Interview with Bill Barclay

Victor Cohen

Bill Barclay joined the New American Movement (NAM) in 1973 while a graduate student in sociology at Michigan State University. He moved to San Diego, California to teach at San Diego State University. Later, Barclay became actively involved in the local NAM chapter, and, in 1979, he assumed a national leadership position as one of three elected NAM Political Committee members. He then moved to Chicago to work from NAM's national office. There, Barclay helped edit NAM's *Discussion Bulletin* and managed the organization's finances, and he toured NAM chapters throughout the West Coast and Midwest. He was an early supporter of the merger of NAM and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), and he participated in the newly-formed Democratic Socialists of America.

Today, Barclay is politically active through the Oak Park Coalition for Truth and Justice and a member of the Chicago Political Economy Group. To read Barclay's recent essay, "FDR, Obama and Depression Economics—A Review," or the Chicago Political Economy Group's "A Jobs Program for the U.S.," log on to the January/February 2009 issue of *New Ground*, an online publication of the Chicago Democratic Socialists of America, at http://www.chicagodsa.org/ngarchive/ng122.html.

This interview took place by phone on January 7 and 21, 2008.

Victor Cohen: When did you join NAM?

Bill Barclay: I joined in 1973 when we created the Red Cedar Chapter in East Lansing. We created it out of a group called Crisis in America (CIA) that was an independent local political action group.

Cohen: Were you always in involved in left politics, or were you radicalized when you came to college?

Barclay: My parents were Goldwater Republicans. I grew up in the South, and what first radicalized me was the Civil Rights Movement, seen from a distance because I was still in high school. Of course, all the way back in the fifth grade, which was the fall after *Brown v. Board of Education*, I remember arguing with classmates about the significance of that decision and what it meant. But we never talked about this in class, and my high school remained all white. It was the only white high school in Raleigh, in fact, even though there were constant court challenges to try to force them to integrate. It remained that way until I graduated in '62.

Then, after one year of college at North Carolina State and one year at the University of North Carolina, I took another year off and I barely missed being drafted. In the fall of 1965, I returned to school at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. I discovered that the previous year, its tiny SDS chapter—the time I hadn't been in school—had invited Dr. Herbert Aptheker, a member of the Communist Party U.S.A., and Frank Wilkinson, a founding member of the Citizens Committee to Abolish HUAC, to come and speak. They'd done so because North Carolina had passed a speaker-ban law that said if anybody had ever been a member of the Communist Party or had taken the Fifth Amendment in hearings regarding activities of the Communist Party, they would not be allowed to speak at publicly supported educational facilities.

It was clearly unconstitutional, but as lawyers will tell you, you have to have standing to bring a case; you can't just say "This is a stupid law; throw it out." My girlfriend and I went to the SDS meetings leading up to the event, and I thought, "This is what we should be doing." So we joined SDS without knowing very much about it, except that they seemed to have the right position on this issue. Aptheker and Wilkinson came; we had them walk onto the campus so they could be formally ejected by the campus police, which they were, and then we had Aptheker actually stand on the sidewalk just off campus property. A lot of students came out to hear him—they thought it was the most exciting thing that was happening. TV news cameras came out, and that started the case; eventually the law was overthrown.

Near the end of that term, I was sitting in an office with one of the women who was a graduate student in the SDS chapter, and I remember asking her, "What should we do next?" and she said, "Well, I think we ought to take another look at the war." I went away thinking, "These people are crazy," but I started reading about it and realized it was the people who were perpetuating the war who were crazy. So that's how I got involved and radicalized. When I graduated from Carolina and went to Cornell for an advanced degree in sociology, I knew there was an SDS chapter there, and I immediately went and found it.

Cohen: What was SDS like at Cornell?

Barclay: It was interesting. When SDS ended, either out of hubris or ignorance, we decided, "Well, the rest of SDS is splitting up, but there's no reason for the rest of us to follow that. We're going to continue to be SDS!" Cornell was notorious in national circles for being what they called a "non-theoretical" chapter. [laughs] That's why we didn't get into many of the fights that drove other chapters apart. But it didn't work. We held it together for six months or a year, but that was it. After I got my master's, I went to teach at a community college for two years, from '69 to '71, in Corning, New York, where we created something similar. We were a campus-based group in contact with other campus-based groups. I had gone there thinking, "Well, we'll create an SDS chapter, even though SDS seems kind of dead nationally," but it was a small college, and even the students

who were radical thought that was not the way to go. They were right.

