

Interview with Joni Rabinowitz and John Haer

Victor Cohen

Joni Rabinowitz and **John Haer** were central members of the Pittsburgh, PA chapter of NAM and known throughout the organization as capable and effective leaders. John served one term on the National Board, acting as a liaison between locals and the national organization, while Joni was one of the organizers of the "Industrial Heartland" region, which held meetings three to four times a year. They were active in all of Pittsburgh NAM's organizing efforts and, after the formation of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the couple stayed involved with the organization for another six years.

Joni and John met in 1968 while working in the New York City Welfare Department, though they came from quite different backgrounds. John grew up in Warren, a small town in Pennsylvania, and was radicalized by the anti-war and civil rights movements while in college. Joni, on the other hand, came to left politics "by birth," as she puts it. Her father, Victor Rabinowitz, was a member of the Communist Party USA and a well-known lawyer who represented clients such as Paul Robeson and, most famously, the nations of Cuba and Chile. Joni's mother, Marcia, was also a member of the Communist Party USA and worked throughout the 1950s to integrate the New Rochelle public schools.

John came to Pittsburgh in 1969 to perform his two-year alternative service in a state hospital as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, and Joni came out to visit and then moved there. When the alternative service ended in 1971, the couple travelled around the country for close to a year but returned to Pittsburgh when they heard their friends were starting a chapter of a new organization, "The New American Movement." They have been in Pittsburgh ever since. After 22 years working for Service Employees International Union Local 585, today John is the Executive Director of the Pittsburgh local of the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists. Joni is co-director of Just Harvest, a non-profit organization that she co-founded in 1986. The organization does public policy advocacy on hunger and poverty issues and promotes social and economic justice.

This interview took place in Joni and John's home in Pittsburgh on June 13, 2007 and was conducted and transcribed by Victor Cohen.

Victor Cohen: Since you were in Pittsburgh when the NAM chapter formed, can you describe that moment? How did NAM get underway, and what drew you to it?

John Haer: Well, you have to place it in the context of the huge movement in the country already, mostly spurred by anti-Vietnam

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war activism and the youth movement. There were lots of Left strains out there, and many college-age people were radicalized by the war and the opposition to the war. Some of those trends were also inspired by the civil rights movement and SDS [Students for a Democratic Society].

Joni Rabinowitz: We got out of college and had nowhere to go. When I look now at all the lists of people who were in the Pittsburgh NAM chapter, these phone trees from 1977, at least three quarters of the people are still around and politically—I won't say active; I'd say aware.

Haer: I think the people who were interested in founding NAM self-identified as socialists but were uncomfortable with the organized socialist formations that appeared after SDS split. NAM was an attempt to create some sanity and a real organized Left, and so different strains came together. I think [James] Weinstein's histories of American socialism were real important to a number of founders because he talked about how there wasn't an explicitly socialist mass movement rooted in the history of the country.

Rabinowitz: That's why "American" was in the name.

Haer: At the time, SDS was splintering into lots of different, really crazy factions. There were people talking about how Albania was the model, there were people steeped in anti-imperialism to the extent that they felt everything about the United States had to be burned up to create a new society. Other people were going into the factories to build a working-class base. And there were the crazy Weather-people that some of us knew. We were pretty distraught about the turn that all that was taking. So I think that at the time of NAM's founding convention, 1972, people were initially responding to this call for a new movement that was sensible and still committed to socialism.

Cohen: You had graduated college by the time SDS split. How were you conscious of these other avenues the Left was taking?

Haer: When we were working in the New York City Welfare Department in the late 1960s, we had an organization called "Movement for a Democratic Society." It was grown-up people who had left the campus, SDS, so we stayed involved through that. There was a group in the welfare department, a group of cab drivers, a group of teachers, a group of city planners.

Rabinowitz: Well, it wasn't that big. And some of those people ended up in the Weather underground. One of them was blown up in that townhouse.

Haer: Teddy Gold.

Rabinowitz: Teddy Gold—he was part of TDS—Teachers for a Democratic Society.

Cohen: Were you both in SDS?

Rabinowitz: No. They were a little bit after my time.

Haer: You always told me that you thought that they were sort of “liberal.”

Rabinowitz: Yeah, at the beginning, they weren’t revolutionary enough for me, and by the time they got revolutionary, they got too revolutionary and they were off in some other world.

Cohen: So when you started NAM in Pittsburgh, you were both already involved with the Left, broadly defined?

