Interview with Steve Tarzynski and Kathie Sheldon

Victor Cohen

Steve Tarzynski and **Kathie Sheldon** became involved with the New American Movement (NAM) in the early 1970s while attending Northwestern University, though their real contributions to the organization didn't take place until after they moved to Los Angeles in 1975 when Kathie began her graduate studies in African history at UCLA. Steve joined her the following year and began his residency at County-U.S.C in 1977. They became active in two distinct spheres of NAM activity: Kathie (along with Jon Klancher and a committee of several other NAM members) helped organize and run NAM's largest and most successful Socialist Community School in the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles. Steve became active in a highly successful community organizing drive around protecting health care services to inner-city L.A. and was a member of NAM's National Interim Committee.

In 1982, they went to Mozambique so Kathie could pursue her dissertation research while Steve worked as a physician for the then-socialist Mozambican government. When they returned in 1984, Ronald Reagan's presidency had changed the political terrain in L.A. and much of the energy around NAM dispersed into single-issue political movements. The couple continued their anti-apartheid work and were involved with founding the Mozambique Support Network. They also remained connected to socialist politics, Steve in particular. After the merger between NAM and DSOC, he assumed a role in the national leadership of DSA, where he served on the National Political Committee for ten years. Today, Kathie works as an independent scholar and has published several books on African women's history. Steve, a full-time pediatrician and department chief for Kaiser Permanente, serves on the board of the Community Coalition, a non-profit social justice organization active in L.A. politics. He is active in the campaign for a single-payer health system in the U.S. as a member of the board of the California Physicians Alliance, the state affiliate of Physicians for a National Health Program. This interview took place in Kathie and Steve's house in Santa Monica, California on December 1, 2007. It was conducted by Victor Cohen.

Victor Cohen: Do you remember when you decided to join the New American Movement? Were you both already involved in left politics?

Steve Tarzynski: Kathie and I had become became involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement on campus at Northwestern, where we met. But I had already been radicalized in 1968 by the Chicago

Democratic Convention. We were watching it on television, and that shocked me. But I heard about NAM in my first year of medical school, 1974; I picked up a NAM magazine and went, "Wow! This sounds really good." There was a contact number in the magazine, so a day or two later I called it up, and David Moberg answered, and he invited me down to a meeting on the South Side, near the University of Chicago in Hyde Park.

Cohen: Were either of your parents on the Left?

Tarzynski: No. My dad was always progressive. His family was killed in the Holocaust, all except one sister. So he had experienced that and raised us not us to be prejudiced. I found out later my grandfather was very involved in the Polish Socialist Party in the 1920s and '30s. He died in the Holocaust. But my parents were fairly conservative. They didn't like my politics. I had really long hair past my shoulders, and I dressed like a hippie. It was just too much for them.

Kathie Sheldon: Starting in high school, I was involved in antiwar activities, and though I didn't testify, I went with friends who testified at the State house in Connecticut which was trying to lower the voting age. When I came to Northwestern, antiwar activism was our focus, but I did other things as well—I worked for McGovern at one point, for instance. I was always hopeful.

Cohen: So were you both active in NAM in Chicago?

Tarzynski: A little bit. I became very active in Los Angeles NAM when we moved here in 1975.

Cohen: There was already a NAM chapter here that was well-organized?

Tarzynski: Yes. It started when Dorothy Healey, Richard Healey's mom, got a group together called Forty Socialists in Search of a Party.

Sheldon: The name was a play on what we always said about Los Angeles, that it was really forty suburbs in search of a city.

Tarzynski: We missed the Forty Socialists period, though. There already had been a NAM chapter here, citywide, that fell apart, so by the time we got to L.A., NAM was still here, but a lot of people that had been involved weren't around. But Dorothy was. She had a radio show, and a nucleus of people who kept meeting, and we started to become very active around '76.

Sheldon: But part of what got us involved was meeting Peg Strobel. I met Peg the first week I arrived at UCLA. There was an ad in the college newspaper, *The Daily Bruin*, that said, "A new course, African women and social change." I went, "Whoa! What's this?" Peg was the professor, and I went to meet her, and, almost immediately, we started getting the NAM Socialist School organized. It was

in the basement of the Unitarian church, which was pretty funky, but at its height we would have three or four classes in an evening. That was always more my affiliation than the NAM chapter. Although I went to meetings, I put most of my energy into the school. That was an incredibly active period, though, for the chapter and the school. Every week we were doing stuff, multiple meetings and multiple things going on. There was the School Committee, the Curriculum Committee.