Then, my then-wife and I moved to Michigan State. We both went back to graduate school—she went into social work and I went into sociology and economics. I was in graduate school '71 through '75, and there we formed Crisis in America.

It had a lot of people, graduates and undergraduates, who had been active in SDS, and some may have been active in the Socialist Workers Party. We were still working against the war, and things really escalated after the invasion of Cambodia. Then there was Jackson State and Kent State, and we were very much involved in that in East Lansing. A bunch of us took over the main drag and closed it down with barricades. We probably didn't save any Cambodian's life, but it made us feel good. There were just thousands of us out there on the streets, and we were all really pissed off, because despite the fact that Nixon had won his campaign on a promise to end the war—none of us believed him—the war was escalating.

Around '73, our group decided to affiliate with NAM.

Cohen: Was that problematic, or did the group support that decision?

Barclay: I don't remember any hesitation in terms of whether or not to affiliate with a national organization. I had worked in groups that were unaffiliated nationally for three years by that point and felt that the experience in a national group like SDS, even loosely networked as it was, was a positive thing. I don't think we lost anybody over becoming a NAM chapter. We certainly didn't lose any of our core activists.

Then a couple of things happened. My first wife and I split up, and we were both in the NAM chapter, so I distanced myself a bit from that social circle, and then I got offered a position at San Diego State University, so I went out there in the fall of '77.

Cohen: There was an active San Diego NAM chapter—do you remember when you joined?

Barclay: I was in NAM pretty quickly out there, but I can't recall an exact date. Most of the university NAM people were faculty, though there were a few graduate students. Most of our work was oriented at that time around trying to help the faculty form a union and with working with the San Diego city labor council.

It was there, and through NAM, that I met my current wife, Peg Strobel, who was in the Los Angeles NAM chapter—we met through a mutual friend.

Cohen: Could you describe the ambition you had for NAM when you joined or were an active member?

Barclay: Well, that was something I had almost forgotten until I started reading through the old NAM documents I have. We didn't see ourselves as a party, although we saw ourselves as trying to build

a political tendency that would lead to some kind of socialist party eventually; that was our ambition. We had conceptualized ourselves as an organization of organizers, which meant that each chapter was full of people who were doing work in various workplaces and mass movements. That had a plus and a minus. The plus was many people were very highly committed. The minus was that we retained only one out of every four new members who came to the chapters. It was a pretty big commitment to join a NAM chapter. I think that's one of the reasons we also had an at-large membership and an associate membership. The at-large membership was made up of people in towns where there weren't NAM chapters. Associate members were people who were interested in the organization but didn't feel they could make the same kind of commitment; they paid the lower dues, and they didn't vote at conventions. They shared a lot of NAM's politics but just couldn't make what they perceived as this very extensive commitment.

We also thought that you really had to bring together gender and class analysis. We always rejected any notion that you subordinate the question of gender inequality, that you try to deal with it after the revolution, like some groups suggested. We also rejected the notion some people put forth, even though we recognized it as complex, that went something like, "Well, feminism is an indulgence, possible to women in a developed country or a rich country, and is irrelevant for women in say, Africa or Latin America." In fact, my wife, Peg, wrote an article in one of the *Discussion Bulletins* about dealing with women and imperialism.

Cohen: What was it like trying to put feminism and socialism together, in terms of your political practice?

Barclay: It was less concrete in the first couple years of NAM, but during the last couple of years, we saw clearly the state as the place in which significant political struggles occur, and that meant that you were often working and organizing among a labor force that was more likely to be female and more likely to be a minority than the labor force as a whole. And a lot of our work did focus on that. We had several members who also belonged to a group called 9 to 5, made up of women who were involved in the workforce in a variety of ways and who were concerned about gender issues in the union or workplace that they were in. We had Blazing Star NAM, a lesbian and bisexual Chicago chapter. We had a gay and lesbian task force.