Haer: Yes. We had been involved in the large peace movement in Pittsburgh.

Rabinowitz: We also had an anticorporate movement, against Gulf Oil’s role in Angola. Gulf was based in Pittsburgh, and we hooked up with other anti-corporate movements like Honeywell in Minneapolis and Boeing in Seattle.

Haer: And we had a youth switchboard—a help line, essentially, for young people, along with a draft resistance movement and an underground newspaper called *The Fair Witness*.

Rabinowitz: [reading from a handbook] “Resistance and Beyond. 1970. Living at War, Living in America, Living in School Alternatives. A handbook prepared by Pittsburgh Resistance and their friends.” So this was even before NAM.

Haer: For people who grew up in the ’80s and beyond, I think it’s really hard to understand how this was all happening. You have to have a feel for what it’s like when there’s a cultural change happening, a mass movement. It’s not like you have to call everybody and tell them, “You have to be there and get organized.” Things are happening spontaneously, people are changing consciousness in their daily conditions. It’s not like the hard crank-it-out work that has to be done every day. I mean, it was hard work, but you had the sense that things were happening, that the society’s changing, crumbling. Vietnam, the civil rights movement, the assassination of King, the president . . .

Rabinowitz: And the women’s movement.

Haer: And the riots. The message to a lot of people was that society’s messed-up.

Rabinowitz: And it’s falling apart and socialism is going to take over if we just work hard enough.

Haer: And we have a responsibility to try and make it happen. Of course, we were pretty naive.

Rabinowitz: But we were young, enthusiastic people, and we believed that we were going to make a revolution, and that there were openings to make it. We organized and went to every march in Washington in those days. Sometimes there were several a year.

Haer: People wanted to do that more than anything else—than have a career, than have a lot of money. Sure, we wanted to live a good life, but people wanted to see the damn change. That was what was motivating them. It was pretty amazing.

Cohen: So NAM seemed like a logical extension of what was already going on?

Rabinowitz: Yes. It was bringing the different movements together, and looking at the whole perspective, because all these movements were not socialist. They were individual issue movements.

Haer: There were also all kinds of strands of Marxism, and the people that responded to the calls that NAM put out were interested because there was a sense that we need a real organization, that it should be explicitly socialist, and that we have to find a way to talk about it so most Americans know what we're talking about.

Rabinowitz: When I think about the kind of work those other groups were doing, like the SWP [Socialist Workers' Party] and the IS [International Socialists], the RCP, the Revolutionary Communist Party, the thing I think was significant about NAM was that we didn't put the sole focus on the industrial working class.

In fact, there was a whole movement on the part of NAM to develop an analysis of a "professional managerial class." Barbara Ehrenreich, who was in NAM as we were thinking this through, was a big part of developing that analysis. Many of us had been to college and didn't see being a professional as a detriment. We actually envisioned a revolutionary movement that had a role for people with college degrees, that didn't ask them to throw that away. We had many debates about the bourgeoisie, and who we were, and who they were, and where we fit in—a lot of political debates. That's one thing that distinguished us from a lot of the other Left groups—a lot of them took Marx and said, "Ok, this is what he wants us to do—he wants us to go into the factories and organize people in the factories." And so there were a ton of people who came here to Pittsburgh to enter the steel industry, people from every single group.

Haer: And in the mines.

Rabinowitz: Some of our folks went into those kind of jobs, but many of our people were college-educated and didn't want to deny the fact that we'd been to college and who wanted to find some role to play in our own settings.

Haer: In human service jobs.

Rabinowitz: And non-profits, as well as in colleges and universities. We had quite a number of people who had been through certain parts of the movement and wanted to carry it forward into some kind of broader analysis, or kind of Marxism, that could include all of us.

Haer: You have to put NAM in context of the movement as a whole. It was a strand that came out of people who were already active in the movement: the theorists, the intellectuals who were looking for a different kind of Left organization. I think that defines it.

In some ways it struck a chord, but in a lot of ways we were another tendency that developed. There's lots of folks out there who were very active and did a lot of good work who didn't join the organization, but I think where the chapters took root, we ended up playing a role in building meaningful coalitions with the active groups—especially issue groups—and then trying to find a way to attract new people.

Rabinowitz: I can't explain why our chapter was so large, compared to some of the other places. We had two, maybe three, different groups of people who became elected to what we called the "National Interim Committee," the NIC, who moved to Chicago to work in the national office.

Cohen: What were some of the projects NAM took up here?

