Interview with Leo Casey

Victor Cohen

Leo Casey joined the New American Movement (NAM) in 1972 as an undergraduate at Antioch College. While NAM members from Antioch went on to form chapters in Dayton or migrated to NAM chapters in Cleveland and Pittsburgh, after a year abroad in Tanzania, Casey went on to graduate school to study political philosophy at the University of Toronto. There, he came to know and work with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. While in graduate school, he remained an at-large member of NAM and developed his organizing skills in a variety of movements, including the gay and student union movement in Canada. He eventually assumed a leadership role in student movement for the entire province of Ontario and for the Canadian National Union of Students. His experience in this context, including his graduate studies, influenced him to advocate for the merger of NAM and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) to form the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). In 1982, Casey helped lead the newly-formed DSA, and he remained active in the organization throughout the 1980s.

In 1984, Casey began teaching at Clara Barton High School in New York City, where he taught classes in civics, American history, African-American studies, ethical issues in medicine and political science. In 1987, he became active in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and served as UFT chapter leader at Clara Barton for ten years. In 1992, Casey was named National Social Studies Teacher of the Year for the American Teacher Awards, and, in 1999, Casey became a full-time UFT special representative. He was elected to his present position as UFT Vice President of Academic High Schools in New York City in October 2007. He continues to teach a class in global studies every day at Bard HS Early College in Manhattan.

Victor Cohen: How did you come to the New Left—was it out of high school?

Leo Casey: It was a more interesting and atypical path. Both of my parents were public school teachers. My father actually had been a sheet metal worker who became a vocational teacher of his trade, and even though I was in New York City and the Manhattan world was bustling with left-wing culture, it was not something that I grew up in or was aware of. My parents sent us to Catholic school. During high school, and with the Vietnam War heating up, I became involved with the Catholic Left. There was a place called the Emmaus House, which was loosely inspired by the Catholic Worker tradition. I went there a number of times and, through that, I just became active in a number of ways; I was involved in the antiwar movement

and picketed for the farm workers. I was aware that there was another kind of Left, though. I got involved with the antiwar Student Mobilization Committee in New York, and it became clear to me that there was a Trotskyist shadow organization [the Socialist Workers' Party] running everything. But what separated me from that world more than anything else was a kind of cultural gap. I still remember the people who were involved in that—they were all white upper-middle-class and had large amounts of disposable income. They would be riding around Manhattan in taxis, and if I had enough money to get in and out on the subway, I was lucky. So for various reasons, the Catholic Left was much more attractive to me. It seemed much less alien to what I had grown up in, and having grown up with the Catholic language, at that point in my life it seemed less strange. Then, the religious and the political were very connected in my life. There were still many young brothers in the Marist order [who taught in my high school] who in the coming years would leave, but at the time there were still connections between social justice and their view of religion.

That was high school. When it came time to go to college, I had a number of choices. I wanted to go to Antioch College, and for some reason my father—who by all estimates should have opposed it—he came home one day and said to me, "I talked to those Jewish teachers at school; they're smart, you know. And they say Antioch's a good school. So you can go." I remember thinking to myself, "For once in my life, his ethnic stereotypes worked in my favor!" [laughs] And I went off to Antioch College. Once I got there, I had culture shock. I was still very much this Irish, Catholic, lower-middle class/working class kind of kid, and when I hit Antioch, it was the height of every cultural rebellion from the sixties.

Cohen: Would that have been 1970?

Casey: 1971. One of the things that attracted me about Antioch was that it was a complete work-study, so that you studied for six months and then you spent the other six months working in something related. For my first work study after I had done a term, I worked on the defense committee for the Harrisburg Eight, who were Philip Berrigan and these other mostly Catholic activists who had been accused of plotting to blow up the heating tunnels in Washington D.C. and kidnap Henry Kissinger. It was a very instructive period. While I was in Harrisburg during the trial, people were coming through making connections with other elements of the Left, and there were intense debates that reflected on other things that were happening. I still remember this—about six months after the trial was over and everyone had been found not guilty, there was a reunion, and a number of people who met up had decided that they were going to have a fast unto death to end the Vietnam War. It was very much a statement of the moment's desperation—people felt they hadn't been successful in actually ending the war. Nixon had just been elected and the war had escalated into Cambodia. I remember somebody saying to them, "You're acting like a bunch of nonviolent Weathermen." That insight stuck with me. I conceived myself then as

a sort of Gandhian-Berrigan, nonviolent revolutionary who said, for example, that we would be celibate, because having an intimate relationship would detract from commitment to the cause. This was a difficult thing for an eighteen-year-old. There was a bit of struggle around that for me. But then I finished my first year at Antioch and went to work for the Farm Workers in California.

