

April 10, 1974

TO MEMBERS OF THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE

Dear Comrades,

The following is a report of the National Council meeting of the New American Movement (NAM) held in February which appeared in the April 1974 New American Movement newsletter.

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February 1-3

# NAM National Council

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL of the New American Movement met in Yellow Springs, Ohio, February 1-3. The meeting was attended by some ninety people, representing 28 chapters, 3 pre-chapters, and several friendly organizations. The NC indicated that NAM is growing, both numerically and politically. Chapters have begun to develop a practice around a variety of issues—strengthening organizational coherence and laying the groundwork for working out a strategic perspective. At the same time, as Saralée Hamilton stressed in her opening remarks, the current crisis of capitalism and the possibilities opening for the left form a constant reminder of our limitations and the dimensions of the task before us. This tension between our recognition that we are becoming a more serious and viable organization and our sense of what we could be (and what we must become if we are to unify and focus mass discontent) was an underlying current throughout the weekend.

In the reports from chapters, several trends emerged. Most chapters have established some identity locally, though few are well-known. Membership is increasing, but has not significantly broadened to include sectors of the working class beyond white collar workers. NAM is experiencing considerable growth on campuses, with new chapters in Binghamton, Queens, and Columbia, New York, and Athens, Ohio. Less than half the chapters had women's caucuses, although several chapters are engaged in educational activity around socialist-feminist ideas. While many chapters worked around such issues as Chile, Wounded Knee, the Farmworkers, Attica Defense, and Indochina, impeachment organizing seemed to be the most common programmatic activity among chapters. Several chapters have been putting out newspapers, addressing local and national issues from a socialist perspective. Both Iowa City and San Francisco participated in coalitions running candidates in socialist electoral campaigns. Chapters such as Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Margaret Sanger (Durham) have been involved in coalitions around local issues in social services and control of local government. The reports from Philadelphia and New Orleans about

strike support work and the remarks from a representative of a taxi drivers' rank-and-file group in New York emphasized the importance of workplace organizing as a means of broadening NAM's base—a concern which was to recur throughout the weekend.

Whatever their previous experiences, nearly all the delegates were concerned with developing an organizational response to the energy crisis. A panel discussion, workshops, and plenary debate helped to define the issues and the Council eventually adopted a perspective for organizing (see box).

The speakers on the panel (Sam Love, Environmental Action; John Braxton, Philadelphia NAM; Frank Ackerman, Somerville NAM), while offering differing analyses of the causes of the energy crisis, all stressed that we must combat the oil industry's attempts to blame the energy crisis on the consumer, and project a system of producing and distributing energy based on human needs.

There was general support among the delegates for the six demands passed, but significant differences arose over the emphasis that should be placed on calling for nationalization (public ownership and democratic control) of the energy industry as the central focus of any campaign. Those who argued against such a focus said that given the absence of a strong, organized mass movement for socialism or any organs of people's power such as worker or community councils, a call for nationalization could only mean bureaucratic control and at best something like the TVA. Socialists, they felt, should not fall into supporting such a course because for too long Americans have been told that socialism means more bureaucratic control and this is precisely the image we much change. Those who supported nationalization responded that we would have to redefine the understanding of the term to build a movement for a publicly owned and democratically controlled energy industry. Only a coherent national program which makes this the central issue can strike at the source of the energy crisis: the ability of corporations to make decisions on the basis of profit maximization. They saw nationalization as a transitional program that embodies our socialist goals. The National Council did not resolve this question—whether to make nationalization the



central focus of any energy campaign—and it will continue to be debated within the organization

A second source of controversy during the weekend was the formulation of NAM's position on the Middle East. The panel presentations (Peter Johnson, MERIP; Paul Bermansohn, Durham NAM; Deborah Hertz, Minneapolis NAM) provided information on the history and internal politics of Mid-East nations, as well as raising some of the political questions involved in trying to arrive at a position. However, because most delegates were not familiar enough with the complicated questions involved, a minimal resolution—opposing zionism and affirming the rights of the Palestinian people to national self-determination in Palestine—was adopted with the understanding that it would pave the way for further discussion of this issue (see box). This experience pointed out the need to stimulate debate on the scheduled topic in print and in chapters prior to national meetings.

