

The following is intended as an explanation and elaboration of "theses 45-60" in the political program for NAM, published in New American Movement newspaper, #6.

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Pivotal to the development of a revolutionary socialist movement in the United States is the outcome of the shifts of consciousness that are now occurring among the masses of "middle America." The millions of men and women who have long been integrated into the essential myths of the society by the promise of future happiness in an ever more affluent nation are now uncertain of their place in society and their future. Paul Rosenstein's article in the last issue is correct to discount glib rhetoric about the "revolutionary fervor" of American workers. Such rhetoric is more than useless, for it obscures the tasks required of socialists in the present. The New American Movement in particular has a vital opportunity to participate in the creation of a mass movement of Americans that clarifies the class nature of the society and in so doing, builds the base of a socialist movement for the transformation of the nation. Such movement-building must shun the rhetorical moralism of the new left and do the concrete work of organizing that makes a new vision of the future, and new forms of relationships, possible. It must transcend the limitations of single institution organizing (whether the workplace, the school, the hospital, or counterinstitutions) and seek instead to unite struggles of different constituencies around common programs against common enemies. And it must sharpen the class nature of conflict by demanding that money and control be wrested from the ruling class, not transferred from one sector of the working class to another. It is undeniable that we are witnessing a major transition in the country. How the left responds will determine the political contours of America for decades to come.

The starting point for a socialist strategy must be some sense of the mood of the American people, an awareness of the doubts and defensiveness that millions of people now experience. The economic squeeze that traps blue and middle level workers is well documented: in 1968, the median family income of \$8,632 was more than \$1,000 less than the government defined moderate income level for a family of four. And since the mid-sixties, real wages have declined under the impact of rising prices and heavy taxation. Moreover, the relative positions of most Americans has declined for over two decades in comparison with the position of the ruling class. According to conservative calculations, the top 1% of the nation, which owned 21% of the wealth in 1949, owned 33.3% of the wealth in 1962, and may own over 36% now.

The current wage price freeze reflects the limitations on the power of "pace-setting" industries to "buy off" workers with wage increases tied to productivity; the competitive disadvantage experienced by American corporations in the world market threatens the edifice of social peace that has been built on "labor's fair share" of an ever expanding material "pie."

But the material hardships felt by most Americans form only the framework for the current mood. A complex of forces have combined to erode the moral universe of middle America in the last decade, leaving millions of people without sure footing, uncertain where to turn.

The central images of consumer America -- the "pepsi generation," the carefree young families, or the cool, detached young "technicians" who populate the media -- are far distant from the real life experiences of people trapped in drab, grueling work in factories or homes. The model of decision making by distant experts who "know best" further undermines the confidence of ordinary people in their power to influence events. The decay of neighborhoods, the soaring urban crime rate, the pollution of the environment, result in frightened retreat into isolated homes for millions of people whose life goal once consisted of extra-job relaxation in stable and enjoyable communities. To many today, hard work seems to have brought only an-

xiety, not the happiness that they had been taught would be theirs if they "played by the rules."

Against that background of fear and uncertainty, American liberalism in the last decade, discovering the poor and black people who refused any longer to be invisible, undertook a crusade. And to the mass of middle America, decent people whose class position and human feeling generate at least as much compassion as that possessed by more affluent liberals, the crusade has seemed an attack. It is middle America which is characterized as "bigoted" and provincial. It is ordinary people whom liberalism has deemed morally obtuse -- Gene McCarthy spoke for the constituency of the elect when he declared that "only educated people will vote for me." And directly to the point, it is ordinary working people, themselves caught by economic hardship, that have been asked to pay the bill for the "great society." As Gus Tyler recently wrote, the rich have told working people, "We must fight poverty and discrimination to the last drop of your blood. Share your job; share your neighborhood; pay your taxes."

The new left reflected such class prejudice in myriad ways: it called police from blue collar neighborhoods "pigs." It loudly protested the oppression of students at Harvard or Yale -- oases of privilege and opportunity from the perspective of most Americans -- while it simultaneously noticed middle America in order to comment on its racism, sexism, boorishness. And in more recent years, with no intent to listen to the voices from the nation's working people and with little respect for the intelligence and imagination of "ordinary Americans," leftists have sought to "educate the workers" through sermonizing and glib generalizations. The necessary precondition for overcoming the mistakes of the past must be the recognition of the justifiable rage and bitterness that such arrogance and contempt has elicited.