Tarzynski: We also had the socialist hiking group, which we called Correct Paths for a while.

Sheldon: Or Red Trails. We had the cabaret for a while, the NAM Hootenanny, in the same place where we had the school.

Tarzynski: Folk singers and poetry. And every other weekend, or once a month, we'd set up little tables with little candles, and you could get a beer. We used to have NAM and DSA night at Dodger Stadium. We used to try and go when they played the Cincinnati Reds.

Cohen: The L.A. Socialist School seems to have been a very successful project. From the records you kept, it was always self-sustaining, drew a great number of people from across the left, and had a diverse set of course offerings.

Tarzynski: It was viewed on the left in L.A. as a real institution. In fact, many sectarian organizations wanted to take it over.

Sheldon: They thought we were soft.

Tarzynski: But we weren't stupid. We were trained by Dorothy [Healey] and Ben [Dobbs]. We knew what was going on. We tolerated them [members of sectarian organizations] in the classes. They could take classes because we were open and democratic, but they could not be on the School Committee. At that point, we had to grow as an organization to protect what we'd accomplished. And if they tried to take over the school, they would be expelled.

Sheldon: There was one long-time member of the School Committee who had taught a number of very popular courses. But he kept trying to bring in other people who were Trotskyists, hoping to shift the balance of membership.

Tarzynski: I can't remember what the issue was, but one night we got into an argument. They found out we knew who they were, and I told them to get out. I had to escort them out of our apartment, shall I say. Another night, the Spartacists were trying to take over the Socialist School. We had this long staircase, and me and somebody else just kept pushing them up the stairs and out the door. They were another crazy ultra-Trotskyist sectarian group.

Cohen: Though NAM chapters throughout the U.S. had members who had been a part of the Old Left, the L.A. NAM chapter seems to have had a particularly strong grouping of people who had come into NAM with Dorothy Healey, who like her, had left the Communist Party in the late '60s. Were either of you taken aback when you met them and found out about their life in the Communist Party?

Tarzynski: I never remember being put off, like these are these terrible subversives. By that time, we felt the subversives were the government. They were the ones who were un-American, not the Communists. Dorothy and Ben were wonderful people and had this amazing charisma. They won you over immediately and took us under their wing right away. They were real teachers and committed to training us. You'd be organizing or in a meeting and goof up, and Dorothy or Ben would pull you off to the side and say, "You know, you made a mistake." They'd point out what you did, and what happened because of it. There was a lot of that. Dorothy always took people aside and talked to them, always. And we were going to so many meetings that it happened a lot. Eventually, if you make enough mistakes, you learned how to run meetings, how to talk to people, to encourage and even lead them and move things forward, and how to work with other organizations and build coalitions.

In fact, because most of us were in our twenties, maybe early thirties, one of the important things for NAM was that we had communists who had split from the Communist Party—Dorothy Healey, Ben Dobbs, Steve Nelson, Herman Rosenstein. We learned from them.

Sheldon: And Millie Rosensten.

Tarzynski: Many of them were in Los Angeles, but there were others in the rest of the country. They were mentors for us and said, "This is the right thing to do. You gotta hang in there. We need to put this in more historical perspective." I would say Dorothy and Ben were my political mentors. I learned a lot from them, and still use it today.

Coalition politics, everybody does it now. But back in the seventies, the left did not believe in coalition politics. NAM and DSOC were the only ones arguing for joining together to make things happen. Even the social movements—the environmentalists, the feminists—didn't work with each other. People pursued their own work, but NAM was saying, "We have to have a broader approach, and we need coalitions between groups to make it happen." It might sound obvious today, but back then, we had to convince people this was the right thing to do. NAM was one of the first groups, at least on the Left, to argue that it's better to move together part of the way than to try to go alone all the way, because you won't make it by yourself. Now, we didn't invent that. That perspective came from the people in our organization who had been in the [Communist] Party, our mentors. But NAM was really the first organization that put together a broader and coherent view of how all these things fit together—the environment, feminism, racism, labor organizing, internationalism.

