

Interview with Portland NAM Members

Victor Cohen

The Portland chapter of the New American Movement (NAM) formed in 1977, four years after NAM held its inaugural meeting. It was a lively and nationally-renowned NAM chapter, and when the merger between NAM and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) took place, a majority of its members remained active in the new organization, and, through it, successfully engaged in regional and national politics.

The five people in this interview—**Rhys Scholes**, **Marcia Barrentine**, **Nancy Becker**, **Scott Bailey**, and **Bev Stein**—were central to the chapter's life throughout its existence. They also worked together beyond the life of the organization; Bev Stein went on to serve three terms as State Representative in the Oregon Legislature (as a Democrat), and then Chair of the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners and County Chief Executive for eight years. She credits her successful election campaigns to her experiences gained in NAM/DSA and also to her NAM/DSA cohort who supported her in these elections and beyond.

Today, Nancy Becker is chair of the Oregon Nutrition Policy Alliance (ONPA) and is the recipient of the American Dietetic Association's 2009 Award for Grassroots Excellence. Scott Bailey is the co-founder of the local chapter of Community and Parents for Public Schools and is the Regional Labor Economist for the Employment Security Department of Washington State's Labor Market and Economic Analysis branch. Marcia Barrentine is a graphic artist whose clients include writers, poets, artists, entrepreneurs, and non-profits. Rhys Scholes is the Communications Policy Director for Multnomah County Chair Ted Wheeler, and Bev Stein is the president of the Public Strategies Group, a consulting organization to government and non-governmental organizations.

This interview was conducted in Bev Stein's home on July 25, 2008.

Victor Cohen: Thanks for getting together for this interview. It's a rare opportunity to have so many NAM members together for a discussion about the organization. Let's start at the beginning. How did the NAM chapter begin?

Rhys Scholes: In August of 1976, as part of an outreach drive, the leaders of the Eugene chapter of New American Movement, which predated the Portland chapter, organized a potluck picnic in Laurelhurst Park in Portland for people to learn about NAM. It was publicized in the *Scribe*, Portland's underground newspaper, which was how everybody used to find out about these things.

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Beverly Stein: We had a study group for about a year and, at the end of it, Richard Healey came through town, and you [RS] and Katherine Pritchard and I said, "Well, we don't know if we really want to start a chapter of NAM, but let's put out a call and just see if people come." A whole bunch of people came, and so we did it.

Scholes: There were maybe twenty people to begin with, and Beverly was the key leader. Portland NAM got underway on January 6, 1977.

Cohen: Were you all from socialist backgrounds when you started the chapter?

Scholes: My mother voted for Norman Thomas for president three times. [Thomas was the six-time Socialist Party presidential candidate.] I went to high school in Decatur, Georgia, and was involved in the anti-Vietnam movement. The Socialist Workers Party and the Young Socialists Alliance were organizing primarily around Emory University, but as a high school student, I went to Socialist Workers Party events and subscribed to the *Militant*, the Socialist Workers Party newspaper. I started reading Trotskyist takes on the Vietnam War and economics in my last year in high school, 1971. That's my story.

Stein: My grandfather was a socialist, but I came to it through feminism. I went to Berkeley and was involved in the antiwar movement, but mostly as a foot soldier. After I graduated, I got involved in a feminist group that really turned out to be a socialist-feminist group. We produced a radio show for KPFA called "Un-Learning to Not Speak," and we had a study group, but then I went off to law school in Madison and I joined a group of women who studied Marxism. We would very carefully study the texts. So I was ripe when I came out to Portland.

Cohen: [To Nancy Becker] How did you get in this?

Nancy Becker: Well, I went to college in Madison, Wisconsin, and was involved in the antiwar movement, and then moved out to Portland looking for community. I remember meeting Beverly at a party. She took me for a walk and we talked about lovers and politics, and analyzed our relationships. Nobody had ever done that before.

So we became friends. And I remember being invited, after that, to a women's-only lunch. I had been out foraging for wild mushrooms and I brought them along, and they made cream of tomato soup. It was amazing, all this beautiful food and these radical women. I heard about NAM through them.

Scholes: There were several different kinds of formations, both cultural and political. It was a really dense array of consciousness raising and political study groups, very personal.

Becker: And that's what made it so attractive. It was really taking to heart the personal and the political, and there was a tremendous

amount of community. We agreed on so many things. We also learned from each other, because people came to it from all these different places.