Cohen: Was this focus in NAM a response to the chauvinism of SDS as much as an indication of how deeply involved NAM was with the women's movement?

Barclay: I think so. It was also a response to the women's movement that had grown and become much more part of the popular consciousness of people in the Left by 1972 when NAM was being founded. A high portion of our membership was between age 25 to 35; relatively few people were between 35 and 55; another chunk of people was over 55 or 60. We had some younger people also, but

the largest group was the 25-35. I found a document, a little table, that describes the age breakdown of the majority of the chapters, though it only lists 28 out of the 43 chapters. They had 276 members that were between 25 and 35, 83 that were under 20, and only 90 people between 35 and 65.

Cohen: So this was primarily the generation that came of age in the late '60s.

Barclay: Yes, early to late '60s. Some of them would have been in the Civil Rights Movement, most of them would have been in the movement against the war in the '60s, and many of them would have later been in the revival of feminism. We also had a great deal of people in these chapters who were union members; among the twenty-eight chapters, twenty-one percent of members were in unions, overwhelmingly in public sector unions; sixty-nine percent of our union membership were in unions like AFSCME, AFT, and SEIU.

Cohen: Why do you think that was?

Barclay: Well, those public sector unions were obviously growing unions, so that's where union membership was going. Second, most of our membership, though we didn't ask people what their educational level was, probably had at least a college degree, so they tended to hold white collar work when they were in a union. And returning to what I said earlier, the unions in the state sector were a place where women and minorities, although we didn't have many minorities in NAM, were more likely to be employed. This union membership reflects a lot of facts.

Cohen: You were eventually a member of the Political Committee, which meant you were in touch with entire regions of NAM membership. When did you start taking a more active role in NAM's national leadership?

Barclay: That didn't happen until after I got to California, and it really happened after I met Peg and Dorothy Healey. Through them, by the way, I actually met Frank Wilkinson. At one point we went over to a party at his house, and I introduced myself and said, "I know you from another experience." [laughs] He remembered the event, of course. He was around NAM, but he was getting older then.

Anyway—at that point, the existing Political Committee was coming to the end of its term. In California, we had regional NAM gettogethers because there were San Diego, L.A. chapter, East Bay, San Francisco, Irvine, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz chapters. In San Diego NAM, I was one of the people who went to the regional meetings, so I became more involved at that level. Then either Dorothy or her son Richard asked me to run for the Political Committee. By then there was some inkling of a merger with DSOC—this was still early, not even '78 —and they were looking for people whom they thought could carry on the direction that the existing Political Committee

had established. I'm sure because Dorothy spoke highly of me to Richard, she was key in initiating that development. So I was nominated, I ran, I was elected and served through the formation of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

It worked out well for Peg and me, since she got offered a position to lead the women's studies program at University of Illinois-Chicago, with tenure. By then I had taught at James Madison College for two years and San Diego State for another two, and while I liked teaching, I was increasingly convinced that I wouldn't be unhappy if I left academic life and did something else. So, we moved to Chicago where she could teach and I could be on the Political Committee, since by then that's where our national office was.

Cohen: What did you do in your role on the Political Committee?

Barclay: The Political Committee did two or three things. Of course, we managed the finances of the organization as a whole, and I was in charge of the treasury. We didn't have a lot of money, but we could still manage it—our national budget peaked at approximately $65,000, which is not much to run a national political organization on. The local chapters had their own accounts as well, so if you added up all of NAM's finances, that number would be larger, but not by much. Also, each member of the Political Committee was responsible for keeping in contact with, and dividing resources to the extent we had them, among chapters around country. So, I had California and the Midwest all the way down to the South. I had Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio because of the Dayton chapter, and Kentucky because there was a Lexington chapter. That meant talking to people; I spent hours on the telephone, in the evenings mostly, finding out what was going on with chapters and what they needed from the national office that we could reasonably provide.

Cohen: What were some of the other chapters you would meet with? Do you recall how they were organized to begin with?

