Dorothy Healey and Richard Healey visited Australia in June to represent the New American Movement at the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of Australia. Up to 1973, Dorothy Healey, now in her sixties, was a leading member of the Communist Party of the USA. She had been a member for 45 years and for 25 years was Southern California organiser and one of the party's national leaders. She was one of the party's best known orators and popular figures. In 1973 she resigned after a long period as a dissident within the party. She later joined the New American Movement (NAM). When they visited Australia in June, her son Richard, 36, was National Secretary of NAM. Brian Aarons interviewed them for ALR.
Starting from today's reality, what are some possible political developments in the US?

RH: The US working class has not been in action in any mass way for years and years, in some ways not since World War II, maybe even the 30s. But the working class's standard of living has been static for several years in the unorganised sectors — 80 per cent of the class. In fact, real income has declined steadily if only slightly over the last 10 years. There is also a variety of social pressures on the class, all in the general area of what we might call social disintegration, leading to an even greater atomisation of an already atomised class.

There is also a two-sided political pressure on the class. On the one hand, there is a certain disintegration or at least decay of labor's ability to organise within the Democratic Party. On the other, there is also a much increased attempt by big business to dominate the Democratic Party.

Four years ago there was a law passed which allowed organisations to create what they called "political action committees" (PACs) and big business has taken advantage of this much more than anyone else. Through the PACs they have channelled literally millions of millions of dollars into the two parties, but they have channelled over 50 per cent of it into the Democratic Party. They have realised that the Republican Party is less and less able to represent their interests because of its incredible minority status in the United States and hence are wanting to control the Democratic Party more directly than they have done before.

Why is the Republican Party such a permanent minority?

RH: Firstly, it has been seen as the party of business and big business and the working class has been pretty clear that its immediate interests are not served by that party, except for presidential elections in which the Republicans can represent themselves as more universal. Secondly, to a larger extent than the Democratic Party, the Republican Party is controlled by its activists, who are very very conservative, very far right. Now, that means it is very hard for liberal Republicans to have much influence within the party and it has been pulled recently to the right. The probability of a Ronald Reagan being elected in 1980, or at least being nominated by the Republicans, is very great.

Getting back to the Democrats, this partial demolition of labor's ability to control the Democratic Party was reflected very sharply in labor's inability to get through Congress last year the Labor Law Reform, a very modest attempt to improve the ability of unions to represent workers, to get contracts signed. Labor expected to win on it, but lost. Big business came out squarely against it. Business sectors that labor thought would come over to its side came out against Labor Law Reform. One such very important group was the Business Round Table, which is the key executives of the 150 biggest businesses in the US, and is probably the clearest expression of monopoly capital interests.

In that struggle labor had absolutely no idea of how to go to its rank and file to try to fight for the Labor Law Reform. For many years they had totally put all their efforts into lobbying in Washington so that when that wasn't sufficient, they only began to look for grassroots support among their own rank and file at the very end of the campaign, far too late to have any effect.

At the same time, partly as a consequence of this, certain trade union officials began to make statements which we haven't heard for a long time. For instance, one said big business has declared class warfare on us. And the top officials of the AFL-CIO are feeling a squeeze from below, some restlessness from below, and pressure from above, both economic and political. Business attacks on unionism and business attacks on labor's ability to deal in the Democratic Party successfully broke certain kinds of interests. That is, labor is being squeezed out of its role as a successful junior partner to "corporate liberalism" in governing the United States.

Very hesitantly, very tentatively, certain sectors of the labor movement began to respond. Around Labor Law Reform they started to go to rank and file to see if they could do anything. It was unsuccessful. Also unions like the United Auto Workers made an alliance with the National Organisation of Women: NOW would try to do some lobbying around Labor Law Reform and in return labor lobbied for the Equal Rights Amendment. For the first time in years labor made an alliance with a non-labor group to trade off those kind of issues.
Out of that experience and out of the succession of economic and political defeats, two coalitions have formed which indicate a certain potential within the class to change course. The first was the Citizens-Labor Energy Coalition (CLEC) formed by William Winpisinger of the International Association of Machinists. This coalition has been very important in trying to bring together community groups and trade unions around attacking utility rates and lack of safety in nuclear plants. They are not anti-nuke but they are pro-solar.