The Farm Workers was interesting because until then I didn't really see unions as great agents of social change. But with the Farm Workers, clearly here was a union that conceived itself as a social change movement. It gave me a whole different sense of working class potential than I'd had up to that point. It was also an education in the not-so-glamorous part of real organizing. Somehow in all of this, while I was working in Compton, I managed to get hit over the head and was knocked out for a couple of hours. I woke up in the hospital and didn't remember where I was.

Cohen: What happened?

Casey: I don't quite remember; I never quite remember exactly what happened. I have a vague memory of getting picked up off the ground and being put into an ambulance. The police never came around to find out what had happened. It could have been just random, or it could have been purposeful; I don't know. I mean, I was a young white kid walking through various very poor parts of inner city L.A. in '72, but at the same time, there was violence directed against the Farm Workers union, so who knows?

All of that brought me back to Antioch about halfway through my sophomore year, and there was a big upsurge in antiwar activity that spring. To understand Antioch at this time, you need to remember that McGovern Democrats were the right wing at the school. There were these huge mass meetings and everybody would come, and in the course of all that, two left-wing organizations emerged on campus. One was the Communist Party, which had a very strong base among African-Americans. Many of them arrived in Antioch through something called the New Directions program, which brought in poor kids who generally would not have a chance to go to college. And then there were Maoists, mostly then the Revolutionary Union (RU), which became the Revolutionary Communist Party, and they were very much upper-middle class white kids.

I didn't really feel at home in any of those places. But a bunch of people who had been involved in these antiwar protests and the Indochina Peace Campaign with Tom Hayden had been in touch with people who were forming NAM, so a NAM chapter began to develop, and interestingly enough, among the students—and there was a number of faculty involved as well— there tended to be many more people like myself who came out of white working class or white lower-middle class backgrounds.

Cohen: What do you make of that?

Casey: There are some connections to the silly dogmatism of the RU, those who cut off all their hair and dressed in blue work shirts

and dungarees to be "working class." For those of us who had grown up in working class communities, it was so clearly a caricature of what real working class culture and life was like. Part of it may just have been circumstance. A lot of us had been involved in the feminist movement or the gay movement, and the Maoists were at best neutral, at worst hostile, at that point. So we were looking for a left-wing home that would be more friendly.

Antioch was a very peculiar and even unique institution, even at this time. When I attended one of my first antiwar meetings, a few people were acting in a particularly undemocratic way, and I called them Stalinists. I was told, then, that Stalinism was not a term of opprobrium for the various Maoist groups, and I was shocked that they actually could conceive of themselves as Stalinists.

Cohen: In a positive way, you mean.

Casey: Yeah. [laughs] Antioch was a left-wing hothouse. But those are these three main organizations on campus—NAM, the RU and the CP. From this NAM network, some of us went to Dayton after graduating, including Julia Reichert and Jim Klein, who went on to do the movies *Union Maids* and *Seeing Red*, which had Dorothy Healey and other people in it. Around them and other NAM activists, a whole NAM collective in Dayton developed who did media work. Then there were folks in Cleveland and some migration between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, too, of people who were involved in 9 to 5. NAM was beginning to define itself as socialist-feminist, and at the same time the socialist-feminist unions around the country were trying to integrate socialist-feminist politics, and some of them decided to do organizing among working women in clerical trades. That famous Dolly Parton movie, *9 to 5*, was somewhat inspired by the 9 to 5's work. But 9 to 5 started out to organize women clerical workers, and it eventually went into SEIU. So these people from Antioch's NAM chapter from Yellow Springs spread out.

The other thing that we were involved in was Antioch College's radio station, which became a Pacifica-type station. There were a bunch of people involved in NAM who were active in that and who then went on to other positions in left-wing media around the country. Mark Miracle, who was in Yellow Springs for many years, is with Pacifica radio today in the Bay Area. And John McChesney, who had been an Antioch professor, eventually became an NPR reporter.