Gramsci was a major influence with this, and helped us to articulate our perspective, as well as strategy. Carl Boggs, though he was

very opposed to the merger between NAM and DSOC, was very involved with the L.A. Socialist School where he taught, among other courses, a course on Gramsci that was very helpful to many of us. And don't forget, Gramsci was only translated into English in the early '70s.

Cohen: What about Gramsci was so eye-opening?

Tarzynski: First, he realized the importance of culture, and how that was related to the failures of the Italian Communist Party to win out over fascism and Mussolini. That was important. And he articulated the need to get even part of the bourgeoisie in your camp, a fraction, and to build coalition politics. We also benefited from his intellectual honesty, and his insistence that Marxism doesn't have an answer about everything related to the mysteries of human existence. But it's got part of the answer. That was also important.

We also benefited from his concept of the role of the revolutionary party. We took to heart his analysis that you needed to work with other organizations and insert yourself in the day-to-day struggles of people. And this related to his other foundational concept for us, which was his analysis of civil society, that all its institutions are important, not just the state, and so the left has to be active everywhere—PTAs and soccer teams, as well as the military and the government. Gramsci argued that the left has to genuinely be part of all these areas, and also, as a result, that the left will be changed and learn things from its involvement.

All those concepts profoundly resonated with us. We felt we couldn't have a revolution or socialist movement unless we were rooted in American traditions, culture, history, and values, and with people in communities, in a real humble way. We wanted to learn from that, and build from it as well. We always knew this was what we were trying to accomplish, and that this was the way to do it, but we were groping for it until Gramsci's writings put it in a theoretical framework that gave us the ability to understand and move it forward in the way we wanted to. That's what's important about Gramsci, and still is today.

Cohen: What was NAM doing on a practical level in Los Angeles? We've briefly mentioned the Socialist Community School—what were some other activities or projects?

Tarzynski: There were plant closings in the '70s—Kaiser Steel was a big one, and NAM was the first left organization that identified that as a nationwide issue. We were doing organizing around that here, but we were too small to have an impact, although we had something of an impact in L.A., as everywhere else. I was interested in health care organizing, and with two other people [NAM members], started a group called the Los Angeles Health Organizing Committee. I was still a medical student at the time. The L.A. Health Organizing Committee grew to about a couple dozen health care workers, and we did quite a lot of organizing on health care issues. I started my internship and residency at L.A. County then, and got involved

with the house staff [interns and residents] union and became one of the vice presidents.

That was 1978, right when Proposition 13 passed. Once that happened, there was an immediate fear that the county hospitals would be closed, so we organized this huge mobilization. Ben Dobbs said it was the first time he'd seen anything like this since the 1930s. We had about seven hundred people coming to the board of supervisors every day for two weeks from all over. We had unions, people from the black and Latino community, all coming to testify and protest. A lot of the key organizers were NAM members, or were in our network of NAM, like people who had come to the Socialist School. I still have friends from the work we did to this day, some of whom have gone on to high-profile political careers.

From there, though, we formed the Los Angeles County Health Alliance, and blocked the cuts in public health care for about twenty years. That was the third rail here in L.A., and they weren't able to touch it until the late nineties. Closing Martin Luther King Hospital, the hospital L.A. County created for the inner-city black community in the wake of the Watts riots, would have been impossible back then, because we had a massive coalition. Other than my work in Mozambique helping with the fight against South African apartheid, that was the high point of my organizing, the Los Angeles County Health Alliance.

But we'd done what we were supposed to do. We were activists, and had read Gramsci so we knew it was important to build coalitions and go out and reach out to communities beyond ourselves. We were the "Modern Prince" in L.A.

Cohen: When you were doing all this work, did other people or groups in the coalition know you were NAM members?

Sheldon: Sure.

Tarzynski: Absolutely. That irritated the people who'd been in the Communist Party, that we were always open about who we were. We didn't go up and say, "Hi, I'm a socialist." But it came up. We were pretty low key about it. We didn't do any recruiting, though we probably should have.

Sheldon: Well, we did in a way. But that was part of our politics, that we were open about who we were.

Tarzynski: We didn't ram it down your throat, though, like the Progressive Labor Party, who would come to people and say, "Hi, I'm a communist." I mean, what do you say to that? "Oh, okay." Weird. We basically stayed away from those people. We felt that they were sectarian, undemocratic, and that their politics were really extreme and unrealistic.