The potentially more significant coalition, formed on October 17, 1978 in Detroit, now called the Progressive Alliance, comprises about 120 organisations: 40 trade unions, and about 80 social groups ranging from the National Organisation of Women to National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to consumer groups, the most important environmental groups and even two socialist groups, Democratic Socialist Organising Committee and New American Movement.

So far the Progressive Alliance has two major points on its agenda. One is to try to democratise the Democratic Party. It has said that Jimmy Carter has totally violated the Democratic Party’s 1976 platform, showing that the party has no control over its own officials.

The second is to work on some of the major issues of this period that no-one has yet worked on. They’ve picked out three:

* the question of the federal budget and putting more money into domestic issues. They are the only, important, major group that has really challenged Carter on his increase in the military budget and his decrease in social spending. (And they’ve mostly dealt in domestic aspects; they’ve shied away from foreign policy.)

* the departure of US capital from the United States in the form of plant shutdowns, plant removal, runaway shops. There is an attempt to pass a law, now introduced into both the Illinois and Ohio legislatures, that would force big business to give at least two years’ warning of their intention and also to pay reparations to workers and the community.

This two-year warning enables you to organise against it. At present they announce on day one they are going and on day two they shut down. And for the first time the labor movement has said it has some right to question capital’s power of investment, the most crucial aspect of capitalist control.

* industrial causes of cancer, both in the workplace and in the community. This may be one of the most important issues in the 80s in the US because so many workers are furious about various carcinogenic problems.

In all this, the problem is not so much that US workers greatly believe in the free enterprise system as such. What they do believe in, still even in 1979 to some extent, is the possibility of upward mobility. But even this belief is being eroded by the fact that there are no longer jobs in the middle classes, in the middle strata, for working class children.

The greater problem is that our working class has not participated in any kind of organisation for years. Even the 20 per cent in trade unions does not participate in any organised fashion in their own unions. So they do not know how to organise, therefore don’t believe there is really any way to change the status quo.

Hence you can pile crisis upon crisis upon their backs and it’s not clear they’ll react in any progressive way, that they’ll respond, for example, to the Progressive Alliance. The Progressive Alliance could call local meetings to try to activise people but who knows if anyone will show up. Not because people aren’t angry, they are. But firstly they are not sure who the right target for their anger is — should it be welfare mothers, their corporations, their foreman, or the Russians?

Because this is a working class that doesn’t have any deeply seated instinct against capital as a whole. It does have instincts against its own employer but not against the capitalist system, it doesn’t think in those terms. So we have to do a very basic job of even trying to get people to participate in this Progressive Alliance, and to redevelop in the working class some basic class consciousness.

The right wing has a much easier job of mobilising people because it does it around very elementary, gut-level issues of
scapegoating people, of saying “Look, your target is such and such...” An example is the white backlash against “affirmative action”, which means that the black and latino minorities and women have special access to jobs, to better training, to upgrading and won’t necessarily be fired on the basis of first come, first go. This principle was first undermined in a case concerning admission to schools. A white man applying to go to a medical school was not admitted and blacks who got lower scores on some tests were admitted. He successfully challenged the provisions and the Supreme Court upheld it, eroding the ability of blacks or women or latinos to get into the schools.

The Webber case now before the Supreme Court is much more significant because it deals with employment. Brian Webber, a worker at the Kaiser aluminum plant, got passed over for promotion and some blacks got it instead. If the Supreme Court upholds his challenge to that it could undermine almost all the gains that blacks have made in the last few years.

It’s much easier to rally white workers around that than around upholding affirmative action or the aims of the Progressive Alliance. And white workers are still the bulk of the working class.