Scott Bailey: My parents were mainstream Republicans. In fact, in 1968, Nixon passed through town, and they took me to see him. I was about [holds up hands] this close to him as he went through a room. For me, watching the Chicago demonstration, the cops beating up students – something clicked there. But it wasn't until I got out of Oregon State University and started working at this alternative social service agency called the Contact Center, which was run as a collective, that I started to move to the left. There were all these incredibly radical feminist lesbians, and so as well as doing social service, we were in little study groups reading *Opposing Liberalism* by Chairman Mao. I remember one day going out for a walk with a guy—I can't remember his name—who said, "We gotta do more than social services. We gotta do social change, too. And I think Marxism is where we need to be moving." And then the Trojan Decommissioning Alliance, TDA, came along and I said, "Well, I have to get involved with that."

Cohen: Did the TDA, the anti-nuclear power movement in Portland, predate NAM?

Stein: It was co-terminate.

Marcia Barrentine: Perhaps a little ahead. The Trojan Decommissioning Alliance came about in response to the building of the Trojan Nuclear Plant, and there were a lot of different people involved with that effort, including all of the antiwar groups, and that's how I got involved, coming out of the anti-Vietnam movement in high school and United Farmworkers-led grape boycott. I knew absolutely nothing about socialism or feminism. But when I got involved in the anti-nuclear power movement, I met all of these people.

Stein: As NAM, we did have a meeting where we decided to pursue public power. But that was after TDA.

Scholes: That was the New American Movement Energy Task Force. That proved to be one of our most successful projects, and it grew out of TDA. There was a lot of overlapping leadership between the two, TDA and NAM. But the New American Movement was thinking about energy issues in a deeper way, and so the civil disobedience actions we organized at the Trojan [Nuclear Plant] were really a cadre-fying experience. People went to jail together. And we developed our strategy in discussions with NAM energy leaders from around the country—notably, Paul Garver in the Pittsburgh chapter, who was really influential with the national Energy Task Force. That helped us think about how to broaden our class contacts and to develop a project starting from our base in the counter-culture anti-nuclear movement but then expanding into utility bill issues. We organized a group called the Ratepayers Union, and with the Trojan Decommissioning Alliance, by this time we had a long list of allies.

Bailey: The Grange.

Scholes: The Grange and the Farmers Union, old time left-wing groups. A lot of the people who we worked with had been involved in Communist Party front organizations in the 1930s and were now pretty elderly and retired. At our trial in St. Helens, the first civil disobedience trial, Martina Curl testified about how this was the second time in her life that she had been in jail; the first time was when she was picketing on the docks in the late 1930s trying to block shipments of war munitions to Japan. And she compared the nuclear power movement with support for Imperial Japan, and why capitalism didn't really have the interest of the working class at heart. So it brought together the Old Left and New Left.

Stein: It was typical of NAM. I mean, that was NAM, the communists and then the New Leftists. We were mostly a New Left chapter, but we had connections with these old commies.

This also highlights how active we were, personally. From the NAM perspective, we led double lives. We had double meetings where we would meet as NAM, and then we'd be involved in the Trojan Decommissioning Alliance or other kinds of activities. We'd have the NAM Energy Task Force one night, and then the next night we'd go to the Public Power Coalition meeting.

Bailey: "Meeting hotline. Can I help you?" "I don't have a meeting tonight." "Okay. There's the Friends of Foreign Fish at the library." (all laugh) "Thank you so much."

Becker: And then we'd have parties together.

Stein: We were a social network. [all talking, laughing]

Barrentine: We did a lot of street theater and music as well. We had the People's Power Players.

Stein: The People's Power Players came out of the grant I wrote out of Legal Aid. The federal government funded that one.

Scholes: The first iteration of that was TDA Live, a show where we performed at large rallies specifically around the nuclear power themes.

Barrentine: I was in this anti-nuke folk band called the Lonesome Neutron Band. [all laugh] It was the band for TDA Live. Part of what we did was fun. We found out how to poke fun of things and make political points in an entertaining way. We had elaborate costumes, songs, scripts, news shows—I mean ridiculous stuff.

Becker: Hysterical skits.

Stein: Remember we made those cooling tower costumes? We'd go downtown wearing cooling towers.

Scholes: When we presented a petition to the utility, we would also do street theater and direct action demonstrations. We'd bring along the cooling towers and do a skit, and it would help us get on TV. Our cooling tower costumes got us on all of the TV news stations, so we were feeling pretty good about our ability to take a fairly radical message and drive it out into living rooms of average people. We were weird enough, and the competition for TV news space was thin enough that we could have some success. It made a lot of that work much more valuable. We were able to get mainstream media coverage much more easily than anybody who's organizing today.