Sheldon: When we first came out to L.A., one of the people I became friends with, someone who was doing their master's in the African Studies program where I was studying, was a member of the

Socialist Workers Party. I was good friends with him and his wife. They knew I was a NAM member, and the husband thought he could sway me to join the SWP. He kept trying to recruit me, so finally I agreed to go to a meeting with them. It was so off-putting. It was like they were teaching people this line. I stayed friends with them, but was never was interested in joining, and we never did anything organizationally between the two groups. And I never tried to get them to join NAM, either.

Tarzynski: Of course, NAM members were never seen as real socialists by other Left groups. We weren't "real revolutionaries" because we weren't sectarian, democratic centralists. We were too laid back, our meetings too relaxed, like a family argument or something. We irritated the hell out of those people. We did pass one proposal, called Unity in Action, to try to get ourselves to present a reliable NAM position to other people. Some of us used to joke and call it "Unity Inaction." (laughs) But the resolution was, after a NAM chapter made a decision, you could be free to speak that you didn't agree with it, but you still had to work for it. But even that was controversial.

Cohen: What was the impact of the merger between DSOC and NAM on the L.A. NAM chapter?

Sheldon: There wasn't a big DSOC presence in Los Angeles. There were some people, like Harold Meyerson, who we've remained friends with. But because the DSOC chapter was small, it was never like there were two big groups that had different cultural styles or organizing projects.

Tarzynski: NAM, on the West Coast, had hegemony, to use a Gramscian term. We had two to four hundred members in our chapter at its high point, and San Francisco had several hundred members. We were huge. DSOC had maybe twenty, twenty-five members.

Cohen: Had anyone in the L.A. NAM chapter been talking with, or about DSOC?

Sheldon: I think we hardly had heard of them. When we formed DSA, they basically joined us.

Tarzynski: Obviously in New York, things were different. New York NAM had a few hundred members, but DSOC had a thousand members or more. They were huge. They had a real presence in the labor unions, in city politics, and they had Michael Harrington, the main public intellectual on the left of his time. For us out here, though, it was different. "Michael Harrington—great writer. But is he going to come and help us organize?"

Cohen: It's ironic, then, that there was such tension in NAM about the merger. But there was a great deal of anxiety and resistance in NAM, correct?

Tarzynski: We basically lost a third of our organization, many of whom were very bitter about the merger. And we devoted three years to the process, both in NAM and DSOC, and by the time we merged, Reagan got elected. Had we had those three years, things might have turned out maybe a little differently. We might have been in a better position to help the socialist left survive in this country. But we had terrible, bitter arguments—friendships were broken. It was ridiculous. And what a waste.

What we felt was so extraordinary and so important was that for the first time in fifty or a hundred years, the American left, or the left anywhere in the world, was merging. Two separate traditions were coming together and reuniting. That was historic. I mean, the history of the left has been a circular firing squad and splitting. Certainly that's been the case of the American left. But we just had no idea how difficult it would be, how much history and psychological obstruction there would be, to actually merge. And I think we were a little naive when we went into it.

Cohen: Steve, working in the leadership of the new organization, DSA, for as long as you did, and being as involved with the merger as you were, what do you think DSOC thought they were getting out of the merger?

Tarzynski: I think they wanted to merge for various reasons. They were going to get more troops, more money, a national presence, et cetera. But there were people in DSOC who were very principled and really knew that this was an important thing to do, that we had to form a nationwide organization that brought in all these different traditions, and could be synergistic, greater than the sum of its parts. And this was in an important time when we could begin to make an impact on the left and beyond, in the Democratic Party, and so forth.

That was a real strength of DSOC. They were very active in the Democratic Party. I always agreed with Ben Dobbs, who told us the Democratic Party is not a political party in an ideological sense, or a European sense. It's always been a coalition of forces. Everybody's there: labor, women, blacks, Latinos, the environmental movement. From a Gramscian perspective, as a socialist, how can you not be there? We always felt this was one of the major arguments for the merger, though it was also one of the major points which led to the departure of a third of the NAM membership. The question, though, was, "Should the socialist left have a role in the Democratic Party or not?" About a third of our organization was violently opposed to it, one third wanted to go in, and maybe a third was a little skeptical, but they were willing to take the risk.