The most pronounced rightwing mobilisation now is around the Right to Life movement which has managed to defeat some of the best senators and politicians we had last year. Even more striking was their ability to get activists on this issue. Right to Life is being used by far-right forces to try to build an entire, organised network of rightwing forces for the first time. There are some attempts to split that because there are a lot of Right to Life forces who are decent catholics but who respond on this one issue. It is not just the Catholic church — the Protestant evangelical churches are growing very rapidly, gaining members, and forming what amounts to a fourth national television network which has in most communities 16-hour a day programming of religious and conservative programs and has enormous viewership. All this is reflected in the youth movement, and the ability of cults to gain numbers when the left can’t.

So these crises on the working class are producing a break-up of the prevailing ideological consensus — what Gramsci would call an organic crisis — but it’s a very prolonged one. The left presently has neither the organisation nor the ideological capability of projecting an alternative to that.

From the other side, the crisis has led to an attempt at a new reconstruction of that hegemony around a far right alternative. That’s what the Right to Life movement represents, that’s what “law and order” represents, that’s what Brian Webber represents: a restructuring of corporate liberalism to a frankly much more regressive corporate rule. At present, we can only look towards the Progressive Alliance and the CLAC as a counter attack. The only organised forces are in the major trade unions and if they don’t respond then we’re in big trouble. What’s hopeful is that there are some positive responses.

Such as?

RH: The coalitions I mentioned, Barry Commoner’s present attempt to form a new political party called the Citizens Party, which bases itself on a real working class program on inflation, unemployment, the questions of minorities and women, on abortion, and very much on energy.

There is a great contradiction on abortion: Every opinion poll shows that increasing numbers of Americans believe in the right of women to have abortions. But the right’s ability to get activists on this is phenomena and the liberal forces, in particular the Democratic Party, is not based on activists. The Democratic Party is simply an electoral machine. It doesn’t really have members in the Australian or European sense.

How does it work then?

RH: It operates between elections with a number of functionaries who are paid by the party because of their fund-raising abilities. It has around those elected officials a very small number of activists, but in almost no city or state do we find Democratic Party clubs. At election time they will then pick people — depending on the election, maybe lots of people.
In lots of states people run as Democrats who are also members of the Communist Party, socialist groups or even rightwing parties. Essentially anyone can contest it. You just have to get a certain number of signatures on a petition and you then can run in any primary election to be the candidate for that office. For example, Congressman Dellons from Oakland, New Berkeley is also a member of the Democratic Socialist Organising Committee. He is elected as a Democrat by that congressional district but he speaks as a socialist, he opposes almost everything about the Democratic Party, he attacks it, he says he's a socialist.

Who can vote in the primaries?

RH: At most places, you just register yourself and then on primary day you say which ballot you would like, the Democratic or Republican. In some states, like California, you actually have to say ahead of time which one you are. That's to try to prevent Republicans from crossing over and voting for the Democrat they think would be the weakest candidate. But in lots of states you can do that and so you get some crazy results. In the US, in a hotly contested election, you get typically a 60 per cent turnout of registered voters, who may only be 50 per cent of all the people who can actually vote if they register. So we have very low turnouts. In a union election it's even lower. You may have 10 per cent or less of the membership showing up for a union election. You may have 50 per cent showing up for a strike vote.

What is the program of the US ruling class for the worldwide and national crisis?

RH: A new tendency within the ruling class is exemplified by a special issue of Businessweek, which is our leading magazine for the upper circles of the bourgeoisie. In February 1979, it had a special issue called "The Decline of the American Empire?" with a picture of the statue of liberty with a tear rolling down her face. A more or less direct quote from it said:

"We have to be clear that the US has had an empire since the end of World War II but that we are in the process of losing it. History teaches us that an empire can be maintained only by direct military or economic force and we feel that that is the direction we have to go....."