Barrentine: Not that we knew what they thought when they turned on their TVs and saw nuclear power plants tootling down the street. [all laughing]

Scholes: But we struggled with that. That's why we moved from organizing around nuclear power to organizing around people's utility bills, because that was how we were going to go mainstream. And we got really intent about providing childcare for our meetings, because we only had a few members who were actually parents, but we wanted to make sure we were able to include everyone.

Cohen: In all that activity around TDA, you were participating not as a cadre of NAM members trying to recruit people, but as a part of the anti-nuclear movement? I was reading one of your speeches, Beverly, that you gave at a NAM national convention, and you said there was some conflict between NAM and TDA, because people perceived NAM in some ways as a group that was out for itself. Did working as NAM within that coalition create tensions?

Stein: Oh, God, yes. Many people in TDA, from the Grange and the Farmers Union in particular, were quite a bit older than we were, and viewed us as "the new people" on the scene.

Barrentine: There was a feeling that we weren't entirely trustworthy. They felt, "Well, are you really going to get behind this effort, or is this just a way to build NAM?" To be fair, these were people for whom this was their life's work.

Scholes: And they personally experienced, as organizers, the Communist Party's work within front organizations. So for them it was a real question of what we were, and were we behaving in a way they had seen different factions behave, particularly in the labor unions, but also in other kinds of work. In a way we were, and in a way we weren't. We were really principled about this—we had hours and hours of discussion on these questions—this was the feminist part of our practice. We were trying to respect the diversity of different folks, and struggling with class issues, and our own class identity, and what was the class identity of those we worked with.

Stein: Among some of them, the fact that we were out-front democratic socialists, and used that word, was just attracting trouble. But

we were promoting socialism, and tried to be very proud of saying, “Yeah, I’m with the New American Movement, a democratic socialist organization.”

Scholes: It was a weird thing, the fact that “socialist” wasn’t in the name, but not necessarily in a bad way. I remember in 1980, I was representing Portland NAM on the Citizen Labor Energy Coalition to stop big oil, which we were real enthusiastic about. I was sitting at a table with guys from the Carpenters’ Union and the Machinists’ Union, and we’re talking about the coalition, and the New American Movement is right in there and they were really glad to have us. But the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee was also there, and the labor folks were a little concerned that those people were too radical. I knew that they [DSOC] were a lot less radical than NAM, but the funny thing is that we were more popular because we didn’t have the word “socialism” in our name. (all laugh) I believe that that actually helped us a lot in our organizing. People got to know us not through a stereotype, but as “the New American Movement,” which really had a generic ring to it.

Barrentine: But to go back to your earlier question—about how NAM and TDA worked together, as well as how NAM formed—we were involved with all this stuff, and also building a chapter of NAM at the same time. As we got to know people, and as they worked with us, we had these little adventures together, and through this, more and more people would join. But it’s not as though there was a NAM cadre sitting on the outside somewhere looking at this movement and saying, “We need to get in there and recruit.”

Stein: We were consciously low key about recruitment. But we were always conscious that we were building an organization, because we were building a movement for socialism.

Cohen: What were the NAM meetings like?

Bailey: They took place on the third floor of Centenary-Wilbur, which was a church.

Stein: It had a lot of lefty groups in it.

Scholes: [Holds up another document] I have an agenda from one of our meetings here, and I note that we spent ten minutes on a potluck evaluation. [all laugh] I’m really intrigued about whether we discussed the attendance or the food. [all laugh] In terms of practice, though, we went back and forth between similar models—a Philadelphia Movement for a New Society, a Quaker model of self-evaluation that had influenced us, and a more Marxist criticism, self-criticism.

Stein: [Reading] This meeting started at seven-thirty and went ‘til ten o’clock, and that was not unusual.

Scholes: Sometimes we'd have three meetings a night.

Cohen: What year was this?

Becker: '79.

Cohen: At that point, did all of you feel the movement for socialism seemed possible?

Stein: Yes.

Scholes: Oh, yeah.

Becker: Absolutely.

Bailey: We also had a lot to learn about socialism at the same time, which was part of the reason for the Gramsci school, and National [NAM] coming down with "Every Member a Marxist." We called ourselves socialists, but I think we had a pretty fuzzy idea of what that meant. So Jim Shoch, from National, sent us the booklets that you had to have the magnifying glasses to read that were very thick, with very tiny mimeographed articles from various lefty journals on Marxism. They wanted to get us all up on at least a basic level about talking about what socialism meant as a movement.

