

# Carl Davidson, Bill Ayers, and Zig Ziglar Moments

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At the end of March 2011, the annual Midwest Peace and Justice Summit was held at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. (The title of the Summit was quite a misnomer, as a good 90% of the individuals and organizations participating came only from Indiana, the vast majority of these only from Indianapolis and its environs; almost no participants came from neighboring Midwestern states.) The sponsoring student group was the reconstituted Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which is quite a different organization from the old SDS that was the leading New Left group of the 1960s, especially from 1965 until it self-destructed in 1969. But the new SDS still maintains ties of nostalgia to the old one and regularly brings in as speakers former SDS leaders from that time. So it was at this year's Summit where old SDS leader Carl Davidson held a workshop on political organizing, and old SDS leader Bill Ayers was the keynote speaker.

I myself was an activist in the old SDS from 1965-1969 on the campus of Michigan State University (MSU) in East Lansing. I personally knew Bill Ayers then, as he was based in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, and was active in SDS there as part of a radical countercultural tendency, the James Gang, which did not at all like the politics of the majority then in MSU-SDS, winter-spring 1969. Ayers and his followers regularly made the 60-mile trek to East Lansing to organize a breakaway tendency within MSU-SDS to oppose the "stodgy" majority, in which I played a leading role. (I'm quite proud to note that my activities in MSU-SDS are quite extensively chronicled in a well-regarded history of the anti-Vietnam War movement on non-elite universities, Kenneth Heineman's *Campus Wars* [1993: New York University Press].)

Later, after SDS's self-destruction, in which Bill Ayers played a major role, he became chief leader of what became the notorious Weather Underground, which tried to spark a socialist revolution in the U.S. through bombing selected buildings. I was glad to see that Ayers' politics now were much more realistic, and that he finally had come around to the position we in the majority of MSU-SDS had then, that meaningful political change comes with the masses on the radicals' side, not the radicals opposing the masses as "backward."

Carl Davidson was also a major leader in the old SDS, one of the principal theoreticians of the New Left. Both men, now in their late 60s (I'm only a couple of years younger, 64 at the time I originally wrote this, 65 now), have remained politically active over the ensuing decades. Ayers is now Distinguished Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and Davidson is a National Co-Chair of the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism (CCDS), in which I am nominally also a member (which means I sent them a check, same as my nominal membership in DSA). During the time of the heyday of the Weather Underground, the 1970s, Ayers and Davidson were bitter political opponents; now they're political buddies, and allied crucially on many issues, generally for the good.

But not entirely, as became evident during both these men's separate presentations. What both gave were good old motivational pep talks on the value of radical organizing, which was seen as a pristine good in itself, irrespective of political program. They presented what were essentially Zig Ziglar moments, as if they were selling those "progressive movement" widgets: just psych yourself

up for it, and your good attitude will make others want to buy those widgets. This is not the time to question whether those widgets have flaws in them that would make them unsatisfactory to the masses, who are potential widget buyers. Just psych yourself up to believe these are good widgets we're pushing, and that if we sell them right, people will find them valuable and want them. Radical political organizing, in essence, is the same as selling refrigerators, and even Eskimos need them.

But there are significant flaws in the left political widgets we movement activists wish to sell, and that's the rub. Our widgets simply need vast improvement, and believe it or not, the masses know this. That's why, even in this time of the continuing Great Recession, they are ignoring the left. While Bill Ayers didn't talk much about left programs in his speech (which are the very essence of those left widgets), Carl Davidson did—and what he said was that good programmatic ideas are not nearly as important as organizing what is essentially a political machine to win the passive acceptance of the people and thus garner votes. Same as the ward-heeling Daley machine in Chicago, where Davidson lived for years, and to which he constantly made semi-favorable reference.

And in this presentation, Davidson passed over the crucial flaw in the left widgets being proffered: the lack of a coherent political program for dealing with the unemployment crisis now. While Davidson talked about the importance of creating Green Jobs (which I support, as does Ayers), those kinds of jobs are off in the future. But the need for good-paying jobs that produce valuable goods and services is *now*, and without addressing the pressing economic issues that are undermining the worldwide economy *now* (and jobs is at the heart of them), which are what's really on peoples' minds, all those Zig Ziglar motivational moments are going to flop. Want to build the left? Start talking to ordinary people about the need for jobs now, and how we can concretely fight for jobs now, not off in the future. Then people will listen more when we talk about the importance of gay and women's rights, struggling against racism, and opposing neocolonial wars like the one in Afghanistan that are futile in terms of GI lives lost; dead-end in winning the "hearts and minds" of the native populace, who, like the Vietnamese over 40 years earlier, resent dying for foreign imperial ambitions; and incapable of procuring either stable empire or giving the 99% who make up the vast bulk of the U.S. population anything to hold on to or cherish except rationalizations that the 1% are somehow part of "us" while Afghans are not.

This above was originally written before Occupy Wall Street and the other Occupy movements burst out and confronted power in the most dynamic way some six months later. Yet so much of what I wrote then was only confirmed by these subsequent actions. The organized left was caught off-guard and could play no significant role in the Occupy movements, despite the political naïveté and ignorance of many of the youthful instigators and participants. While the organized left was off selling widgets, masses of people were seething underground and would break out in rebellion unbeknownst to the organized left that had long "prophesized" that such rebellion would inevitably happen, but which, when it did, caught the left off-guard and unprepared to step in and "lead" as a "vanguard." It also exposed that woeful lack of political education the left had been supposedly providing through its incessant ideological wars over "correct strategy and tactics" among its various splinters, offshoots and twigs over the course of decades that was supposed to somehow "educate" the masses, but only alienated them. New forms of struggle and new concerns emerged out of the Occupy movements that were not covered by the ideological "field manuals" of the traditional left, which left the left to *follow*, and not "lead" as the "field manuals" had predicted.

Still, the Occupy movements themselves failed to grasp how to adequately connect with the 99% whose interests they championed; they could only do this obliquely, with varying results, and could not channel the mass sympathy the Occupy movements had among working people into active, committed support. That the Occupy movements had the sympathy of the vast majority of the 99% was always apparent; not only did public opinion polls show it consistently, the "mass" organizations that relied on being passively accepted by the 99%, such as organized labor and the Democratic

Party, embraced the Occupy movements in order to try and channel that enthusiasm these movements generated. *And once again, the nature and severity of the unemployment crisis remained unaddressed*, not only by the Democrats (we could expect that), not only by organized labor (despite much rhetoric, it's done essentially nothing to reach out to the unemployed, many of whom are *former union members* whose union membership and involvement ended with their jobs), but by the youthful rank-and-file of the Occupy movements themselves, who seemed quite unaware that they, too, would someday cease being students or student hangers-on and become unemployed workers (only around 55% of recent college graduates will find jobs,\* and this among one of the more privileged strata of the 99%!). So while the Occupy movements have given the left a new, justifiable hope, they also exposed the left's failure to engage the masses, who still remained unimpressed and uninterested in the traditional left widgets so avidly pushed by the likes of Davidson and Ayers, but which were regarded as irrelevant by both the vast majority of the 99% and by the Occupy movements themselves. Not always for good and clear reasons, of course; but not always for bad and foggy ones either.

### **Note**

\* Only 56% of the graduates of the Class of 2010 had at least one job by the spring of 2011. Catherine Rampell, "Many with New College Degree Find the Job Market Humbling, *New York Times*, May 18, 2011.

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