This was with direct reference, for example, to the question of oil and raw materials, generally raw materials. There are signs that this approach is being accepted by large parts of the ruling class. I think it's reflected in the attack on major unions such as the UAW, exemplified by the attack on Labor Law Reform and also by the way General Motors moved some of its plants to the south and did everything possible to prevent the UAW from being in those plants.

This goes hand in hand with an increasing drive to restore the draft, to get a sufficient number of white men in the army so that an invasion of parts of Africa or the Middle East becomes a credible threat, which it isn't with an army which is 38 per cent black and increasing. There is an increasing anti-Sovietism and concerted attack on SALT II, showing a new militarist tendency within the top circles of American business.

There are still elements of big business which don't agree with that, for example, those which back Teddy Kennedy. They still think that reforms and New Deal liberalism is the way to go, that there is sufficient give in the system, both economically and socially, to give the working class social reforms that would quell the problems. It's not clear how they would solve the problems of profitability and of control over foreign resources — these are a huge question mark for that sector of capital.

Turning to wider questions: where are the US working class and people at ideologically and why?

DH: I would say certainly our working class, more than other working classes in capitalist countries, accepts as a natural law the right of capitalism to exist and to exploit. It's a very militant class and has been historically, but even in the 1930s it was only approaching a developed class consciousness. So it was not an enormous achievement of capitalist ideology, from the late forties on, to even reconquer those sectors of the class that had been developed in the class struggles of the thirties and forties and had an advanced consciousness, and to almost eliminate that consciousness with the exception of a few unions.

I would say that the two most important changes were the expulsion of the left trade
unions from the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organisations) in 1948 and 1949, and then in 1955 the merger between the AFL (American Federation of Labor) and the CIO.

There were great illusions, great expectations that the industrial sector of the labor movement (mass production industries) would have an enormous effect on the craft sector (e.g. building trades) represented by the AFL. This was not true. On the contrary, a labor movement that was to the right of the Democratic Party in foreign policy, became the dominant expression.

Is there a trend, as in Australia, for white-collar unions to move into the AFL-CIO?

RH: Well, white-collar organising has come relatively recently to the United States. It’s something that’s really taken off since WW2 but even more in the sixties. One of the largest unions now in the AFL-CIO is the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which now has well over a million members, primarily government employees that are also going into other kinds of private employment. There is a second union that has a large number, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). All three of those are members of the AFL-CIO — and each has “blue-collar” members. For example, AFSCME covers sanitation workers as well as social service workers.

The fourth important union is the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) which has hundreds of thousands of members. It is a member of AFL-CIO. It was at one point one of our best unions in terms of good positions on social issues. It’s increasingly militant — for the first time teachers are going to jail around job actions, both for job quality and wages.

Unfortunately AFT has been taken over by an extremely right-wing leader who has a very tight grip on the union. He is in the mould of George Meaney, the AFL-CIO leader, and is one of the many contenders to be the AFL-CIO heir apparent.

How did he become the teachers union leader?

RH: He controlled the New York teachers, the United Federation of Teachers in New York City and New York State. That’s the largest of the state federations and is a power base. He ousted a much more progressive person about five years ago — he is a member of the Democratic Socialist organising committee.

But there is one other teachers’ group, called the National Education Association, which is actually larger than the AFT. It’s a respectable association, not a union and that was its appeal for many years.

But with the attack on public employees over the last decade, it’s become progressively more union-like, has called strikes, and now advertises itself as being more militant and more ready and able to conduct strikes than the AFT.

There have been discussions of merger between the two teachers unions and in California they have merged.

One of the primary differences between Australia and the US is that many white-collar clerical workers are not organised, such as banking, insurance, and the mass clerical areas — primarily women who have entered the labor force in the last few decades. They are not unionised and no one has managed to organise them yet, though attempts are going on.

DH: The only really significant growth in union membership has come through government employees being organised. The total labor movement today represents only 22 per cent at most of the US workforce of 93 million.

Why is there resistance among the clerical workers to being organised?