Scholes: I went to three or four New American Movement conventions, and they were extremely helpful and inspiring. We could talk about the practical work we were doing in the field, and the problems we were facing, and go to workshops with people who were doing very similar work in other communities.

Over the years I've had the opportunity to go to many conventions and trainings, and the NAM conventions in retrospect were just amazing. It was through discussions with people at conventions that led us to move, first to utility rate work and then to the public power movement, and also to start the Red Rose School. We heard that these were things that had worked in other communities, and we made the assessment that they would work in our community. We had enough people, activists and a periphery of radicals that we could gather them all together and make projects happen. In both cases—the public power project, and the socialist school—they really worked. The Red Rose School lasted for a long time.

Stein: For a long, long time after NAM.

Scholes: There's organizing that's going on today that benefits from the classes people had at the Red Rose School. Things spun off and came and went because of that work.

Becker: Like the New Jewish Agenda, which came out of the Red Rose School and became a chapter here. And that was in '80 or '81. Today it's an important movement in Portland. But I want to emphasize that this point Rhys makes—the periphery was important to our

work. Not everybody in Portland around our circle joined NAM on the dotted line, but people looked to NAM for leadership on how to do things, and how to organize.

Cohen: One of the most interesting things about Portland NAM is that it gets going late, by comparison to other chapters, many of which begin in '72, right when NAM nationwide gets up and running.

Becker: Well, there was a huge influx of immigration to Portland in '75 and '76. Thousands of people came here.

Stein: That picnic where we all met? Everyone there, practically, was new to Portland.

Scholes: Some of us chose Oregon very intentionally because of political developments that had been going on here. Oregon was a place where stuff was happening in 1976. There was a nuclear safeguards measure on the ballot. Tom McCall [a Republican known for his environmentalism and drive to make the beaches in Oregon publically-owned] had been the governor.

Also, early in 1976, Newsweek came out with its first ever ranking of cities across the United States as far as what were good and bad places to live. I lived in Memphis. It was ranked at the bottom, and Portland was ranked number one, the most livable city.

Barrentine: It was also an inexpensive place to live. You could get very cheap rent, which meant that you didn't necessarily have to have a job, and could figure out a way to be a full-time organizer.

Scholes: You could be semi-employed.

Becker: You could have a CETA [Comprehensive Education and Training Act] grant.

Bailey: I lived off CETA for four or five years. There were a ton of nonprofits doing progressive political work, getting real cash from CETA. And we were getting jobs through that.

Scholes: I think also it's important that within Portland, there was a very vigorous left culture that had many different expressions. The same year that we were formed, the RCP [Revolutionary Communist Party] was doing big-time organizing. We had an October League, a little Spartacist League and a pretty active Socialist Workers Party.

Stein: There was also a very big feminist culture.

Scholes: For somebody who had progressive politics, you just looked at what you could do every night of the week in Portland, and it was an irresistible place to be.

Cohen: It sounds like the NAM chapter remained strong after 1980, which is also unusual.

Scholes: One of the things that we did that really boosted us into the eighties was our big campaign, with a very broad coalition, for public ownership and control of the electric utilities. We were pretty cocky in early 1980, contesting for public ownership and control of the utilities, so we thought, “Boy, people want to come and do stuff.” At the NAM convention that year, we recruited people to come to Portland, on what I always thought of as the United Farm Workers model, where we said we’ll pay you five dollars a week and give you room and board, and you’ll work eighty hours a week. We brought four or five people out.

Stein: I just have to interrupt here. [reading a matchbook] “Crime pays; ask Mobil Oil. Portland chapter New American Movement,” with our address, and then, “The point is to change the world. KM” [all laugh]

Cohen: I didn’t know NAM had its own matchbooks.

Scholes: Yeah, we sold them at conventions. We had two slogans. The other one was “fan the flames of discontent.”

Stein: But anyway—two of the people we brought out from the convention remained here and continued to do various things, and one has become one of the most significant leaders in the environmental movement, behind the scenes. At the national level we were considered a really strong chapter, so people were attracted to come and we could make a case for coming to visit.

Scholes: We put several up at this weird house on Union Avenue where several of us lived. [all laughing]

Barrentine: It was really cheap, [all laugh] and it had beautiful architectural bones. But there was a reason it was so cheap. We’d be upstairs asleep, and we’d come down the next morning and the rug is gone, the television’s gone. [all laugh] We moved after that.