Barclay: There were many NAM chapters that were college-based. Eugene NAM, of course, was based around the University of Oregon. We had a chapter in Missoula, for years, that was around the University of Montana. It didn't get big, it didn't get small, it was just a steady chapter. In some cases, I got a chapter going; for instance, in Moorhead MN-Fargo, North Dakota, we formed a NAM chapter because a couple of our friends who were teaching at Moorehead State moved up there. It was a very small chapter, but it was a chapter for a while. I got a chapter started in Marin; the NAM members in San Francisco knew some people up there, and they sent me up to talk to them.

Cohen: When you would go to talk to chapters, what would you say? Describe an event.

Barclay: Well, there would always be a talk to the chapter itself, but we were always asking the chapters to hold at least one public

talk for us, and if possible, an interview of some type, on the radio or with a local newspaper. Some chapters were better at it than others because they had better contacts. The way I usually did the talks was to try to give chapters a choice of two or three things that I was working on that I could talk about and could fit to their situation. Of course, they often had something they wanted me to talk about as well. The Cleveland chapter, for instance, included Randy Cunningham, who headed our urban commission, and I was very interested in the city as the locus of class struggle—David Harvey-type of stuff—and understanding the class struggle particularly in the state sector. So, there I gave that kind of talk. Part of the public talk would always be explaining what NAM is, and I'd point out the chapter people who were there, have one of them say when the next meeting was and what they were working on. I would also do an internal talk to the members, which was generally a report on the status of NAM in terms of the organizational situation and the most recent political discussions at the National Interim Committee and Expanded National Interim Committee, or NIC and ENIC.

The point of a lot of these visits, though, was to create a sense of a national organization. For example, with the smaller California chapters, including Santa Barbara, Chico (which later dissolved), the [San Francisco] East Bay, and San Fernando Valley, I often tried to get them to understand they were part of the national organization, and we would assess what our national resources could help them do. So I'd sit down and talk about what their programs were. And if they weren't developing programs, I'd talk to them about how they could.

Cohen: Since you spoke to so many NAM chapters, what seemed to be the most successful things they were able to engage in, in terms of attracting other people or having a presence in a community?

Barclay: I had two regions that were, I think, significant. I had California, which was always our largest region—it had anywhere from thirty-five to forty percent of the total NAM members in it, and I had the Midwest. Our Los Angeles chapter was very strong, and so they wanted to know more about what was going on more generally, and to talk about programs, and to hear our assessment about the national political situation. The other California chapters were good chapters, but, with the exception of S.F. NAM, they weren't at L.A.'s level; those chapters all tried to work with some variant of what we would now call a labor-community coalition. That was similar to many of our Midwest chapters. Danville NAM was interesting; it was a small chapter composed of a group of guys who worked in a factory, and they had a fairly sophisticated concept of trying to organize politically and union-wise. For me, going there was interesting because I could talk with them and hear about their experiences. The other chapters, like Milwaukee, Cleveland, St. Louis, were fairly diverse in terms of what they were doing.

Cohen: What other tasks did take you on as a Political Committee member?

Barclay: We also put together the NAM publication, the *Discussion Bulletin*, and we tried to be theoretical or at least encourage theoretical debate. And when I say "putting together the *Discussion Bulletin*," I mean we had to go and find people to write the articles.

We also convened a leadership body that was larger than the three of us who would come together quarterly. Of course, there was always the problem of raising enough money to be able to fly them back and forth.

As time passed, and I started in the national office in the fall of '79, the possibility of merging with DSOC began to take more time. However, the Political Committee was not the group holding the discussions with DSOC—that was intentional, because this was supposed to be a decision the membership would vote on, and having all Political Committee members heavily involved in negotiations might slant the vote one way or the other.

Cohen: Thinking back, do you recall tension, since you were talking to different chapters, as discussion of the merger evolved? How was that seen?

Barclay: There were definitely disagreements. Some chapters were clearly on one side or another, and others were of mixed opinions. For example, the California chapters almost universally strongly supported the merger, and some people analyzed this as, "Well, the California chapters are in a situation where, to the extent that DSOC exists out there, California NAM would set the political tone for the merged groups." I say that even though there were some articulate opponents of the merger, but they were minorities within their individual chapters.

Cohen: Do you recall why they opposed the merger?

Barclay: Well, my perception of the opposition, and this is also from me looking at some of the things in the *Discussion Bulletin*, is that there were two or three things. One, you've got to remember that this when many people of the Left still scorned social democracy, and DSOC was seen as representing that. So there was a general, political-economic opposition.

