

### THE SOCIALIST ORGANIZING COMMITTEE, ORANGE COUNTY: WHY WE ARE LEAVING NAM

The Socialist Organizing Committee of Orange County, formerly the Orange County Chapter of the New American Movement, has decided to become an independent collective. We have been in existence for more than eight months; our study and practice during this period have moved us into sharpening contradiction with the main direction of NAM. To summarize the nature of this contradiction, first, we have come to understand that the difficult and complex process of building a mass-based genuinely democratic centralist communist party in this country is a major priority for all Marxists, and we are struggling to make this understanding a part of our practice. Despite a formal national commitment on the part of NAM to this perspective (*Resolution on Party Building*, 1974 convention), in our experience neither the theoretical nor practical aspects of party building are ever discussed. And there is no reason to believe that NAM is moving in a direction that would facilitate the emergence of a new workers' party. The opposite seems to be the case: we feel that NAM is sinking deeper into the mire of social democracy as evidenced most clearly in California by the decision of at least one chapter to endorse Tom Hayden, and by the decision at the March 20-21 California Conference making electoral work a major priority and encouraging participation in the "left wing" of the Democratic Party.

Second, we have come to the position that communist organizations must expand their base in the working class, primarily by workplace and trade union organizing, secondarily by community organizing. In Orange County we have several members active in trade unions and we are building or enlarging a number of committees and coalitions involved in workplace organizing, strike support, and anti-repression and community struggles where we can contact and make efforts to recruit workers. NAM, by and large--with the exception of a few individuals working virtually on their own--refuses to commit itself practically to this course; indeed refuses to face the overwhelming petty bourgeois nature of its current social composition (which must be faced, not to engage in self-castigation, but to do something about it.) The ideological cover for this refusal is the extremely broad content given to the "extended working class" theory--including middle management, state managerial bureaucrats and all manner of professionals as a part of the proletariat--and the notion that no sector of the working class has particular strategic importance. Therefore, many NAM members feel justified in pursuing comfortable petty bourgeois lives and doing a little agitation "where they are" on the side, without strategic coordination. Given these attitudes, NAM is and will remain isolated from the working class.

To be clear: we are not against organizing among progressive sectors of the petty bourgeoisie. Our own work includes organizing students and united-front activity with other petty bourgeois forces in the community. Our perspective is that a class alliance between sectors of the petty bourgeoisie and the working class--with the working class in the lead--is a necessity for revolution in the U.S. Our objection is not that the membership of NAM is largely of petty bourgeois origins, for this is true of most of the U.S. Left today, including ourselves. Our objection is that NAM, by and large, refuses to face this fact or struggle to reorient its practice toward the working class.

Third, we have come to believe that mass political practice must take the principal form of building independent mass movements of the working class and its allies, as we are struggling to do by helping build independent anti-repression, strike support and community committees, plus taking part in the trade union movement. This is the only way that the mass of the people will come to understand the tremendous power that independent organization brings--an understanding that bourgeois society constantly seeks to obscure. An important trend in NAM, however, is toward increasing involvement with bourgeois political institutions and channels that exist to divert the masses from independent political struggle. The clearest symptom of this is, again, the decision of California NAM to sponsor ties with the Democratic Party, the continuing fascination with the California Democratic Council, and the growing interest in the contemporary Italian and French Communist Parties (which are clearly revisionist in a Second International sense) as models.

Fourth, we have found that it is necessary to study dialectical and historical materialism--that is Marxism-Leninism--as a means of advancing our political practice. The vast majority of the NAM chapters we have encountered have *no* study. A general contempt for the role of theory permeates NAM, as evidenced by sentiments that it is necessary to be "open to all arenas of class struggle" (without study or discrimination) as well as a general contempt for the relationship between theory and practice, as evidenced by the lack of study or implementation of NAM's own strategy documents. NAM people see their anti-theoretical attitude as open, creative and "anti-sectarian." We have come to see it as pragmatism.

Finally, we have come to believe that the struggles against racism and sexism must permeate all areas of political work, and that these struggles must be prosecuted *strategically* from a Marxist perspective--they must be located in the context of the class struggle. Admittedly this is very difficult; theoretical clarity on these questions--the basis for strategy--is at a low level on the U.S. Left. The task then is to coordinate and sum up practice, while simultaneously studying the problem historically and analytically. This is the approach we are attempting to implement, although we feel self-critical about the weakness of our study of racism and sexism.

We feel that our approach is sharply divergent from that of NAM. In the main, NAM does put forth anti-racist and anti-sexist lines. Also, we feel that practice in these areas does exist to some extent in NAM. But the practice is uncoordinated--often the special interest of individuals or small groups--and summing up this practice (thereby advancing theory) seems largely absent. Systematic study and debate is all but ignored. Internal struggle around these questions--like all real internal struggle--is largely excluded from NAM's organizational life. Internal practice usually appears in NAM as ritual (women's and men's caucuses in the margins of conferences) or bureaucratically conceived affirmative action (quotas of women in leadership), which can be important as a secondary facet of thoroughgoing struggle, but an act of self-delusion on its own. Our feeling is that the dominant approach to the struggle against sexism and racism in NAM (as always, with exceptions) promotes moralism and liberalism--not communist practice.

We realize that our perceptions of the dominant trends in NAM are colored largely by our experience with the organization in California, though there are indications that these trends dominate nation-wide. The fact that it is so difficult to learn what is really happening at the rank and file level of NAM in general is symptomatic of the atomization and disorganization present. In fact, most of the decisions within NAM and most of the work of the organization seem to be the province of a few individuals. Real democracy--in which political power and initiative are widely disseminated and subject to a dialectic between theory and practice, leaders and actives--is impossible under such conditions.

During our association with NAM we took seriously our obligation to engage in ideological struggle within the organization. Our attempts to advance our political positions were fruitless, in part because of the low level of thoroughgoing political commitment--the well-known NAM "malaise"--that makes political struggle of little importance to many of the members.

The guidance and aid that we received from NAM--including the NAM newspaper--have had no relevance to our practice. Although we feel the need to be part of a national organization, we have come to realize that by staying in NAM we would waste more energies than we can afford, to little effect. By leaving we sacrifice little in the way of national aid and direction.

We understand that what we have called the dominant trend of NAM is not the only one. We know that there are other trends in NAM that are moving in what we see as a more positive direction. Our judgment is that the dominant trend is increasingly prevalent, and the others increasingly isolated. And, again, there is little we can do to affect this process. The continuing fragmentation of the Left in this country is a tragic situation, but false unity with little agreement on principles and practice--our situation relative to NAM--neither advances the struggle for socialism, nor promotes the type of Left solidarity needed to build the foundations of a new communist party.

The Socialist Organizing Committee knows itself to be a small, young formation which has limited experience of the class struggle and has not yet studied many important questions. We are aware of areas in which we need to improve and are struggling to do so. We believe that the widest possible principled unity between Left forces is desirable; we therefore seek to participate in democratically organized united fronts that advance the struggles against imperialism, racism and sexism--including united fronts in which NAM or NAM chapters may be represented. Furthermore, we wish to make contact and open correspondence with any political formations that share our general outlook.

April 1976

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