Cohen: What were you doing in NAM throughout this period?

Casey: Well, a lot of it was your ordinary campus organizing—being involved in study groups and consciousness-raising. But there were organizing drives with a union of cafeteria workers and grounds workers on the campus. There was a series of strikes around financial aid, including one that culminated in a huge strike that almost destroyed Antioch. There are some people who would claim that Antioch never really recovered from that. Throughout this time, I also participated in NAM nationally. But for my senior year at Antioch, I went to Africa, so I was away for the better part of a year. I

had originally planned to go to Chile, but a little coup occurred. [laughs] So instead I went to Tanzania.

I'd have to say overall that Antioch for me provided a really great education. It is the case certainly that there were gaps in my knowledge; when I got to graduate school in political philosophy, I knew Lukács backwards and forwards, but I had never read Aristotle or Plato. [laughs] But in terms of engagement, I was very much connected to what was going on in the real world. It was quite the place to be. But by this point, '75, the year I spent abroad in Tanzania, it was the beginning of all the implosion of the New Left with these self-styled Marxist-Leninist organizations becoming dominant.

While I'm in Africa trying to figure out what I'm going to do now that I'm going to graduate college, I decided I would go to graduate school. Africa was a very interesting experience for me because I not only learned huge amounts about African society, culture, politics, and the liberation movements, but I also really developed a sense of how American I was, in a way that most New Leftists of this period didn't.

Cohen: What do you mean by that?

Casey: Well, I discovered in Africa, for all of my opposition to the U.S. government, how much I was a child of American culture. Some of that realization came out of the daily communication I had with Africans in real life, realizing how different our assumptions were. The culture of the university was also very misogynistic; they had, outside the cafeteria, something like a democracy wall where people would put stuff up and everybody would stand around reading these manifestos, and alongside this political writing were these incredibly sexist mockeries of women. I wrote a manifesto attacking them, and my roommate pasted up it up for me so it would not be apparent I had written it. I was literally the only white student in the university, so it would have been easy to discredit the statement by linking it to me. But in a hundred different ways, while it was a wonderful education, on the other hand, it was clear to me that this was a culture in which I was not at home in some very significant ways. There were a number of African-American students from Antioch there, and I think for them it was even more of a culture shock. They thought they were coming home to the motherland, and the Africans were very explicit about the fact that they were American, not African.

So towards the end of that, I decided I was going to go to graduate school.

Cohen: And you were going to go study political philosophy?

Casey: Well, I wasn't really sure at that point. What I wanted to do was study socialist politics and write the great theories of revolution. There was no shortage of ambition there. So I made the decision to go to the University of Toronto because it was close to my home, and I liked the idea of being in another society but not one that was so radically different. As it turned out, at this time Toronto probably

had the leading program in political philosophy in North America because it had leading people in both the left- and right-wing camps—a bunch of Straussians, like Alan Bloom and Walter Berns, who had left Cornell because of the student strikes there. There was C.B. MacPherson, who had written a very influential interpretation of Hobbes and Locke, and a significant figure in radical political philosophy, Christian Bay, so overall it was a very interesting place to be.

Cohen: Were you planning to be a professor when you graduated?

Casey: No. When I finished, there was some discussion about what to do with the doctorate, but initially I had not decided that I would necessarily become a professor. For me, the intellectual stuff was always connected to the political, so this provided me with an opportunity to continue with the political work, to do intellectual work connected to that, and also to get the opportunity to think. But the first thing I did when I got to Toronto was to become involved in the Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa. I was also involved in one of the first efforts to organize teaching assistants, and through that, I became involved in the student union. In Canada, all students paid dues to their unions, which had political force and engaged in mainstream political campaigns. Through that, I became involved in the social democratic party in Canada, the NDP. In Canada, all universities receive government aid, so all the universities are in some sense public institutions. This meant there was a lot of back and forth in government policy, in everything from the cost of tuition to how much support the government gives to the university. And towards the end of my time there, I became involved in the gay movement and wrote for a gay magazine in Toronto. A large part of the time I spent in graduate school was not in the classroom.

While doing all this, I remained a NAM member. I was an at-large member and went to all of the conventions and summer planning conferences, and I did other sorts of things for NAM. There was a NAM publication on the student movement that I wrote for, and I edited and did most of the work short of the actual printing of it.

Cohen: And this is all while you're a graduate student?