I don't think DSA could have changed the Reagan era. But I think maybe the left could have survived better through that time if we had had a really good strong democratic socialist organization. And we could have helped the generation of activists who've come up since then. They're us, the way we were thirty years ago. But there's no Dorothy Healey now. We could be playing that role for them, but there's no way for us to do that. I do it on a tiny scale in my work with the Community Coalition, but where's the Socialist Community School to teach them all Gramsci?

Sheldon: There's a really interesting novel by Dana Spiotta called *Eat the Document*. It came out a couple years ago and it's *really* interesting. It starts with the story of a woman who went underground in the seventies and made a new life for herself. Eventually, she settles down in the Seattle area, so there's parallel stories going on about 1990s anti-globalization activism with reflections on what the main character was involved in with the seventies, an explicit juxtaposition of different generations of political activism. It isn't, in the end, very complimentary about any of them, but—(laughs)—it seemed very honest and real to us. She's somewhere between the two generations herself, younger than us but older than the generation who were activists in Seattle. The novel raises and deals very thoughtfully with a lot of the political questions we struggled with, about how to have an impact and to make change happen, and how to measure that change. Frankly, it's not very optimistic about answering either question.

Tarzynski: But in part, that's a result of there not being anything for these folks to grab on to. The generation that could be linking the two is missing, as if there's a big hole that nobody can fill but those folks who would have been there.

Sheldon: Of course, we thought we were facing a generational hole like that in the seventies because of the impact of the McCarthy era. There were all these older people who'd been active in the '30s and '40s, but there wasn't a group from the '50s that had that activist experience, because the McCarthy era was so devastating. It still is in some ways, I think. But we thought we had our new seventies generation that would be carried forward, and it also fell into a hole somehow.

Tarzynski: Ideally, we'd have had an organization that had millions of dollars, with staff and offices everywhere, with people in their forties and thirties who'd be active, and with people like us on advisory groups. I feel like I have responsibility to people that aren't here anymore, like Dorothy and Ben, but I don't know who's going to carry this on, or even learn from our experiences.

Cohen: One of the things I really find fascinating about NAM is the fact that although it thought of itself as a revolutionary socialist-feminist organization, its formation and development was unique in comparison to the rest of the radical left in the '70s. It was a cadre organization of a kind, but didn't envision itself as a vanguard, and was committed to democratic socialism, but drew on the New Left for the radicalism of that concept, rather than the more staid social democratic traditions of DSOC.

Tarzynski: I think part of that was a generational thing. We had young activists from the sixties and we had democratic communists from the thirties. By the time NAM had formed, both generations had got to be that age when we became fed up with the shenanigans. NAM was a genuine organization that filled a real need, and its ab-

sence is a real blow to the left in America. If you consider the entire American left, from every kind of anti-globalization group to the people with the deep pockets, from Seattle to Hillary Clinton, you won't find an organized expression of that democratic socialist tradition. It's missing, and I think the entire left, broadly defined, is the lesser for it. Even though the individuals are around, the organizational expression is not there. That's what irritates me to this day about the failure to merge correctly and the time we wasted on that.

Cohen: What do you think now about the people who left NAM, who resisted the merger?

Sheldon: They would say that they were right because things didn't work out very well. They'd say, "See, we warned you DSOC couldn't be trusted. We told you that wasn't the way to go."

Tarzynski: And they were right in some ways.

Sheldon: But if they had stayed involved, then maybe it wouldn't have turned out that way either.

Tarzynski: Many of them were our best cadre who worked hard, and even went down and did work in the Nicaragua Sandinista support movement, or got involved with Central American issues deeply. These were very committed people, and many were our friends. We were in a babysitting co-op with some of them, and we're friends still today. But there's some things we just don't talk about. A couple of them have hinted that we were right, but I don't want reopen the discussion—it's not worth it.

Sheldon: Here's a typical story that might explain how we all feel. Our son, when he was at University of California Santa Barbara, was the president for two years of the College Democrats. He saw it as the way to do progressive politics. He was quite open about that. So when we were at one of these parties where we were seeing a lot of old friends, I said to one of them, "Oh, and Ben is really involved with the College Democrats at UCSB." This friend looked at me and he said, "And you're okay with that?" (laughs) I said, "Yes. We encouraged him to do that." But there's still that attitude that that wasn't a proper political activity for someone who was on the Left. It's just craziness to me. Though there are still all the individual antiwar, or environmental, or women's organizations, there's not something that brings them all together, which is really what we thought the role of NAM was when it was really working.