Scholes: At that time, 1980, we also had a really big renewable resource program, Article 11D, that we were going to get on the ballot. And that looked really good. Then a volcano erupted near to our city—

Stein: Mt. St. Helens.

Scholes: And the city was blanketed with ash. You couldn’t go outside because you had to wear a mask. We fell a few thousand signatures short of getting our renewable energy measure on the ballot because of that.

Stein: I remember collecting them with a mask. [laughs]

Scholes: We got 44 percent of the vote in the public ownership measure, which was really pretty good because the utilities spent millions and millions of dollars. But it was the same election that Ronald Reagan won, and it was a bummer. So I feel like we really built to 1980, and then never quite matched that level of activity or optimism.

Cohen: How big was the NAM chapter at its most active?

Scholes: [Holding up a list] This says twenty-six, and that's 1980.

Cohen: That's around the time NAM and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee [DSOC] begin to talk about merging. Portland had an active DSOC chapter, right?

Stein: Right.

Scholes: Basically, DSOC was the spine of the Democratic Party here. A group of people that had come out of the Bobby Kennedy campaign were the leadership of the organization.

Stein: We were still very different, in the typical ways. Unlike DSOC, we didn't work on campaigns, for the most part, until we started getting closer to them. We did do ballot measures, though.

Scholes: We liked ballot measures. (all talking, laughing) I still like ballot measures.

Barrentine: But now you can pay people to gather signatures. If you have the money, you can get your issues on the ballot. At the time that we were doing it, you had to get volunteers to get out there and get those signatures. We loved it, because we obviously had a lot of energy. [all laugh] You could get your issues out there, talk to people and get them to meetings, and if you could get enough feet on the street, then the entire state would vote on your issue. It was amazing.

Scholes: We did a lot of that, especially over public power. In later years, I realized what a benefit that was to us. One of the things, particularly in the coalition building work, is you get a number of fake leaders, people who talk like they're doing stuff but they're not really doing anything. But when you have signature collection as part of your organizing plan, it gives you a metric to collectively hold yourself accountable and find out whether you're actually doing it. So we quickly sorted out who was doing stuff and who wasn't, and the way we really gained mutual credibility with the Grange and the Farmers Union and the people who had been part of the left in Oregon in the 1930s was, we were collecting signatures. And you know what? They were collecting signatures, too. And the people who were doing stuff managed to recognize each other, and that helped us work together and build confidence.

Cohen: It would seem, then, that in some ways, NAM and DSOC weren't as far apart in Portland as they were in other cities. What did people think of the merger between NAM and DSOC?

Stein: We were for the merger pretty early.

Scholes: Their work was complementary to ours, and we worked in coalition with them. They were fine folk.

Stein: We weren't totally opposed to working electoral politics.

Becker: It just wasn't the focus. Although, I remember when the merger started, everybody was really worried that we were going to be co-opted and that it was potentially a dangerous thing.

Bailey: Some people left.

Becker: And then other people said that this is a potentially *really* powerful thing.

Stein: It was at that point that we adopted the inside-outside strategy: working inside the Democratic Party, but also outside, building a movement. So we didn't abandon that commitment to building a movement.

Becker: There were some personality conflicts. I remember the DSOC folks looked at NAM like we were these wild people. There was a skit, a People's Power Players skit—[laughs]—I was thinking about this as I was driving here today. It was supposed to be DSOC's view of a NAM meeting. The actor had a bomb. [all laugh] It was entitled "DSOC's Nightmare." [all laugh]

Scholes: That was "The Janis Joplin Chapter" skit.

Barrentine: NAM—at least NAM in Portland here—was at its roots very counter-cultural.

Stein: It had come out of the feminist movement.

Barrentine: And not just the academic feminist movement but –

Becker: "Street" feminists.

Barrentine: And the DSOC people were far more just sort of –

Stein: Regular, mainstream—and they took pride in that because they saw themselves as being part of real people.

Scholes: But they were socialists, certainly.

Barrentine: We had to get comfortable with each other because we thought maybe they weren't going to be any fun, and maybe they

were going to have us assimilated into the Democratic Party, and then we wouldn't be getting the signatures and creating the grass-roots movement. And I think they thought we could very easily make them and their efforts seem less legitimate, because we were the people that had been walking around the streets wearing cooling towers. [all laugh] We had to work this out.