RH: Organising workers is very different in the US. Here you have these government awards. In the US you have to go through a very complicated process of getting certification from one-third of the workers, then they go to a government board and ask for elections to be held. To just get a representative may take up to a year or more in which time the employers have every right to do all sorts of nasty things to the workers. It’s a very big organisational task, the union movement has been relatively slow to approach clerical workers, and they have always been contemptuous of women workers.

Correspondingly women workers have not regarded themselves as being permanent
workers. Why should they pay union dues? What would they get out of it? The usual kind of resistances which I think you may have some of too.

And when unions tried to organise clerical workers, they tended to use people who come straight out of the thirties. You might have 30 per cent black and latino women, and 60 or 70 per cent white women, all relatively young, and a handful of men, and unions send in men aged 50 or 60 who have never organised women in their lives. They worry just about wages instead of talking about child care, working conditions, dignity. The real possible breakthrough is coming not from our big unions, but from groups in several cities called Working Women, Women Employed, etc. These are women who have not been part of traditional unions but have been trying to organise women in these clerical areas. They are much more sensitive to the particular needs and demands of women but, so far, not even they have had overwhelming success.

In Chicago, for example, Women Employed has 600 or 700 women but not as part of the union. Women are very reluctant to join unions, they are very afraid of strikes, and it’s going to be a very long-term process to organise areas like banking, and insurance.

What happens to workers who aren’t organised into unions?

DH: They benefit from what the organised workers get.

RH: Organised labor has kept up with inflation relatively well and the unorganised sector, which is the mass of workers, has fallen behind. So when we say that American workers’ real wages have stagnated now for 12 years, you really have to look at each sector. The UAW and the Teamsters have done better than inflation. Other workers have not.

DH: Some have what is called an escalator clause that provides for an automatic increase every year.

RH: It depends on the union. Some have cost of living adjustments, but, for example, the UAW gave one up in a contract six years ago because they thought inflation was going to be beaten. So at the last contract negotiation the membership stressed that they had to have their cost of living adjustment back in.

What are the issues that might motivate US workers back to an interest in socialism?

DH: One big issue for northern workers is “runaway shops” — industries which close down their operations in the north of the US, either to go to the south of the US, which is not organised, or to set up assembly plants elsewhere, for instance, just across the border in Mexico.

This means the total closure of industries in localities that have historically had steel, rubber and other basic industries.

Another major issue, increasingly important, is the pressures of technological change, where industry contracts and workers become redundant.

On the economic front, inflation is a major problem. The Carter administration’s wage/price control is simply nonsense. Wage rises are supposed to be limited to seven per cent but most prices in significant areas of life are totally unchecked. In the last year most important victories in California, for instance, have been around rent control and in reaction to the property tax rebates that were given to landlords. Then there’s the fear that is present in communities, mainly black and latino, because of uncontrolled police assaults on people. In my city, for instance, there have been some 50 people murdered by police in the last year. This is not political, but killing for the sake of it — and it’s increasing. Really, the police are an occupying army inside the ghetto and the barrio.

So there’s no lack of issues.

But the long-range objective is to develop a systematic and coherent response to the total decline of life in the US. We need the ability to join together the disparate issues in the country into a programmatic approach that unites the potential allies into a cohesive striking force on every level of the society.

Will extending democracy, in the workplace and throughout society, become an issue for people?

DH: Oh yes. It’s still a minor issue in the sense of its articulation or the support for it, but there is no question that it will become increasingly important. It will be both a
question of workplace democracy and union democracy — democracy within the labor movement — that will go almost hand in hand, if it is to be effective.

What has been the social effect of the energy crisis in the US?

DH: Remarkably it has led to an enormous swing of opinion in favor of social ownership of the oil companies. Poll after poll shows that people feel the oil corporations are responsible for the crisis, totally reject the propaganda as to why there’s a shortage in the US and are demanding public ownership. There is also recognition of the need for state counterparts of the oil companies as a way of checking the books of the oil corporations. The federal government has absolutely no way of knowing the truth about profits, the degree of shortages, or the actual state of the oil industry. Only the oil industry has those figures and none of the government agencies have them, so this adds to the feeling for public ownership in order to determine the accuracy of the charges.