Cohen: And that was because social democracy was perceived as too reformist?

Barclay: Right. Second, there was skepticism about the extent to which DSOC was committed to feminism. And third, there was a lot of discussion around electoral politics. I had at that point myself not really been involved in what you would call "electoral politics." We had done some minor work in terms of helping campaign for an aspiring African-American who became an alderman on the South Side of Chicago and a few things like that. But there were not that many people even in Chicago doing electoral work.

Of course, I was looking through the *Discussion Bulletin* and other things that we put out, and NAM did more electoral politics than I

remember. It wasn't national, but political work in things like city council elections and various kinds of referendum initiatives, almost always at the municipal level. We'd already had some discussions about what the Carter presidency meant and what the Reagan presidency meant, what the nature of the shift to the right was, whether it was long-term or temporary, who was involved, so we did talk about some of that, but it wasn't as large a focus as our other work.

Cohen: What did you think about the merger with DSOC as it was shaping up?

Barclay: I was in favor of it. I thought that a bigger organization was better than a smaller one. And I recognized that if you could align everybody on the Left by an axis—which you can't always do—the median of the two distributions would be somewhat different, but the tails of each distribution would overlap the other. That is, there were people in DSOC who were to the left of some NAM members, and of course there were NAM members who were to the left of everybody in DSOC.

I found most of the DSOC people I'd met by then fairly easy to deal with. I had read Harrington's book, *The Other America,* when I was an undergraduate and had liked it, and when I met Michael in person, I liked him. I wasn't sure that I wanted him to be the single leadership figure at the head of the merged organization, but he certainly had a very important role to play.

Cohen: Did you feel the merger came from a strong desire to keep socialism alive in the U.S., more so than the merged organizations could move socialism forward? Another way to put this is to ask, was the merger a defensive tactic to keep this kind of political practice together or an optimistic move based on people's sense of the possibilities for expanding socialist-feminism?

Barclay: I came through a political life where we ended the system of segregation in the South. We didn't replace it with nirvana, but we destroyed a century-old system. And along with the obviously very important role played by the Vietnamese themselves, our generation stopped an imperial war in Southeast Asia. Finally, we rekindled what Peg calls the second wave of feminism. And this is still in the '70s. Things were not like they were in the '60s, but at the time of the merger, we were only seven years away from when the U.S. was driven out of Saigon. A lot of people my age, at that time, didn't have the sense that there was 25 years of a wasteland ahead of us.

Cohen: So you feel the debates around the merger came from a place of optimism?

Barclay: Yes, I think you're right, because if you're arguing against the merger like some people were—that we really need to develop this tendency, this truer Left socialist-feminist tendency—that's got to be an optimistic position. And those of us who favored the merger were thinking, "Oh, we'll get bigger, faster, by getting these two

groups together. Though both these groups are struggling, if they are together, there really are some possibilities." NAM had strong chapters in places like California, Oregon and Washington, and some good chapters in the center of the country. We were weaker in the Northeast, while DSOC had a lot more there and along the East Coast, though NAM had a very strong Pittsburgh chapter. But it seemed like the geographical strengths complemented each other, and that would be good. And NAM had constant financial problems, and we thought a little more financial stability would be a good thing.

Cohen: Correct me if I'm wrong, but while NAM was never flush, it ran in the black for most of its life, right?

Barclay: Well, it ran in the black because those of us who were going to be paid ended up foregoing about half our salaries. But yes, it ran in the black, though the finances were always pretty fragile.

Cohen: And there was a sense that DSOC would help stabilize that?

Barclay: DSOC had more money, and they had access. We had access to some people on the older Left, like Dorothy and Ben Dobbs, but they also didn't have any money. They had good political experience and good political analysis, and we learned from them.

Cohen: How would you describe the political cultures of NAM and DSOC? Were there differences that struck you as profound?

Barclay: Well, the DSOC generations were on either end us. The younger DSOC people didn't really have the experience that we'd had around the war and civil rights, so they were a different group. And—can I say this fairly?—the economy was shifting at this time, young people were becoming more career-thinking, and while these young people in DSOC certainly weren't future-MBA people, more were thinking about where they were headed, their life paths, than most of us were in the '60s when everything seemed open and fluid.