Rabinowitz: We had the taxi group, Yellow Fever, and we had the PPP, the People's Power Project, which went on for a number of years and grew out of the movement of the middle seventies around the energy crisis. We developed the PPP around the idea of publicly-owned utilities. We did a campaign against Duquesne Light rate hikes, and we had a lot of public activity around that. We built an organization which became Pennsylvania Alliance for Jobs and Energy, which merged with a senior's group, Action Coalition of Elders (ACE) that was focused on energy issues.

Haer: One of the later spokespeople for Pennsylvania Alliance for Jobs and Energy was Jim Ferlo, who's now a state senator in Harrisburg.

Rabinowitz: And then we had a labor committee—people were organizing at the University of Pittsburgh in the faculty union and also in the clerical union.

Haer: That was the first [SEIU Local] 925 clerical drive—it was unsuccessful, but it came out of Pittsburgh. We had six or seven pretty loyal cadres that were very active in that. Some of them went on to work for National 925 SEIU.

Rabinowitz: We had political education. We always had PE going on.

Haer: One of our members, Holly Graff, taught in the philosophy department at the University of Pittsburgh. She was a top Marxist, and a very good teacher, and because of her, we talked a lot about Gramsci. [laughs]

Rabinowitz: [holds up an issue of NAM's *Discussion Bulletin*] Here he is, Gramsci.

Haer: Holly was part of a group of Marxists theorists who were very interested in how to counter cultural hegemony and find a way to transform these institutions.

Rabinowitz: You have to understand, our interest in Gramsci came out of our interest in social change. People were like John said—really committed to this revolution. And we said it: “committed to the revolution.” Now it sounds quaint and hokey. Then, we didn’t hesitate to use that terminology, or to talk about it in public, or to talk about it in all our writings, because we really believed we were doing it, and that we were going to bring it about.

Cohen: How did you think it was going to come about? I know we’re talking about Gramsci here, but NAM also had a long history of debating the role of electoral politics in relation to this question—did that come up as well?

Rabinowitz: Sure. We, John and I, happened to be on opposite sides of the electoral politics debate, which was a big debate in NAM. And it wasn’t just electoral politics, but the role of the Democratic Party, what participating in that arena meant. During one PE, John and I had a debate about the issue.

Cohen: [to Rabinowitz] Which side were you on?

Rabinowitz: I was on the “electoral politics are just another form of corporate control” side, and John was on the pro-electoral politics side. [Both laugh.] And now we’re both Democratic Committee people. How about that? But I have to say that I never voted for a major party presidential candidate between ’63 and ’93.

Cohen: How many people came to the public education events? What were those events like?

Rabinowitz: Thirty?

Haer: They were more like internal education.

Rabinowitz: We had the chapter Socialist School from ’75 to ’80. Here’s our Marxism course [holds up pamphlet], January 1975—this is all my notes. I guess I learned something. [reads] “Thanks to David Houston and URPE”—that’s the Union of Radical Political Economists. “The classic Marxian flow-diagram of a capitalist economy. Elements of the value equation.” I have to say, this was beyond me. I mean, I tried.

[reads] “Holly Graff and Jeff McCourt—study group. What is dialectics? Materialism versus idealism. The origins of capitalism. Commodities and exchange. Money, capital and labor. What is money? How does it cloud people’s minds? Production versus consumption.” This was serious stuff.

Cohen: Was that for NAM members, or for anyone who was attending the class? And this was for the Pittsburgh Socialist Community School, right?

Rabinowitz: Yes. Here’s a flyer that says, [reads] “Pittsburgh NAM Socialist Community School,” and there’s a cut-off here. [reads] “Clip and return this month to Pittsburgh NAM.” It’s from 1979, and the courses for February were, [reads] “Economics for Activists,” “Reproductive Rights Study Group,” “Socialist Approaches to Childrearing,” and “The Nuclear Future.” It went on for a short amount of time, and people did come. But it was much too much to do—I mean, it was a huge thing, to teach courses like this.

Haer: The chapter had four, maybe five, really strong, good speakers. Some of them needed Joni’s help to kind of figure out how to get from A to B. They might have been good speakers, but they had no idea how to help people to get there.