So concern with energy issues has been one of the most important upsurges in the last year. The Three Mile Island nuclear accident added to it enormously. Based on this, people like Barry Commoner are now initiating a movement calling for a new party in the US on the grounds that the two existing parties do not really provide for any response or input from their constituents. They hope to get this off the ground by the 1980 elections and to get ten per cent of the vote and show a credible role in public life. I doubt their ability to do that because of state electoral laws. To qualify for a presidential election you first have to go through 50 state legislatures, and it’s no easy matter.

But in a period of great mass upsurge it’s easier to get a response for a new party.

To what extent are American workers developing an environmental consciousness?

DH: Many workers simply say “Yes, we will die of asbestos poisoning in X years, but what alternative do we have? It’s our job.” There is a great gap between the labor movement and the environmentalists because of that. Barry Commoner is one of the very few who is sensitive to that problem and attempts to meet it head on. He spoke at an AFL-CIO Central Labor Council meeting in Los Angeles and he started by saying:

when there is a conflict between jobs and environmental considerations I identify myself with the jobs.

But the environmentalists are increasingly aware that they cannot disregard the desperate feeling of workers for security and that they have to find some way to include that question in their thrust towards an unpolluted and clean environment. And there are some few unions, most notably the International Association of Machinists — similar to your Metal Workers Union and one of the major US unions — which are becoming aware of wider social issues. It covers many defence industries and is discussing a program that there must be an alternative to the defence industries, which are capital-intensive anyway and don’t really provide jobs to any large extent and which produce non-useful products. Their leader William Winpisinger has also helped initiate a national movement of labor and environmentalists that NAM is also a part of.

Could you list the different main organisations on the US left?

DH: The largest is the Communist Party with approximately 7,000 members. The Socialist Workers Party (Trotskyists) and their youth group, the YSA, has a total membership of 1,850. This makes them third behind the Democratic Socialist Organising Committee but this is not an organised numeric force. NAM is fourth with about 900. Then there are innumerable new communist parties in the US. The Communist Labor Party, the CPML, the Revolutionary Communist Party, the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters. These have small memberships — 500, 300, 700.

What is the Democratic Socialist organising committee?

RH: It’s socialists within the Democratic Party, but not quite so simple as that. In 1972 when they formed, they said that their strategic goal was creating a left wing within the Democratic Party, a progressive and socialist wing. But increasingly within the last year or two, we’ve been very pleased to see that they’ve started looking at the environmental movement, the women’s movement, and they have a Hispanic commission which started working against the blockading of Cuba, so they are
gradually diversifying. They are part of the Second International and have 3500 members. They are not really cohesive, nor activists.

DH: But they do have some of the more important labor figures in the US and black leaders such as Congresswoman DeLollis, who is probably one of the Congress members most militant, most socially conscious, and most responsive to issues in the country. He is the vice-chair of the Democratic Socialist Organisation.

Speaking about the Trotskyists, the SWP, it really amazes me how they never seem to learn from history. They are regarded by all sectors of the movements as a very manipulative organisation, always with a private agenda which they seek to impose upon mass forces. That's true of the women's movement and it's true now of the nuclear movement. They have recently carried through what I gather their Australian counterparts are also trying to do, "industrialise" by sending members into industry.

They have the most simplistic definitions of political reality. They are a bit like the Socialist Labor Party, which has exactly the same policy now that it had in 1890.

It had a momentary influence and growth in the anti-war movement, which they split to set up there own sector, and they had a limited but nonetheless significant growth among students. But it amazes me that what they had they have simply dribbled away, leaving little impact on their organisation, policy, or influence.

But weren't they more open to the new movements — of women, blacks and so on — than the CP?