Bailey: I remember our first joint meeting, and everybody was nervous and looking around. And at the end of the meeting, Dick Celsi (a DSOC member) raised his hand and said, "Do any of you guys play bridge?" And [in NAM] we had this long-standing Sunday night socialist bridge club, and we said, "Well, sure." And that was our first joint project, and something of an icebreaker as well.

Cohen: It sounds like the formation of DSA, at least for Portland NAM, was a good one. Is that correct?

Stein: The way we merged was to make Bill Thomas and I co-chairs of the DSA chapter. Of course, for NAM people, some of the pizzazz around the merger was that DSOC also held people like Michael Harrington, Ron Dellums and William Winpisinger.

Scholes: NAM, though, had its own famous members, like Barbara Erhenreich, who always drew really well. We were able to book her into appearances at Lewis and Clark and Reed College, and a morning show on the radio. Michael Lerner was also important. We read his material. In fact, we had to, since *The Discussion Bulletin* [NAM's internal journal] was always filled with people refuting various elements of Michael Lerner. There was this whole disputational group of Marxist university professors who were always fighting on the edge of NAM about different things, and different caucuses would come up. We weren't terribly involved.

Stein: One thing that distinguished us from DSOC, I suspect, is that we spent quite a bit of time in study. That was an important part of our whole NAM culture, and that was why we had another meeting every week, because you'd go to some kind of study group. I don't think DSOC folks did that. We were very theory based, and extremely conscious of what we were trying to figure out.

Scholes: Part of it was that one Mao Tse-tung essay on theory and practice. I think we were really influenced by Maoist thought on theory and practice.

Bailey: [Singing] "Oh, Marx and Engels always taught that, under concentration, an abstract intellectual thought without its application is always bad, never is"—no, wait. I was on a roll there.

Becker: Unbelievable!

Bailey: Or—"it's never good and always"—

Scholes: “And always is a source of great confusion!”

Bailey: “A source of great confusion.” [all singing] “It only helps the bourgeoisie and not the revolution. That is why we always try to keep a clear relation between the statement of the thought and its practical application.” [laughing]

Cohen: Where would you guys sing these songs, or do the skits?

Bailey: We’d sing them at meetings.

Scholes: With the *Little Red Song Book*.

Stein: At NAM conventions they would always sing, and we always played the “Internationale” at the end of the convention.

Scholes: And stood on our chairs and held up our fists.

Stein: Right. I mean, this was the NAM convention—we were revolutionary socialist-feminists.

Scholes: Those were very transformative experiences.

Cohen: Can you explain that, Rhys, what you mean by transformative?

Scholes: In this work, there are a few times when people commit to an experience out of deeply held values, and at the same time, have the experience that other people also hold those values deeply. This is the experience of doing civil disobedience, for example. When we were going to get arrested, we operated like an affinity group—by consensus, very honestly, and according to the idea that we’re each making a decision to put ourselves at risk, but because we’re depending on each other, we’re going to have an unusually strong relationship. At a lower level, just marching in the street with ten thousand people gives you a similar feeling; you experience yourself as being more powerful because you’re part of a collective.

I’m not an expert on the whole neurological thing, but when you’re singing with a group of people, their voices are echoing in your head with your voice, and you’re having a neurological experience of solidarity—when you feel that, it’s powerful, and you carry it forward.

And we had a series of those experiences. Sometimes it was listening to speeches, where you hear somebody say something that brings things together, or the experiences we were having in our practice. At conventions, we would hear the theory applied, and other people’s practice, and we could sense the vision of, “They’re doing that in Pittsburgh, they’re doing this in L.A., they’re doing this in Chicago, and it’s welling up. We really have the possibility of achieving fundamental change.” And that just gives you goose bumps, and tremendously motivates you.

Bailey: You feel that you’re part of history.

Stein: That's why having a national organization was really important. We could have all come together, and we probably would have, in different forms. I mean, we were all activists of various sorts. But the fact that we belonged to a national organization that was promoting a national movement made us feel like we were able to really change the world. That was very important. It was not that we were just out here doing our thing; we really related to the national organization.

Barrentine: I think, going back for a second to the Gramsci study group, for me what resonated was the whole concept of hegemony, that you don't have to live in a totalitarian state in order for there to be oppression. There can be oppression everywhere because we all believe simply that what is normal is therefore what is right. It's how we grew up, so who even thinks about it? When you have those experiences of really feeling you can make change, then you have to look both at yourself and at the society as a whole, and say, "Well, what obstacles are in the way of change, and what concepts have we bought into, to the point where nobody has to keep us down because we'll do it for them?" Gramsci was fascinating to us, just fascinating.