Then, there were these older people who did have some of those leftover politics of the Socialist International. One important point people like Dorothy Healey made was, "You know, we and some of these old DSOC people were at loggerheads for years, and if I can be in the same organization with them, then you people should be able to. You don't even have this history."

Of course, I think for people who weren't there from the two organizations' beginning, belonging to DSOC or NAM was to a certain extent a matter of which group you came across first. I knew people in the last couple years who joined both groups; they would tell me they joined both because they thought the two belonged together. So, to a certain extent, fighting the battle about whether there should be a merger or not was something that time was almost passing us by on. But it was still a very intense battle.

Cohen: What do you make of the tensions? I can understand how, if you build an organization from the ground up, the idea of merging it with another would naturally lead to a well-founded anxiety because a lot of what you've built might evaporate. I don't imagine it would have been an easy thing, especially under these circumstances, to join these two groups. On the other hand, it seems a sensible decision, given the political landscape of the early 1980s or even the late 1970s.

Barclay: Well, you've obviously put your finger on one of the issues. You have a sense that this is your baby, you created it, and you're going to give up part of that. In a merged organization, it's not going to look exactly like the organization you created. There is some holding on to what you think is a political space that you, and people like you, have created and in which you are comfortable. Some people want the organization to be founded on a strong sense of *gemeinschaft*. That's where they want to stay, in that sense of community. NAM was an important, sometimes the most important, community for many of the people involved in it. It was their reference group, where they had a lot of their friendships, where they put most of their energy outside of their job if they were working, so it was very central to their lives. One of the difficulties in retaining new people is that you're asking them to join a social structure that's ongoing and to which they don't have a map.

And the question of the merged organization's commitment to NAM's socialist-feminist strand was core from the beginning. It was a real issue. I don't know if NAM was the first socialist-feminist organization to support actively the women's and gay liberation movements, but it was certainly the largest at the time. People did not want to lose that. There were also tensions that went back to the opposition between socialism and communism that were based on a picture of NAM that bore relatively little resemblance to reality, in my opinion. Likewise, elements of DSOC had been very skeptical about the student Left in the '60s and saw correctly that NAM was a descendant of that. But these were just some of the issues, the ones that I recall the most vividly.

Cohen: Once the merger happened, how do you feel it played out?

Barclay: Well, did we create a larger, more viable organization? No. Now, that varies from place to place. Members of the L.A. NAM chapter, which was still mostly NAM, felt that they worked pretty well for a while, for example. I think what dominated the outcome was the changing national political climate. You can probably find some evidence that working together helped in some places, didn't help in other places, but what was so overwhelming was the larger political shift: the political reawakening of the religious right; the shift among large numbers of the U.S. population in a more conservative, nationalistic direction; the determination of conservatives to overcome what they saw as the Vietnam Syndrome. Those things begin to dominate what was going on. They were more important factors in terms of people's political work than the impact of the

merger. Many of us came from an era in which we'd seen huge political changes, mostly in our favor, so we were probably living in an insulated bubble, not realizing what was about to hit us.

I think the exhaustion of people coming out of the '60s and into the early '70s was obviously part of it as well. People talk about the '60s being an era of New Left on campus, but if you look at the data, there were never more than about twenty percent of students, even at the campuses we associate with being liberal campuses, who had strong agreement with New Left values. So there were a limited number of people doing a lot of work and winning some victories, culminating finally in the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. A lot of those people had spent a significant period of their life—their late teens, 20s and early 30s—doing a lot of work, and then their life situation changed. I think some people felt, "Wow, we won all these things, life is going to get better. I can do other things for a while." So, it's not just the fact that there was a backlash and countermove to the right that was making it harder to recruit people. It's also the fact that people who were in our age group, the 25- to 35-year-olds who made up the bulk of NAM, were politically worn out from what they'd done over the previous ten to fifteen years.


"Pessimism of the mind,
optimism of the will."
– Antonio
Gramsci
NEW
AMERICAN
MOVEMENT

IV.
Chapters at Work:
NAM across the Country