Casey: Yep. And then around 1980—I started in Toronto in the fall of 1975—I got elected to the NAM National Committee when the NAM-DSOC merger was really heating up, and I was an advocate for merger. What was really instructive for me in the time I spent in Canada was being part of real left-wing political institutions that engaged in political activities outside the margins. I mean, although there were mass movements in the '60s in the United States, by the time I became involved, they put themselves along the margins, so being a self-identified socialist meant you were outside the real U.S. political battles. That just wasn't the case in Canada. For example, while I was on the graduate student union at the University of Toronto, I was a student for all of Ontario and the Canadian National Union of Students.

Cohen: How did you find time for your studies? It sounds like any one of those would be a full-time job.

Casey: [Laughs] I think I've always been a bit of a workaholic, but there's a sense of being involved in a politics and a movement that is for the better. So, I'm elected to the NAM merger committee, in part because by now I've been around a lot, even if I haven't been part a chapter. But it was also connected to my advocacy around the NAM-DSOC merger.

Cohen: Coming as you did from Antioch, and being involved with the new social movements of the '60s and '70s in the U.S., as well as the movements in Canada, what did you think was the value of merging with DSOC?

Casey: There was an evolution in my political thinking—I'm not quite sure how to characterize it in ways that don't simplify it too much—but that at the point that I come back from Africa, and having spent those years in the NAM chapter in Yellow Springs, I have a sense of having a mission. It's not a dogmatic socialism or a dogmatic Marxism; it's very much Gramscian and heterodox and all the rest, but I basically felt then that you start from a political vision and you try to build an organization that will realize that vision. But it's not just that I'm in Canada and participating in different organizations—there are also all these Marxist-Leninist organizations that rise up and implode, like stars, consuming all sorts of people in the process. All of this made me reassess my political notion; the sense that politics is somehow based on a fully-shaped vision that you then try to implement is something that I'd become less and less comfortable with. Instead, I develop more and more an understanding of politics as intervening in ongoing struggles to push them progressively. There's also an intellectual process going on here. My dissertation is a study of Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, and the problem of the authoritarian state, so the more I examine those theories closely, the more inadequacies become evident to me. In particular, I now saw a vulnerability to authoritarianism—exploited by Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao and so on—at the core of Marx's writings. By the time I leave Toronto, I would call myself a post-Marxist as opposed to a Marxist.

Cohen: In what sense would you characterize the word "post-" there? What about Marxism had you moved on from? And what were you still invested in?

Casey: Well, there was something about the intellectual training that we had in the world of left-wing and Marxist organizations that I valued, the attempt to locate particular events and struggles in larger contexts so you could understand the various forces at work; there was a certain importance in engaging the real world with critical tools. That part of the Marxist tradition was something that today I don't see many young people having. But there are many reasons for that as well—as Marxism found a place in the academy, the part

of it that involved the engagement with the real world became more and more attenuated. But the more I looked at Marxism as a theory, the more that I found that, in many respects, it was a utopian theory. It was essentialist in that it reduced everything to class conflict, and as a result it lacked a coherent, developed theory of politics and theory of the state. That was clear in Marx, and the authoritarian theories of politics and the state are inserted into that vacuum by someone like Lenin. Even Gramsci, whom of all the Marxists I read is the only one I still read today for the richness of his tools, but even in his case, there is a kind of essentialism. His theory of hegemony—only the working class can construct it? I knew well, and was friends with, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and I found their critique of Marxism very convincing.

Cohen: You're thinking of their critique articulated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, correct?

Casey: Yes. They were on a similar trajectory as I was, where you go from a Gramscian Marxism, to the logic of the Gramscian way of thinking about things, and eventually you're led to a point where there are fundamental Marxist categories that you realize just can't work. So that's an intellectual process that's going on, along with this political engagement. And the two, in fact, are related to each other, for me at least. While I'm thinking about all of these things, when the NAM/DSOC merger is finally consummated, the decision is made to keep the national headquarters in New York City, which is a DSOC stronghold, and they need somebody to go to New York City to be the NAM full-time person. I grew up in New York City, and it was easier for me to take this position because I was a graduate student and could pick stuff up and go, so in 1982, I go to New York to serve as the NAM person in the DSA leadership.

Cohen: Had you finished your dissertation at that point?

