pitt SDS violated at least one and possibly more of the guidelines for student organizations.

***Guideline 17: “Refrain from advocating, inciting or participating in any material interference or physical disruption of the University.”<sup>18</sup>***

On April 14<sup>th</sup>, in cooperation with Pitt Students in Solidarity with Service Workers, Pitt SDS participated in a protest in Market Central – Pitt’s main campus dining facility – that ended when police arrived on the scene. The protest was a clear disruption of University dining facilities.

Additionally, by teaching Pittsburgh Freedom School participants to use building occupations and road blockades as protest tactics, Pitt SDS clearly advocated tactics that would materially interfere with or physically disrupt the University.

***Guideline 21: “Conduct all activities in a manner consistent with the educational mission of the University.”<sup>19</sup>***

Less concrete than Guideline 17, this guideline should nonetheless be interpreted to preclude University-recognized student organizations from training students to engage in illegal protest actions such as building occupations and road blockades. It would be difficult to justify the training of individuals to break the law as an activity that is consistent with Pitt’s educational mission.

Furthermore, the actions of Pitt SDS violate several regulations in the Pitt Student Code of Conduct:

***Regulation A.7 subsection a: “Students may not hold group functions in any University area without the express advance approval of the appropriate University official per University space usage guidelines.”<sup>20</sup>***

The protest held inside Market Central clearly violates this portion of the Student Code of Conduct. Participants did not have permission to hold the protest.

***Regulation B.12: “Engages in conduct which is disorderly, lewd, or indecent; breach of peace; or aiding, abetting, or procuring another to do the same.”<sup>21</sup>***

Once again, the Market Central protest clearly falls under this regulation. The loud and disruptive conduct of the students and union members participating in the protest disturbed the peace and decorum of the University.

More importantly, by training students to occupy buildings and blockade roads, Pitt SDS directly aided individuals in the future conduct of actions that would constitute a clear breach of the peace.

As an organization whose activities violate key aspects of the University’s guidelines for student organizations, Pitt SDS should no longer exist as a University-recognized student group on campus. It is unacceptable that an organization dedicated to disrupting and training others to disrupt educational activities should receive material support from either the University or the Student Government Board.

In keeping with regulations outlined in the “Guidelines for Student Organization Certification,” University administrators should move immediately to rescind Pitt Students for a Democratic Society’s University certification.

Furthermore, it is troubling that the University, in examining Pitt SDS, found no violations of University policy. Either the University’s investigation was not thorough or it has decided that the Student Code of Conduct and Guidelines for Student Organization Certification do not apply to this activist group.

### **Conclusion**

Although Pitt SDS and its supporters are attempting to frame any criticism of the group as an attack on free speech, Pitt SDS represents a compelling threat to the educational environment of the University of Pittsburgh and the educational rights of Pitt students. What’s worse is that the anti-education actions of Pitt SDS are being supported with university resources, state education dollars and student tuition dollars.

To be clear, Pitt SDS does have a right to engage in protected speech that The Publius Foundation and other citizens of Pennsylvania find objectionable but it does not have the right to receive material support from the very institution it seeks to disrupt. It is inappropriate that an organization whose activities violate the educational mission of the University of Pittsburgh should continue to be subsidized and supported by the University.

Furthermore, it is necessary that both the University and the community in which the University is situated firmly rebut Pitt SDS’s assertion that its particular ideology gives it the right to disrupt other people’s lives and violate other people’s rights. The original SDS and its leaders who went on to found the Weather Underground demonstrated, through their actions four decades ago, the consequences of society’s failure to confront this radical ideology.

Moving forward, the University of Pittsburgh should, in keeping with student organization guidelines established by the University, rescind the certification of Pitt Students for a Democratic Society so that they can no longer reserve space in University buildings, receive support from University staff or apply for funding from the Student Government Board.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Hayden. Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Margot Adler. “1968 Columbia Protests Still Stir Passion.” *National Public Radio*. April 23, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Bernardine Dohrn. Weather Underground Declaration of a State of War. May 21, 1970.

<sup>6</sup> See Pitt Students for a Democratic Society’s official registration with the University of Pittsburgh Student Organization Resource Center.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Young, “Not a Banner Day,” *Pittsburgh City Paper*. December 17, 2009.

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- <sup>8</sup> Jacob Brown, “Two Terrorists Involved in 1974 Bombing Downtown Paid to Speak at Pitt,” *The Publius Foundation*. April 6, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Craig Smith, “Ayers Talk Kept Quiet At Pitt,” *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*. March 27, 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Macagnone, “Union organizes protest at Market Central,” *The Pitt News*. April 14, 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> Eric Langberg, “SDS Event Could Be ‘Baptism By Fire’ for Recruits,” *PittBriefly*. April 15, 2010.
- <sup>12</sup> Pittsburgh Freedom School website. <http://pghfreedomschool.wordpress.com/>.
- <sup>13</sup> Estelle Tran and Liz Navratil, “Activists allege pressure amid controversy,” *The Pitt News*. April 15, 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> See WPTS-FM’s Media Round Table interview with Jordan Romanus on April 7, 2010.
- <sup>15</sup> Langberg.
- <sup>16</sup> UPI, “Mob attacks UC-Berkley chancellor’s home,” *UPI*. December 12, 2009.
- <sup>17</sup> Langberg.
- <sup>18</sup> Student Organization Resource Center. “Guidelines for Student Organization Certification.”
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> University of Pittsburgh. “Student Code of Conduct and Judicial Procedures.” August 24, 2009.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

### **About the Author and The Publius Foundation**

Giles Howard is a junior majoring in history at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the president and founder of the Publius Foundation.

The Publius Foundation is a nonprofit student think tank dedicated to advancing personal and economic liberty in the Pittsburgh area. More information is available at [www.PubliusFoundation.com](http://www.PubliusFoundation.com)