Two contradictory impulses now contend in the consciousness of millions of working people. On the one hand, the fear and defensiveness, the feeling that they are scorned and ridiculed, give rise to an angry and sullen reaction -- identification with politicians such as Reagan and Wallace who seem to voice the bitterness and despair of ordinary people, even while they play upon fear and hatred. On the other hand, implicit class consciousness -- a recognition of solidarity of the oppressed and growing anger at the powerful -- reflects itself in the support for McGovern, for Reuben Askew in Florida, for Ralf Nader, in the anger at the wage freeze, in the cynicism about the work ethic on the job, in wildcat strikes against working conditions.

A socialist strategy must begin with the realization that the revolutionary transformation of consciousness has a central "therapeutic" dimension. It must move beyond the name calling and moralism that so often characterizes left practice to the concrete work of organizing new opportunities for deepening consciousness. People transcend the myths of false consciousness -- racism, sexism, national chauvinism, individualism, myths they have adopted as defenses to maintain fragile security -- not primarily by being told such crutches are not in their real interest, but by actual experiences which allow perception of new possibility. On the most elemental level, self-organization for collective struggle is the real life context in which people are able to begin to transcend ancient prejudices and fears. When people march for the first time on a civil rights picket line, when they organize a community organization or a union, they pass the boundaries of the normal to discover new potential in themselves and new solidarity with others. Often for the first time they discover that the "experts" serve special interests and that they themselves can understand and use "technical" information supposedly beyond their grasp. They learn that they can depend on others in collective struggle; they sharpen a sense of the common enemy and learn to feel and articulate anger previously mystified and repressed. They discover new capacities in themselves for courage and new ability to run meetings, to speak, to think creatively. It is in such contexts that elitist, sexist, racist behavior can best be challenged, within the framework of common goals and expanded possibility. The left must not avoid such arenas; it is rather the task of socialists to initiate and work within popular organizations as participants -- with

a particular perspective.

For organizations atrophy, whether they are community, consumer, labor, whatever they are, when their logic is exhausted, when it becomes plain that no fundamental changes will come in one community, in one factory, from one group of people. The task of the left must be to unite struggles of different constituencies and different sectors of the working class around class programs.

Such programs have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. On the one hand in terms of material interest, socialists must demand that all reforms, and end of special oppression -- e.g. of blacks, women -- be paid for by the ruling class. Such a demand is fundamental to class struggle: whether talking about ecology, welfare, education, health, the left must continually strip bare the myth of affluent workers who must be forced to pay for reform and instead focus uncompromisingly on the wealth of the ruling class. Quantitative class demands challenge the relative position of the mass of the population in comparison with the ruling class.

An exemplary program that challenges such a class distribution of wealth in the present would focus on the tax structure. Attacks on tax policy, and demands for tax on corporate income in particular, are pivotal in demonstrating the material class division in the society. And now tax questions are especially fruitful for socialists to raise; not only is there a growing tax revolt, but also it is apparent that liberal and conservative politicians, whatever their rhetoric, will be forced to levy increasingly heavy tax burdens upon middle income tax payers to meet the imperial crisis.

On the other hand, the left can raise "qualitative" demands in the present as well -- challenges to the organization of all social life (services, work, recreation, even the home) according to the imperatives of profit-making. And socialists must create movements to contest the power of the ruling class over institutional and social life that cut across seemingly separate areas of the society. Through such struggles the false distinctions between consumption and production, between work and school, between home and community can be abolished. And through such struggles constituencies which previously seemed entirely separate -- welfare victims and industrial workers, for instance, women in the home and men at work -- can be united around common programs against a common enemy.

It is in the context of organizations with programs contesting the power of the ruling class across institutional lines that intra-class relationships of power can be addressed. An exemplary program which raises and integrates the demands of a variety of constituencies is a focus on the organization of work. Such a program taps the consciously felt needs of increasing numbers of workers for reorganization of the work process in order to safeguard health, but more broadly, to allow meaningful and interesting work at a variety of tasks. And by demanding retraining programs to equip workers with a variety of skills, it can also address the special oppression of women and third world workers, formulating proposals in the context of class struggle for an end to discrimination on the job. Moreover, through a focus on the role of education in reproducing the divisions of labor, it can open the question of control over school in a way that makes student movement meaningful to "middle America" -- by demanding schools teach children and adults a variety of interesting and useful skills to fit human needs for creative labor, not the needs of corporations.

There exist concrete mass organizational contexts in which an organized, explicit socialist presence with a clear class perspective could make a major difference. And an organization such as the New American Movement should be able to multiply such organizational forms many fold. With honesty about NAM political perspectives, with a clear class approach to organizing, and with a deep respect for the integrity and intelligence of those we would organize, NAM should be able to sink roots in sectors of the population hitherto unreached by the new left.