DH: They were, but in a very opportunist fashion and therefore they got very little out of it. For instance, for a while when the gay movement was at its height, they were very pronounced on that question. But, in each case, because they do it in such a manipulative way, they accumulate no real base from their support for such movements and they are as bureaucratic an organisation as the Communist Party. For example, in the YSA in Berkeley their leadership was challenged so they simply flew in people from around the country, outvoted the branch and the dissidents, and took back control.

Could you say something about the evolution of the US Communist Party?

DH: There was one brief period from 1956 to about 1958 when overwhelmingly the majority position in the CP would have been approximately that of your party now: an insistence on independence internationally and a much greater sensitivity to new trends within the US.

The factors contributing to its lack of success were firstly that those who wanted a new direction were united on what they didn't want but not on what they did. Secondly, a number of leading comrades in a sense had one foot out of the party already and you cannot win a fight like that.

But what really defeated us was that the so-called centre forces around Dennis united with the ultra-left forces around Foster, although only momentarily because they saw us as the main threat due to our insistence on independence from the USSR.

The most important question really — though I can't really list them in priority, was that the party's position in regard to the Soviet Union was becoming even more subservient than in the 1930s, with far less justification.

But domestically the problem was equally as great: not only was the party oblivious to all the social upsurges of the 1960s but in many cases it took positions of outright condemnation. As an example, in the upsurge of the black movement the two most notable names were probably Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. But the Daily World in its front-page stories castigated Malcolm X constantly for adventurism and leftism, totally unaware and insensitive to what was happening in that sector of black society called the "street people": youth, those not yet in industry, etc.

Then, concerning the youth movement, there was an almost total absence from SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and from all youth campus upsurge. The party made as its main question the building of a communist youth organisation. Only in Boston and in southern California were there any young communists who were members of SDS. This occasioned great fights.

In the labor movement the party's position was very conservative. I said in a report to
the Party Convention in 1966 that the party's position was really to become the business agent for the business agents, uncritical and supportive of whoever was the dominant leadership of the labor movement.

Now partly the labor response did reflect the 1950s, the conservatism and the fear of being isolated. But this hung on for a very long time — beyond when it was necessary — and it's still present in the party.

Concerning women, you had the really ironic and tragic situation that up to two years ago the Communist Party and the John Birch Society were the two main organisations opposing the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment). Gradually the official position changed, without the party membership ever being involved in debate on it but suddenly they published an article supporting ERA.

Why did they oppose it?

DH: On the grounds that it took away the legislative gains that had been passed to protect women workers. But this saw women only at the point of production, as members of the working class. The question of social oppression was simply not recognised.

To what extent did the ruthlessness of the US ruling class — especially in the Depression and Cold War periods — create the situation of an embattled Communist Party in which sectarianism, conservatism and so on flourished?

DH: Well, I'm one of those who believe that you can't really blame "objective conditions" for what happens to you. It's always the pressure of any ruling class to do that to a communist party and the whole left.

The real question is which of your policies make it easier for them to carry that through and I would say that the main responsibility is our own, not the question of repression. As a matter of fact, it is notable that our great losses did not come as a result of the Depression or even the McCarthy period. Our great losses came after the Soviet party's (CPSU) 20th Congress and our response to it. Of course, the ruling class attacks had a great deal to do with producing the mass social atmosphere of anti-communism but the greatest setbacks resulted from our own policies.

But it does seem that the US ruling class is much more ideologically aware and organised than say here, with all sorts of organised propaganda in favor of free enterprise.

DH: There's no question that that's very important. The anti-communist hysteria and the reaction to what took place in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, etc. all had an impact. But so did the ideas that we live in a free enterprise economy, and the individualism of the American dream that each one can make it, or that you're responsible for yourself if you don't make it, that society has no responsibility. These are still very dominant and in the 1950s they increased.

If there hadn't been this problem of people's image of existing socialism, would that have made much difference?