Stein: We were very into the cultural aspects of this movement.

Scholes: Gramsci's analysis—what Marcia was talking about, the whole world of hegemony—we experienced that, particularly working around nuclear power and the issue of electricity. Who could argue with the idea that nuclear power would give you more electricity? It's great! What could be wrong? And we're saying, "No, wait a minute . . ."

Becker: "Too cheap to meter!"

Bailey: "Better living through technology."

Scholes: You don't get what we were doing without the sixties as the place that the ideas started coming from. We were of that generation, but we were trying to build that analysis into a critique of everyday life.

Becker: And that's the feminist part, not making the same mistakes as the movement did in the sixties with women. That was part of our problem with DSOC. There was lip service to the idea—everybody wanted equal pay for equal work. But some of the more profound feminist pieces that we really embraced I think were just a little bit too much for them.

Scholes: We worked with all these people who were oriented towards reform, and we were about revolution.

Becker: It's really true. We were going to be other kinds of people and live other kinds of lives, and we had the possibility of escaping

the shackles of where we were born. We were going to have a personal revolution.

Scholes: Right. And win it at the ballot box.

Becker: We were going to change relationships.

Barrentine: Right. Cultural revolution with a small "c."

Scholes: In a lot of ways, we were winning. There was a liberal trend in Portland that was triumphing over the previous kind of machine politics. We weren't really supportive of that, but it created a room for us to be further out, and created our sense of possibility. We saw things changing. We believed that if this much is possible, we can just push it forward. And we definitely saw a lot of the old orthodoxy falling away.

Building into about 1980, we had a collective momentum, and the merger prolonged it because it created a critical mass of two groups. Or in the case of the Red Rose School, the work totally flowed into the project, and the project kept going for a long time. But I think if you trace the activists, you'd find a dispersal, largely to other kinds of progressive causes and to other sorts of things.

Cohen: What do you make of that shift by activists away from a movement to organize for socialism? Why don't you think you attracted more people, in Portland, as the '80s went on? Where was the next generation that would have helped to grow DSA?

Bailey: There's two related things to say about that. First, the word "*socialism*" is just a real barrier for people. Second, we had a hard time developing a good, compelling vision of what socialism could be. I remember one of the later times Michael Harrington came to town to talk about DSA's recent economic plan. We were debating it at the time and saying, "You know, we're socialists and the best thing we can do is talk about improving the railroad system in this country?" There's got to be something more to socialism than that, but I could never articulate it, for myself. And I don't think the organization ever really could.

And third, we couldn't articulate anything that was a practical, next step for a progressive movement to make, that I understood, or could make appealing to a person on the street. That, for me, was important. If I call myself a socialist and I can't figure out what that means except to be a social democrat, why am I holding onto this word that really pushes people away?

Stein: Another part of the answer to your question is the political repression that started up once Reagan came into office. In 1980, I led a legal team defending people doing civil disobedience at the Trojan Nuclear Plant out of Legal Aid, the local Legal Services program. But in '80, when Reagan got elected, he attacked all kinds of organizing that came out of Legal Services, so I quit because I knew what I was doing was going to get them in trouble. That kind of sup-

port, both for our work, and through our work, to the community, was cut away.

Scholes: We tried to overcome that shift to single-issue projects. We were all involved in the Alliance for Social Change, which was a great but failed effort at left unity, and that was followed by the Oregon Alliance for Progressive Policy, which was a second failed attempt at left unity. The collapse of both of those things relates to part of what Scott said just now, that there was an inability to identify projects that unify and make sense to everybody, and in doing so, create a critical mass of organizers. Part of my life story, though, is that the leadership experience I got in the New American Movement qualified me to get jobs in various different kinds of movement organizations, jobs that demanded eighty hours a week. By 1987 I was working for Service Employees International Union, Local 503, and I was working seventy or eighty hours a week. There wasn't any time to do anything other than work for the union.

Bailey: When I had my first child in '89, I said that's it. And I stopped doing anything political, basically. I remember, sort of with relief, saying, "This is my last meeting. (laughs) And I'm doing this because I'm having a child." So I didn't do anything in politics except for Bev's campaign [for state legislature], which was actually a pretty serious project. That time, I had child in a backpack, going door-to-door, which was great. You're not going to tell somebody to buzz off who has a baby with them. (all laugh)

Stein: That's what makes me think that we still had an active chapter when I ran for the legislature, because we consciously were saying, "Beverly looks like someone who can actually pull it off, so let's do it." I mean, I was a nobody. Everyone thought, "She'll never win, she's a socialist." But all my friends were organizers, and we ran the best community-based campaign that anyone had ever seen at that point.