Casey: No. I had an early draft of most of it, but it was far from complete. I actually finished it seven years later, in '89. By the time I finish the dissertation, not only am I a post-Marxist, I am more of a radical democrat than I am a democratic socialist. I see myself in the socialist tradition, but I think "radical democrat" is the term that captures how I see myself politically.

Cohen: How do you locate your own trajectory in the context of what happens to the Left from the '70s into the '80s?

Casey: Well, I think part of what's going on here was a crisis in Marxism that precedes the fall of communism in 1989; what's going on with me is not happening in isolation from other, larger developments. When I was in graduate school, I was heavily steeped in Althusserian and Gramsican theory, so there were other people in this process engaged in similar theoretical trajectories. But unlike people who say they'd continue to see themselves as Marxists and use some category of socialist to describe their politics, I see this resonance

between the actual political work that I'm doing and the theoretical analysis that provides a better explanation. It's much more open to other sorts of intellectual trends. As part of the process of political engagement, I read Foucault, Derrida and others, and not just out of intellectual trendiness. I was at a stage where I'm not going to take any kind of thinker or system of thought and just embrace it—but what was compelling for me about people who were trying to create this kind of post-Marxian framework was the capacity to take different thinkers and different radical paradigms and find what's useful in them.

It's also clear to me we had not integrated some of the things we had imaged we had. Socialism-feminism was holding together two strains of thought that really weren't integrated with each other. We wanted to be both socialists and feminists, but we really didn't have the tools for figuring out how you would do that. I mean, when you tried to understand the oppression of women or the oppression of gay people, or even when you tried to understand the nature of racial oppression, Marxism didn't really have very good tools for that. That's in part why in NAM we ended up going to Gramsci, because we were trying to figure out a cultural dimension of the politics. But we needed analytical tools to understand the specificity of culture and the specificity of politics without reducing them in every last instance to the class struggle.

Cohen: Can you unpack that some more? In what sense did you feel, or do you feel now, that Marxism as a methodology or a social theory just seems inadequate?

Casey: In the sense that because of its gaps, its utopianism, and its lack of a real theory of politics and of the state, it leaves itself open to authoritarian versions of Marxism. Michael Harrington—with whom I was engaged from about '81 through about '85 when I was still very much involved in DSA—he held to a Marxist faith that was cleansed of all authoritarianism—and I would call it a faith because I think it had a lot of quasi-religious qualities. He held onto this faith until he died, but we kept moving politically to a position that was beyond Marxism.

Cohen: Could you explain what you mean by that comment? I think you're well-suited to make that comparison, given that you both have a background in the Catholic worker movement.

Casey: Yep. I thought that we would bond a lot more than we did. [laughs] He came from an Irish Catholic working class background, just like I did. He was like I was, a complete workaholic. But he would do stuff that I could never do, like get up at 4:00 in the morning to write his book. My body can't sustain that. But I recall a point where we were meeting after Reagan's election; there was a brief moment when DSA formed when we brought together these two different traditions, and we thought that because Reagan was so extreme in his right-wing politics that there would be a mass upsurge from the Left that a sensible, non-sectarian Left organization like the

newly formed DSA could capitalize on. I remember having this discussion where Harrington went on about how there's an impending economic crisis—and he would always say, and it was only half in jest, that he knows all of this because Marxism is a science—but he went on about this economic crisis and how it validates Rosa Luxemburg's theory of underconsumption, and I felt my jaw dropping. I remember saying, "Michael, you're not serious that you think that Rosa Luxemburg's economic analysis provides the key to what's happening today?" I mean, people read this stuff out of historical interest, but he was serious. And I was just shocked. It wasn't Lenin or Trotsky or Mao, but he had his own set of heterodox Marxist thinkers, and he was using these texts as if they possessed the inner truth of the world rather than gleaning from them some tools that one might apply to understand the world around us. It was just everything that was wrong about the Left-wing tradition's use of theory. That's just not the way that one should orient oneself politically if one wants to change the real world.

Cohen: On a more practical level, what was it like working with DSA, being in New York where DSOC was at its strongest, coming out of working with NAM and being in graduate school?