Rabinowitz: Here’s a letter from 1978 to the secretary of the First Unitarian Church, and it says: [reads] “As I described to you on the phone, NAM is trying to start a Socialist School in the fall in order to better educate ourselves and interested people about the questions involved in radical social change. We’re looking for a package deal from you, which I hope we can arrange.” Then it goes on to talk about the events: [reads] “For the courses, we expect ten to twenty people, and they will start the week of September 25th. Two of them will run for ten weeks, probably on Monday and Tuesday evenings. One of them will run five sessions every other Thursday. There is also our Labor and Politics series, for which we expect fifteen to twenty people, and they will be held one Wednesday night per month. For the Friday Night Forums, though we don’t have dates, we do plan to show a film on occasion. We want to charge fifty cents a session per class and a dollar for the film, and for the Labor and Politics series.” Some of these classes petered out before their time elapsed.

That gives a view of what we were doing in 1978, and the numbers of people we were talking to.

Haer: Were you staff then, helping to organize it?

Rabinowitz: It lists me here as “Executive Secretary,” so I guess I was.

Cohen: It sounds like the school did fairly well.

Haer: Well, I think it reached some folks that found it useful in understanding society.

Rabinowitz: [holding up a flyer] Manning Marable, one of our early members, spoke at this event. This was fall of 1980. [reads] “Black and Left Unity in the 1980s, presented by Manning Marable, historian, political economist and analyst of the Afro-American experience.” Here’s another one. [reads] “Learning and Organizing Forums.” One of the forums was our slide show on working class history, and Joel Sabadasz presented it. This one was a good one [reads], “Nicaragua, by Sandy Mitchell.” She had been there. [reads] “Pay Equity, Ending the Wage Ghetto, by Kathy Ferraro, Public Affairs Committee.” And then [reads], “Plant Closings: Will Our Communities Die? A Night of Films and Discussion.” Then [reads], “Food Politics: Agribusiness and Alternatives.” This one was interesting. [reads] “The World of the Socialist Artist, by Ruth Kirsch, Dancer.” She was a belly dancer and did a session on the role of the socialist artist.

Cohen: What do you think the Pittsburgh chapter accomplished? Success is a difficult term to use in this case. A better way to put it would be to ask, what did the chapter do that resonated with people? For example, the Los Angeles chapters of NAM ran a very successful Socialist Community School, which drew in enough non-NAM students and ran enough events that it was self-sustaining beyond NAM—it didn’t get money from anything other than its classes, lectures, or social events and ran in the black for many years.

Rabinowitz: I remember that. We were inspired by the things that happened in L.A. and in a couple of other places, both organizing projects and schools. Our school was nothing like that.

Haer: I think that the People’s Power Project, which developed into Pennsylvania Alliance for Jobs, that was a popular mass organizing project that really had some legs.

Cohen: Can you describe how it worked? What did that project involve, at a nuts-and-bolts sort of level?

Rabinowitz: Well, we met every other Sunday morning at eleven o’clock; it came up around the energy crisis.

Haer: Remember when Dennis Kucinich was mayor of Cleveland and took over Cleveland’s utilities? This issue was pretty interesting then. There were some of our people who were real close to that work with him. But in Pittsburgh, what we did mostly is build coalitions around the rate hikes, and we got politicians and city officials involved in opposing the rate hikes.

Rabinowitz: But when people asked us what our solution was, public ownership of the utilities was the type of solution we were talking about. We looked at the energy industry as a whole and talked about public ownership and what that meant. We studied some of the little, small publically owned utilities that existed, saw what their strengths were, and that was a model for us.

Now, the actual organizing that we were doing was around rate hikes, because Duquesne Light was doing what they do, which is

just raise rates. And we were able to not just have organized protests, but actually participate in hearings. We had Paul Garver, who was good enough at studying the way the company worked that he could present testimony at hearings that rivaled the corporate people. We had some recognition because we understood what the issues were.

Cohen: So was that a legislative campaign? How would you characterize it?

Haer: It had some legislative aspects to it, but it utilized regulatory systems more, and for pressure points.

Rabinowitz: To try and get the public utility commission to oppose rate hikes.

Haer: I think we retarded them for a few years.

Rabinowitz: But it developed into PAJE, Pennsylvania Alliance for Jobs and Energy. We also had the Kane Hospital group. [to Haer:] Was that related?

Haer: Kind of. Three of our members were working as nurse's aides at the county-operated nursing home, and they wrote an exposé about how the care was just horrible. And got it published.

Rabinowitz: It was called, "Kane Hospital—a Place to Die." As a result of that report, the county broke that one hospital into three. Some seniors got involved around that, and several stayed in for our utilities project. They were called the Action Coalition of Elders, ACE. They became part of PAJE.