Cohen: And what year was that?

Stein: In '88 we ran the campaign, and I took office in '89.

Cohen: And that's when DSA ceases to be an active force in Portland?

Stein: I think that's right, but I don't think it was directly related to me. Though I didn't have my energy in there anymore either. Just like Scott and Rhys mentioned, many of us went on to other things about that time.

Cohen: Bev, what made you decide to go into the legislature at that time?

Stein: Well, part of it was this inside-outside strategy. As we moved towards working with the Democratic Party, we saw electoral poli-

tics as being a more effective way to focus our energy. But I always talked about, even then, creating an inside-outside movement. When I was in office, I would help organize people *outside*, to organize against me, or to support what I was doing. But NAM carried on long after that. When I ran for governor, I would have people coming up to me all over the state from other NAM chapters, saying, "I remember you from NAM," and they would be automatically on board. There was a Eugene chapter, there was Corvallis chapter, one in Klamath Falls, and another in Albany.

Barrentine: If you're going to be a part of the Democratic Party, why not actually be in a decision-making position, whether you're in your state legislature or anywhere else, so you can advocate for a progressive agenda in a way that more people will actually hear you?

Cohen: Bev, were you running as a socialist during your campaign for state legislature?

Stein: No, as a democrat in the Democratic Party.

Cohen: This is a general question to everyone, though it relates to Bev's campaign for state legislature. How do you feel about the future for socialism? Socialist feminism?

Stein: I hold a lot of the values that I held as a socialist, and I still have the same outrage at inequalities, but I don't talk about socialism anymore. It just seems to be something that people don't get, and the world's changed.

Scholes: I think about it a lot, and I hold lots of those values. And I would probably say that I'm still a socialist. But I think that there's a lot that's going on in politics today that's socialistic. The discussion on national healthcare is now once again moving in a more socialistic direction. The movement for single payer healthcare is growing again.

Cohen: What about the longer conversation that socialism brings up, about the interconnection of all these things, like health care, and feminism and disarmament?

Bailey: To me, it's the difference between socialism and social democracy. The heart of socialism is public control over investment, and that's nowhere near anybody's agenda.

Stein: Part of the move away from socialism happened because a lot of our heroes turned out not to be heroes. I mean, we now know that Mao killed millions of people, Stalin killed millions of people. Some of the platforms of the people were discredited. I thought Mao was great, and I read all those books about China, and I thought that was amazing.

Becker: How many times have we said “turn adversity to advantage”? [laughs]

Barrentine: We never liked Stalin. [all talking, laughing]

Becker: We weren’t that crazy about Mao, either. [all talking, laughing]

Bailey: We were forgiving of Lenin.

Becker: That’s why Gramsci was so appealing, because he never was the head of state, he was just a writer.

Stein: If you formed a new organization now called the New American Movement, you’d probably have some different kind of policies, and you’d draw on different thinkers.

Scholes: I view the New American Movement as an organization that actually came close to maximizing its potential in a window of objective conditions that allowed an organization like that to flourish, and failed not because of its own problems, although it certainly had problems, but because the window of opportunity closed.

Becker: The objective conditions changed.

Cohen: Marcia, you’ve been quiet—do you have any comments on this question?

Barrentine: Well, I just was thinking, I’ve had some very interesting conversations with people, because I now live with my family in Milwaukie, Oregon, just south of Portland, and it’s a whole different demographic. Our schools have some of the poorest families around, and there are lots of socially conservative Republican Christians. But they like me well enough because I love the kids, and I get in there and do the hard work with them.

People will ask me about how I feel about politics, and there’s been a few times when I’ve said, “Well, actually, I have a little bit of a democratic-socialist-type point of view.” And they’ll say, “Well, what do you mean by that?” The best description I ever read, recently, was in a Barbara Kingsolver book; she talks about how democracy is a fair way of making decisions for everybody, and socialism is a fair way of splitting up the economy so that it’s shared by everybody. So democratic socialism is like a democratic way of making decisions of what to do with the economy. I tell people that’s where I’m coming from. And then we talk about something else. [all laugh]

Then I always fell compelled to say, “And you know, it’s never really been tried before, but I’m still hopeful.” [laughs] Then we go on and we talk about whatever we’re working on.