Casey: There were a bunch of us in DSA—and this would include in New York even former DSOC people like Gerry Hudson, who's now the executive vice-president of SEIU—who very much saw the importance of new social movements and thought that the DSOC people were much too caught up in having the labor movement as the center of everything. It's interesting that we ended up in influential positions in the labor movement, because I think we were able to look at issues without being caught up in the Marxist metaphysics about the working class that still enthralled most DSOC folks. But there was definitely a fault line between the former NAM people and most of the former DSOC people regarding new social movements versus the labor movement. There were other fault lines, of course, like these Old Left traditions; in the DSOC leadership you had these old Schactmanites, including Harrington, and among the NAM people you have these ex-Communists, and so even there we had ways of discourse that were foreign to each other. I'll give you a couple of "for instances." In one of our discussions, one of the younger DSOC people began a conversation with a quote he says from the "Old Man," which was a quote from Trotsky. The ex-NAM members were stunned. It wasn't that it was from Trotsky, but that we would never begin any discussion with a quote from a left theorist like we were reading from the Scriptures. It was in part how much they still saw themselves as in a Trotskyist tradition, which was a little strange, but even more so, what struck us was that kind of scriptural approach to someone like Trotsky.

The other thing was that, having been Gramscians and having these ex-Communists in NAM—we were making an attempt to appropriate what I would call the democratic potential, and even moments, of that tradition, which these people in DSOC didn't understand. Right before the merger, I was at a DSOC youth confer-

ence at which Irving Howe spoke, and he went on about how Gramsci was a Stalinist—I found it bizarre. Gramsci was not a flawless democrat for us, but we believed that the thrust of his theory was profoundly democratic. I remember another meeting fairly early on where an ex-NAM member talked about using a "popular front" approach, and these Schactmanites jumped down her throat like she had said that we should all become Stalinists.

So there were these very different cultural traditions, and some of it was New Left versus Old Left, some of it was old Communist versus old Trotskyist. But the NAM people, because we came out of the New Left, always had a different relationship to Marxism than many in DSOC, who were much more caught in an Old Left paradigm than we were. I wouldn't speak for everybody by any stretch of the imagination, but I would say that many more of the NAM people moved on to a kind of post-Marxism and to radical democratic politics.

Cohen: When the merger happened, it seems that the energy NAM should have brought to the new organization gets dissipated, and the merger works in the opposite way. Would you say that this is an accurate statement?

Casey: I would say first, the people who opposed the merger, of whom probably the most prominent would be Barbara Ehrenreich—although when we did merge, she went along—for them, we were "leaving the true faith"; it was apostasy. As far as they were concerned, the fact that DSA didn't produce what we thought it would was just proof that we were going into the "swamp of social democracy." For me, in those first few years of the merger, there were these tensions and we had these pullings back and forth, but it was also a time when we were attracting a fairly impressive cohort of African-American left-wing activists like Cornel West and Manning Marable; when I was in the national leadership of DSA, I spent a lot of time trying to develop that base among activists of color. And the former DSOC people wanted to spend more time on the labor movement and stuff like that. When we merged, we thought there was political space to grow into and the only thing really lacking was a powerful enough and smart enough organization to accomplish this. For me, the moment of recognition came when I realized that if DSA had done everything that I wanted it to do, it would simply be a slightly larger organization, a little less insular and dogmatic in its outlook, but still small and marginal. The political space that we thought was there didn't exist. Or, if it did exist, it was in the process of collapsing at that point.

Part of that was the United States moving into a period of real conservatism. But part of it was us being a self-defined socialist organization. I mean, how does that play out in the United States? Is there real political space here to be something other than marginal if you are a self-defined socialist organization? My view of this is that actually, the radical movements of the '60s, they didn't start out as socialist movements. They all started out as radical democratic movements. What happened was that—and we can describe that

process though it didn't end very happily—at some point when they try to figure out how to make change, they become Marxist, or at least socialist and Marxist. This was, for the most part, an uncritical assimilation of Marxism, and it was not a positive development. The next wave of radical movements from the Left will be more like the '60s than the '30s and they will be radical democratic movements, not ideologically socialist and communist.

There were also various things that happened when we founded DSA. We inherited a rather large deficit from DSOC and we spent most of the first couple of years working that off. That kept us from doing more outreach that we would have liked to have done. But at the end of the day, I think particularly for a democratic socialist organization that took shape in the mid-1980s at the beginning of a wave of conservatism, there just wasn't the political space for it to be anything other than a politically marginal organization.