Haer: There were people working in community organizations as well that affiliated with PAJE. There was still a broader movement at that time, and lots of really interesting organizing going on.

Rabinowitz: You know, the other thing we haven't talked about is socialist-feminism. That was a whole intellectual-theoretical piece that developed through NAM. There were some women-only NAM chapters, there were some pretty strong academic and intellectual people writing on the subject. We had a couple of conferences on the subject and really tried to make a congruence between socialism and feminism—"the personal is political" was one of our slogans. I think that that was a significant effort on our part, to bring those two together, because otherwise it seems like a contradiction sometimes.

For instance, there weren't many women involved with NAM early on, until we made a rule about it. There was a struggle about that, and that's how the women got into the leadership. We spent the whole weekend of the second convention writing our "Political Statement" that put all this together. It took us three or four days, with one hundred people writing a political statement. That's when we put in the fifty-percent rule—that fifty percent of every leadership body had to be women.

You have to remember, what we did in Pittsburgh was also what went on in our region—for NAM, this part of the country was the Industrial Heartland Region. We had NAM chapters in Baltimore . . .

Haer: There was a group at IUP [Indiana University of Pennsylvania], there was a group in Morgantown [West Virginia] . . .

Rabinowitz: We were the strongest region. We had three or four meetings a year. We had two-day meetings with NAM members from Baltimore, Philly, Pittsburgh, Morgantown, Athens, and Cleveland and Dayton, Ohio.

Cohen: Many NAM members I've spoken to have talked about the one area where NAM wasn't able to make much headway, and that was drawing into the organization people of color. Was the Pittsburgh NAM chapter largely white?

Haer: Yeah.

Rabinowitz: We had a lot of struggle about how to fix that, and we never succeeded.

Cohen: Do you have a sense of why that was, that it was largely a white organization?

Rabinowitz: Well, believe me, if I could have figured that out, we would have fixed it. I mean, we talked a lot about it, but I don't know if we ever could. And it's still the case. There's still a lot of separation, in Pittsburgh particularly, and it's one of the only things about New York that I miss besides my family. The society here, in Pittsburgh, is pretty segregated, and then, when you work with folks and you interact with them every day, you wonder, why is this? We're really not that different. Deep down, we all have the same needs, the same kind of desires.

Haer: At the time of our coming together as NAM, our most recent experience concerning race and the Left was the Black Power movement and black activists whom we respected saying essentially the most important thing to them was building black-oriented organizations. We really did have, like a lot of the white movement and even white movements now, a problem with trying to integrate with African American groups. The Congress of African Peoples had a chapter here in Pittsburgh, and we did some work with them. In fact, we were one of the few Left groups to have a good relationship with them. We still see some of them today.

Rabinowitz: That's right. That's why CAP was so important. It was one of those black power organizations that was willing to work with white people.

Haer: We tried to work with the Panthers, but that was not really possible—here in Pittsburgh, there wasn't much of a chapter, but in

other places, they were really destroyed by the FBI and police. There was a sense that we could work through coalitions with other organizations, and we made some efforts to do that. There were still some reasonably strong bonds formed, but there were always arguments within the organization around this. A pretty strong critique that came from some of our members was that unless we had an anti-racist struggle as our primary organizing focus, then we would never be able to effectively recruit black members or overcome racism in society. That's something we never resolved.

Rabinowitz: It was a huge debate in the national organization, and we had splits over it.

Haer: But people would argue. There was always some kind of group arguing that we ought to prioritize anti-racist work. There were a few important black leaders who joined the organization and had some leadership positions, and that was really important. Manning Marable was a guiding light at conventions.

Rabinowitz: It was a big failing. But I don't know what we would have done.

Haer: There were attempts. We worked on South African boycott stuff, and we had some effective events and organizing that brought together mixed-race projects.

Rabinowitz: But they were events—it wasn't like integrating anti-racist organizing into all our work. I'm not really sure what that means, in actual practice, although people said it.

Cohen: Well, socialist-feminism—how did that work? How was that felt, or acted on, or incorporated?

Haer: Well, we mandated that all of our leadership positions had to be at least fifty percent women, nationally and locally, and I think that provided ways in which women felt that they were able to not be dominated, though that wasn't always the case, that they felt that way or weren't dominated. But it provided a better playing field. We could have done something like that for race.