DH: Oh, certainly. I probably made more public speeches when I was a Party leader than most party members did and, without question, no matter what you talked about, the first question you'd get from the audience was always about repression in the Soviet Union. They'd ask: How can you talk to us about socialism as an alternative when what you have to offer is less than we have already won?

In 1960 I ran for Los Angeles County tax assessor (I received 86,500 votes — about 10 per cent — a very high vote for a public communist). The kind of question I'd constantly get as I went around speaking (when you're on the ballot, automatically you're invited to speak to any kind of group) would be: Well, if one voted for communists and changed one's mind in six months, how could one be able to change back?

Now, such people weren't necessarily against socialism. It's very noticeable both in elections in our country and in England — I don't know about Australia — that minor groups that have very little strength but who have the word "socialist" in their title, get either more votes than communists, or else very significant votes compared to those of the much larger communist parties. I think this question is a very serious problem and communists have to explore, if nothing else, an electoral ticket that includes the word "socialist". This is a mass phenomenon
that one cannot disregard, one cannot ignore.

The mass meaning of different names varies so much from country to country. In our country there has been no mass expression of social democracy, so the New America Movement can define itself as "democratic socialist" which has a different meaning than it would have, for instance, in your country where the Labor Party uses that term. In our country, your term "self-management socialism" would not be understood, it would be a clumsy expression of what we are getting at — for the US, democratic socialism summarises more what we're talking about. The left should understand that it's how the masses understand it that's important.

That raises the question as to why the US party went in a certain direction, while the Italian party, for example, went in a different one.

DH: Well, I would say probably one of the contributing factors, I'll try to compare it with others, is the lack of a theoretical culture, an independent culture, an ability to relate to what is indigenous within the United States and to develop the capacity to deal with it, which made it possible for the worst kind of empty dogmatism to dominate the party.

I say "empty" because when one examines party history and documents of the past, there was not always the question of whether we were or were not always particularly correct, but there was at least a depth of analysis that could make coherent a policy. It might have turned out to have been a wrong policy but there was a rationale, a logic, or a particular analysis.

Since 1960 that has not been true. The party has been content with reports and speeches which are empty platitudes, sonorous generalities, the total absence of concrete analysis of any particular situation and therefore the ability to draw any conclusions from anything that is happening in this society.

With the different left organisations, each with a different base and constituency, what are the prospects for the socialist movement in the US?

DH: The problem is not that there is a different base and a different constituency, but that they are all warring and competing for the same base and the same constituency — the working class, the black movement, the women's movement.

There has never been a time in our history when the left has been as irrelevant to the significant social movements as it is today. If you put together all those who call themselves socialists, Marxists, Marxist-Leninists, or what hyphens you prefer, you would not have more than 20,000 people in the United States. There is no immediate prospect of a breakthrough. Partly, this reflects the fact that from about '73 until the energy developments, was very bleak for public protest movements. I don't think in American history there has ever been a decade devoid of great social and political struggles and movements. The left can only grow if there is a mass environment for it to grow in, so it has been a very difficult period. For the first time, now, there is some sign that that long drought has been broken and there is at least the beginning of a renaissance of social protest movements.

Under what conditions can the left move outwards to the masses?

DH: I would consider questions of the Progressive Alliance as potentially important. It will compel, within organisations like NAM, an awareness of the real world, of the challenge of movements and the arena of struggle that is not doctrinally pure, a sensitivity to actual friends and not as we would like them to be among the working class or the women's movement, or the black and Latino movements. That would hold promise for us.

At this point, there is no sign of a qualitative change in the left's relationship to the working class and mass movements, but there is at least an acquiring of significant credentials to intervene in any of these movements with any effectiveness.

Our problem is enormously complicated by the status of the Democratic Party. While we are active, most organised sectors of the movement reflect themselves electorally within the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party can contain most of that and absorb it because it is not independently organised outside the Democratic Party.

This is a big problem because a movement which cannot have any kind of electoral representation or reflection, clearly has great limitations. You can't fight in the streets for legislation and then not have an electoral or legislative approach to it.