Cohen: Given that, though, can you describe the space felt was available? Was it something like what DSOC did with the Democratic Agenda, creating an arena where the Democratic Party Left could be brought together with the social democratic/socialist-feminist left to have an impact on social, political, or economic policy?

Casey: Living and working politically in Canada for years gave me a keen appreciation of what could be accomplished in a society with a mass social democratic or labor party. But if I learned anything from my youthful political efforts it is that you cannot simply will such structures into existence: there are structural limits on what one can accomplish at any given point in history. You need to have a firm grasp of what is possible in the political world in which you work. In some part, DSA understood this: this is certainly the meaning behind Harrington's apt phrase, "the left wing of the possible." But the insistence upon a democratic socialist identity ran against this understanding.

There is political space for a Left. I make a distinction between an organizational left, which is ideologically left-wing in some shape or form, and what I would call a mass left, such as feminist organizations, or organizations like trade unions. There is certainly political space for those mass organizations, and they are the ones that will give rise to whatever is going to be the next political left. But the problem that we had, and still have, is that—and there was this theory late NAM-early DSA which we called "the bagel" or "the donut" problem—that once there was this understanding that the real action was in these mass movements, what happened was that all the most talented activists who had kept the organizations alive went off and put all their energies into the mass movement. As a consequence there was a hole in the middle. So I thought there was a role for a DSA that was more almost like a Fabian society, where all of us who are active in these mass movements could have conversations about what's happening in them, how they fit into larger social developments. Ideally, DSA could have provided the analysis and understanding that would give activists the perspective and the tools to be successful and connect with the larger forces. But that didn't happen. Instead, people went off on their own.

I have a similar concern when I see current generations of union activists who never went through the Left. When everything was said and done, what we took away from Marxism was a way of looking at society and understanding the dynamics of change, and trying to understand how the whole picture works. That training in a certain critical thinking doesn't take place. An organization that had a more modest agenda to provide that would be fulfilling a real role. Then, the sorts of people like me–there would be some reason to be connected to this generation of younger activists. But right now, our relationship to a DSA is not all that different from the old socialists' relationship to DSOC and the trade union movement. I mean, they would send dues and money to an organization out of those nostalgia-for-their-youthful-political-years, but not because they really felt that the organization was engaged in political work that was important. I think that's where a lot of us are now, and I think more so the former NAM people than the former DSOC people because the trajectory NAM people were on was that if you're not involved in the mass movements, you're not where things are happening.

Cohen: This is a common point that has come up in my conversations with other NAM members. The people who should have been coming into an organization from which they could learn and move into whatever organization came next never materialized.

Casey: Yep. And there is a way in which not just NAM people but trade union leadership now are '60s radicals. When you look at the trade union leadership today, it's people who came out of those movements. But as unions do more organizing, the young people likely will be involved in something like a college anti-sweatshop movement, and then they just get hired as an organizer, and there's no or very little formative political education.

Despite McCarthyism and all the reaction of the 1950s, there was some continuity between the organized Left of the '30s and the organized Left of the '60s. But that sort of continuity has largely been disrupted since the '60s: the organized Left is in complete tatters. Harrington used to joke that we in DSA were the "defeated remnant of a defeated remnant," but even at our lowest point, we had an organizational vitality that it lacking today. In the past, there was a sense then that if you were going to be an activist in the labor movement, or an activist in the civil rights movement, joining one of these movements or organizations and being part of them was one and the same thing. But what little remains of the organized Left doesn't have that sort of connection for young people. They don't see that there's a connection between that sort of work and being in these organizations. Also, that whole development in the '80s with the crisis of Marxism and people moving beyond it, that created a different kind of intellectual drain. Before that point, one could still define oneself as a Marxist in a way that is pretty insular and defends Marxism against all comers, or one could adopt an open and heterodox Marxism that's not necessarily in competition with other intellectual traditions. But I think that latter position has been lost, and it's not altogether clear that a Left organization could have a post-Marxist po-

litical outlook and educational agenda that young people would become schooled in.

There are some developments here that reflect the ebb and flow of history, and part of what's interesting about the Obama presidency is whether it sets the stage for new developments. But I fully expect there will be a time when there will be an upsurge from the Left and the movements for social change will be on the ascendency again. But I'm just not sure what that means in terms of the kind of organized Left that we once had, and whether there will be a Left like we experienced to play a role in this development.