Rabinowitz: At one point, we had enough third world people in the national structure to mandate something on the national board. But it didn't last very long. That was a lot of work, a lot of traveling.

Haer: I would say that the one thing I feel was really valuable about my whole experience—and I think a lot of people might say this—we really had an opportunity to learn and develop skills because we jumped in and tried to build an organization. We learned a hell of a lot about a lot of things that are useful today by doing and interacting and struggling with each other. I think it made us better organizers, a lot of us, and knowledgeable about society, collectively. We learned a lot of things about how to build a movement.

Cohen: Did you feel a need to move towards training a cadre of NAM organizers, to be more like the left sectarian organizations NAM was trying to differentiate itself from? Was that an issue for the Pittsburgh chapter? Nationally, it seems that debate was always there, and the longer NAM was around, the more pronounced it became because it was such a diffused national movement.

Rabinowitz: Between being a cadre and being a mass movement? Yes, it was an issue.

Haer: We actually had some ways to work it out in practice, in organizing. We were always pretty strong on working on organizing projects, and we had a lot of practical experience of how best to do that. I mean, we still had arguments around how open to be, and how important it was to be open, but it was around real, concrete stuff.

Rabinowitz: Here's something relevant to your question about the cadre issue. It's a document that describes the PPP, People's Power Project, and PAJE. It says here [reads] "NAM members within PAJE have been pushing but with only some success the interrelated objectives of democratization of the organization and the political development of its membership. In addition, there are disagreements about what issues are crucial to the membership and what sort of tactics are necessary to mobilize them. These disagreements constantly serve to remind NAM members of the crucial questions: a) What constitutes mass organizing in socialist organizations, and b) how do we implement our conception of organizing in such organizations."

We were trying to develop that stuff all the time. And we had a lot of debates about how far we wanted to go, when were we selling out, how were we going to keep the mass character involved, and how were we going to develop the mass character while still maintaining our vision. And what was the role of NAM in all of this? Our friend wrote a letter when she resigned from the NAM Labor Committee in '79, because—and this is a perfect example—the NAM Labor Committee wanted their organizing project to invite people that they were organizing to the NAM Organizing Meeting discussions. And our friend felt she'd get fired if they did that. She wanted to keep her NAM organizing secret.

Of course, now we know that you can't just open up an organizing drive to anybody who wants to share it with you. At the time, we didn't know that much, and we thought, "Hey, they're doing something over there at Pitt in the clerical department and they need to share it more with NAM. Why are they being so secretive about it?"

We were really involved in a lot of projects, and they took a great deal of time and energy. Part of what was going on then, too, was that I was running this bar called Wobblie Joe's, a bar on the South Side of Pittsburgh, on 27th and Jane.

Haer: A member and a friend of his decided to buy a bar and renovate it and try to run it as a movement-oriented bar.

Rabinowitz: It was named after the union organizer Joe Hill. We had music every night, and sometimes we didn't have any customers but still had paid musicians, so we weren't a very good business. The two guys who bought the place and opened it up were social workers, and they got this idea that we could integrate the culture of the movement with the working-class culture of the South Side, which is where a steel mill was. I became the manager, in addition to booking all the music, opening and closing the registers and ordering the stuff.

Cohen: Who came to the bar?

Rabinowitz: It was the late seventies, and people came for the different musicians, some of whom are now nationally and internationally known. Singer-songwriter Ann Feeney started there, and Ernie Hawkins, a nationally known blues artist, started there. There were bluegrass, jazz and folk musicians as well. We had a lot of people travel through. Movement people came, but they didn't drink that much, and we didn't have a kitchen that really functioned, so we didn't make very much money. It went on for three years and was loads of fun.

Cohen: When the merger between DSOC and NAM happened, how did that go over with the Pittsburgh chapter?

Rabinowitz: We talked about it for two years. Look, at the time of the merger, we had NAM chapters everywhere: Buffalo, Denver, Eugene, Madison, and Chicago—North Side and Lucy Parsons, Rainer NAM, Pittsburgh NAM, the Socialist-Feminist Commission, Austin NAM, Cleveland NAM, San Francisco NAM, Chapel Hill, Detroit and Rosa Parks NAM . . . I can't even name them all.

Haer: Don't forget about New York NAM.

Rabinowitz: We were all over the country. And they didn't have anything except Mike Harrington.

Haer: They didn't do much local organizing.