The final meeting on Sunday morning focused on developing a strategy for NAM, particularly examining the role of the party. Participants in the panel were John Judis, Berkeley NAM; Harry Boyte, Durham NAM; and Ann Lawrence, Philadelphia NAM. Judis said that he agreed with much of the Arthur Kinoy article on forming a party in *Liberation* magazine, but he stressed one fundamental difference: in his view the party must be publicly socialist. He also argued that while community and workplace organizing activities are crucial, only an electoral focus can make clear our intention to take state power. Boyte sees this as an "unprecedented time" for the left, due to the demise of the Democratic Party coalition of labor and minorities that has existed since the New Deal. Space is opening up for the formation of a new left party that would not necessarily be socialist; he urged socialists to join it but also to maintain our own organization.

Lawrence emphasized that NAM's long-term goal should be the building of a revolutionary party, but felt that such a party can't be built until the socialist movement has strong and durable ties with the working class as a whole. Consciousness changes, she pointed out, not through exposure to good ideas but by participating in organizations and institutions that can go beyond capitalism, e.g., union caucuses or unity committees of employed and unemployed workers that can form the embryo of workers' councils.

Because members of the panel did not adequately define their differences with each other, the ensuing discussion did not clarify the issues sharply. Still, it was an excited and exciting exchange demonstrating the growing concern that many chapters have with strategy and the variety of ideas present within the organization on this subject. Questions regarding the nature of the party (how open would it be? would it be explicitly socialist?), the role of the state, the relative importance of workplace organizing or electoral activity; the implications of NAM's view of the composition of the working class; the tension between a localized approach and a national perspective surfaced in this session.

Earlier national NAM meetings have been marked by a greater emphasis on socialist feminism than was evident at this NC. Many women present expressed a frustration about the lag between our socialist feminist analysis and the content of our programs. Discussion in the women's caucus and related workshops had four major elements: 1) internal dynamics, particularly leadership and structures to strengthen women's participation; 2) NAM's relationship to the autonomous women's movement; 3) strategic questions; 4) the development of programs relating to the needs of women from other sectors of the work-

## National Council

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Other workshops met around imperialism, community organizing, and impeachment. The workplace organizing workshop began planning for the convention and will function as part of a national network of rank-and-file groups (Write: 47 Ft. Washington Ave., New York, 10032). The campus workshop also set up a network (Contact the Queens College chapter) and will sponsor a conference in April.

Resolutions were adopted in support of the Wounded Knee Defense and Attica Defense. Structural resolutions aimed primarily at strengthening communication and political discussion within NAM were passed.

The weekend was packed with plenaries, caucuses, and workshops, and on Sunday there were a lot of hoarse voices and tired eyes as delegates made final arguments on resolutions. The spirit of the meeting, as characterized by one observer from another organization, was "warm," with much respect and solidarity among all present. The National Council helped to better clarify tendencies within NAM and to intensify political discussion. It was marked by a willingness to identify our weaknesses and work to combat them. But primarily a consciousness of the times and the need for a unified and coherent left shaped this meeting and provided a stimulus for our ongoing work.



*The National Convention is the highest policymaking body of NAM. It is held annually and is open to all NAM members. (Referenda conducted between conventions according to the constitution are of equal authority.)*

*The National Council is the highest administrative body of NAM between conventions. It meets annually, approximately six months after the convention. Two delegates (one man and one woman) are elected by each chapter to the National Council. These representatives also act as liaisons with the national organization between national meetings.*

### RESOLUTION ON THE MIDDLE EAST

1. Zionism is a distorted form of the need of the Jewish people for emancipation, and an inappropriate method for fighting anti-semitism. We support the dezionization of the state of Israel.
2. We support the right of the Palestinian people to national self-determination in Palestine.
3. The only way the above goals can be achieved is through their integration in the struggle for a socialist Middle East.
4. This position is a minimal starting point and leaves out many points of controversy among socialists in the Middle East and the United States which should be the subject of further debate in NAM. For example,
  - a) the questions about national rights (political and/or cultural) of the Israeli people;
  - b) the questions about territorial arrangements;
  - c) a program for eventual cooperation and unity among socialist forces in the area;
  - d) the relation of class and national struggle in the Middle East;
  - e) the relation of the Palestine problem to the Arab-Israeli conflict; and
  - f) the particular nature of socialist transformation in the Middle East.

## NAM CHAPTERS & PRE-CHAPTERS