Rabinowitz: They had some political and union officials like Bill Winpisinger, and they had some Third World people in New York who were part of Harrington's group, but I don't know . . . I don't know why we did this. They didn't have anything or anybody in Pittsburgh—they had about three people here, and they were never doing anything, particularly. I think they were looking for some grass roots, to get broader.

Haer: I think we were too, actually. There was a sense that nationally we were still a pretty small, kind of inward-looking group and could benefit by the association with a larger public socialist group.

Rabinowitz: Well, I think it depends on who it was.

Haer: The vote was not unanimous by any means.

Rabinowitz: I'm sorry, but I thought it was going to just water us down. I wasn't interested in the Democratic party; I wasn't really even interested in elections.

Haer: Their primary practice was not so much local organizing, though they talked about it, but nationally they would try to establish a public Democratic Socialist presence at presidential elections. Michael Harrington would have workshops for people and would come and speak, along with some others. There were a number of pretty well-known elected officials who said they would identify [with DSOC]; there were some union leaders who said they would publicly identify with DSOC, I was told. And I think there was a sense that the merger might provide us with a more national presence.

Rabinowitz: Here we are. [reads] "We're different. DSOC has many members in the forty-to-sixty age range . . ."

Haer: Yeah, they had a lot of older people.

Rabinowitz: [continues reading] ". . . while most NAM members are between twenty-five and forty, and over sixty-five. DSOC has emphasized work within the left wing of the Democratic Party, within the labor movement and on campuses, and within the religious community. NAM has emphasized work within the women's movement, community organizing, and organizing around specific issues such as energy. DSOC has emphasized building on a national level through coalitions and outreach conferences, and has recently begun to build strong locals. In contrast, NAM first started building local chapters that could have impact in their cities and hoped they would combine to produce national presence and practice, as has occurred in some instances. The differences between NAM and DSOC represent complementary strengths, and this is a key reason for merger."

Cohen: Who was writing that?

Rabinowitz: [reads] "Holly Graff, a member of the Political Committee."

Haer: They belonged to the Second International, the European Social Democratic parties, some of whom were progressive and some of whom weren't. But at the time there were progressive movements within those parties, and there were some that were actually pretty progressive—who supported Cuba, were working towards better public welfare systems in their countries and all the rest of it. DSOC was also part of that whole old tradition, the Socialist-non-Communist tradition. We were sort of New Left, and they were sort of Old non-communist Left.

Rabinowitz: Well, it's not just non-communist, it's anti-communist. I think some of them were able to overcome that by merging with us, because we had a lot of former Communists in NAM. But I don't think the ones who were of that age, the fifties and sixties, were able to do that. They had had divergent experiences with each other on the national level, and they didn't get together very easily.

Cohen: In retrospect it seems the merger is an interesting way to mark the beginning of the Reagan era and the end of that optimism of the seventies. Is that right?

Haer: I think so. In retrospect, it also marks the decline of socialism internationally. At the time, some of these European Social Democratic parties were in power but started to wane during that period. And here in the U.S., I could not believe that Reagan won. I remember thinking that was . . . like jumping in a cold bath. It was a shock. I remember thinking, "What is really going on?" I think the end of optimism is a good way to put it, at least the way I feel about it, though I wouldn't have admitted it at the time.

Rabinowitz: We were mostly caught up at that time with the logistics of the whole merger. I mean, we were starting a new national organization. We merged our national committees, and we had a lot of negotiating to do in terms of national resources, in terms of the structure, where the power was going to be, what the staffing was going to be like, and what the finances were going to be like. We found out a lot later they were in much more serious financial straits than they ever told us, and I can't say if it was intentional or not. I don't know. But I know for a fact we got stuck in a financial relationship that we weren't expecting. The whole thing took a couple of years.

And then there was the question of merging chapters. There weren't many DSOC members here, locally, though I remember a few, and a few joint-members, and some other people who were new, and we thought, "Oh, these people are going to start to get involved." But I think they felt excluded because we were a pretty tight group, and they weren't a part of it. I don't even remember who they were. There were about three joint members, and they already were more active in NAM.

Cohen: How long did DSA last in Pittsburgh?

Haer: When did we peter away? I guess we could mark it by the last publication of *The Allegheny Socialist*?

Rabinowitz: I don't think so, because that was '86, and we went after that. I think we just stopped, and John and I stopped before a few other people. But the chapter kept on going, and they kept having elections and they kept going to conventions. I remember there were a few conventions where there were elections for the delegates to go to, but there were hardly any people voting, and hardly any people going.

Haer: A number of people in the leadership were getting involved with families and jobs and that sort of stuff, and I think that had some effect.

I mean, there is a problem with socialism: we can't really point to anywhere where we can say, "This is the kind of society that is the model for what a just society should be." We can find elements in places, but I think that it's pretty difficult. The final break-up of the Soviet Union, and the outcome of other Third World countries that call themselves socialist, isn't really a very pretty picture. And here we are in a whole new era where America is definitely the hegemonic figure in the world. I think we were really struggling with how we would define what socialism means. And you know, maybe we stopped trying, and that's a problem.

Rabinowitz: Well, we definitely got into reform movements. I mean, we were doing community organizing, labor organizing, to improve people's lives and to try to make systemic changes. I mean, that's how I talk about it now in my work with Just Harvest, but it's in terms of what we have in our government, as opposed to changing the government, restructuring the economic situation, the economic form. We don't talk about that very much.

Haer: Somewhere along the line the realization set in that we're not in a revolutionary period, and may not be in our lifetime. [laughs]

Rabinowitz: I think that's fair to say.

Cohen: Did you think you were when NAM formed, or as it grew?

Haer: I think we thought we were.

Rabinowitz: Yeah, we thought we were. [to Haer] Were we? [Long pause.] I don't know. You know, my mother says her life was wasted in the Communist Party. Part of that is the way that she was treated as a woman, whereas my father, I think he's demoralized too that revolution hasn't come in his lifetime, but at least he sees the work he did in the CP as having been more valuable than she does.

Now, he ran for Congress in 1948, on the American Labor Party, so they were doing that Popular Front work. I don't know how meaningful that experience was to him—I don't talk to him about that—but my mom was doing community organizing in the town where we grew up, organizing to integrate the schools there, and I talk about that often when people ask me about the influence of my parents. The other day, I called her a community organizer, and she said, "Well, I never conceived of myself in that way." But she was a very good community organizer, and she brought a lot of black and white people together to integrate the schools.

But these were all reforms, the community organizing and the labor organizing that the CP was doing. They weren't making socialist revolution. They were doing their organizing work, just like we are. And I don't know at what point they realized that they weren't going to have a socialist revolution in this country.

We don't have any kids, so I don't know if we're going to see it in our kid's lifetime, either. [Both laugh.] As far as where the United States is today, it's pretty worrisome, because we don't have control over anything anymore. We pretend like we do. We don't control our food, we don't control our energy, we don't control our material goods.

Haer: I think we want to see a socialist society.

Rabinowitz: I'd be happy if we just had equality.

Haer: But our expectations have been lowered a little bit over time. I was just thinking that it was pretty amazing when Gore won the 2000 election and then the Supreme Court just gave it to Bush. If that kind of thing had happened twenty years earlier, I think that a lot more people would be in the streets rioting. The problem is that most people out there aren't angry at society, that they've internalized it too much. The connection about whatever misery they feel, and I think they do feel a lot of misery, is not directed at the social organization.

Rabinowitz: It's like how people used to say, "When people find out about this, they're going to rise up!" I used to think, "Yeah, right." But nobody even says that anymore. People could be beat down into the ground and still not direct their anger at where it really needs to be directed. In a small way, that's what we try to do at Just Harvest, with our political education. We're just now talking about voter registration and our get-out-the-vote for 2008, and how we have to do not only voter registration, but education on why and how the political system is responsible for their condition.

But this is so far from a capitalist analysis. Although if you were to say in the course of a conversation with someone, "Capitalism's the real cause," people understand that. And we're always talking about how the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, and we show these charts, about how things have changed, and who votes and who doesn't vote, and the people understand that. But whether they can make any sense of doing anything about that, I don't know. But people do recognize that the poor people are getting screwed by rich people; people know that and they'll talk about it all the time.

Haer: I think our optimism was that we could do something like a long march through the institutions, and over time, with emphasis on local organizing, create something like a new consciousness that eventually would be able to exert political power. You know, that may still be the case, but it's really not all that evident, and it's a much longer march.

For example, the [presidential election] vote [for Senator John Kerry] last fall—it was obviously a tremendous antiwar vote, but I'm not sure what all that symbolizes. I mean, it's obviously a product of a lot of organizing and consciousness-raising at the local level, and the national electoral scene is the last thing that always changes.

However, if there were somebody out there articulating a strategy of social change that took into account all the various things that could be done, and was projecting more optimism for the possibilities for social change, it might be able to bear some fruit.