W ithin the last few years, in a period marked by a strong offensive by the Right, there has also been a remarkable surge in activity by a variety of organizations that constitute a new socialist movement in the U.S. The leading figures in this movement, including progressive union leaders, veterans of the New Left of the 1960's, and neighborhood activists, claim that they are helping to revive the spirit of popular revolt which declined with the onset of the economic crisis of the mid-1970's. These leaders speak of the need to fight against excessive corporate power over the economy, society, and government, yet most of them avoid traditional Marxist terminology and call instead for forms of "economic democracy" and popular control of institutions. While parts of this movement have created some interesting developments on the Left in the U.S., the general goals and organizational strategies of the groups pose some serious political problems. What follows are a short sketch of the movement and a critique of it.

The first major sector of the new socialist movement involves the heads of several large industrial unions, especially Douglas Fraser of the United Auto Workers and William Winpisinger of the International Association of Machinists. Fraser made a decisive move in July 1978 when he resigned from the Labor-Management Group (a committee of top corporate executives and union leaders seeking to improve industrial relations), charging that business was "waging war against working people and the poor" and suggesting that the labor movement consider forming its own political party. Several months later Fraser called together representatives from many left-liberal organizations and formed the Progressive Alliance, a coalition of about 100 labor unions, political groups, and movement organizations. He said the aim of the Alliance was to "help bring about a political climate which progressives can win elections and legislative struggles."

At the same time, Winpisinger, who likes to talk tough about the betrayal of workers by business and government (he has said of Carter: "That son of a bitch has lied through his fucking teeth"), has formed his own organization, the Citizens/Labor Energy Coalition, which has recently gained a lot of attention for its attempt to sue OPEC for illegal price-fixing. If nothing else, the agitation of Winpisinger and Fraser on the energy issue helped to pressure the conservative leaders of the AFL-CIO to propose for the first time, at the federation's convention in August 1979, the nationalization of the oil industry.

T he second major component of the movement consists of several explicitly political organizations that see themselves as competing embryos of a new political party (an idea that Fraser has abandoned for the
moment) that would "put socialism on the agenda" in the 1980's. The largest of these groups is the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, which grew out of the old Socialist Party and is led by writer Michael Harrington. DSOC has put forth a call for full employment as the thrust of its ideological initiative, yet it seems most concerned with operating as the leftwing of the Democratic Party and thus as one of the main promoters of

Senator Edward Kennedy for the 1980 presidential election. Next year's campaign is also the focus of the relatively new Citizen's Party, which will offer writer Barry Commoner as its candidate to run on a platform of "public control of natural resources."

Another group with aspirations in the electoral arena is the Campaign for Economic Democracy, an organization currently limited to California (but which intends to expand nationally) and dominated by former antiwar activist Tom Hayden and his wife, actress Jane Fonda. The CED, which grew out of Hayden's unsuccessful bid for the senatorial nomination in the state, has been somewhat active in numerous local struggles involving such issues as rent control and electricity rates, but it has gained most of its publicity because of Hayden's close relationship with the unorthodox Governor Jerry Brown.

Perhaps the most seriously socialist of these political groups is the New American Movement, founded in the early 1970's as an outgrowth of the antiwar movement. NAM places somewhat less emphasis on electoral politics than DSOC and the other groups, but it remains committed to a similar goal of a new socialist movement "appropriate to the American democratic tradition." Yet NAM has suffered from an almost constant crisis, including stagnant membership figures, because of its lack of a clear political identity and the consequent endless debate on whether to accept DSOC's proposal for merger.

The final section of the movement includes a wide range of neighborhood organizations across the country that focus on local issues involving housing, utilities, and social services. In a number of states, community activists have assembled coalitions of local groups in order to be more effective in confronting state and federal agencies and large corporations. Among the best known of these coalitions are Massachusetts Fair Share, Ohio Public Interest Campaign, Illinois Public Action Council, and Carolina Action, each of which has a number of paid, full-time staff members and fairly large budgets raised mainly from small contributions. There are even several broader coalitions such as National People's Action, centered in Chicago, and ACORN, an aggressive group of community organizers now active in 17 states. These coalitions, along with countless unaffiliated local groups have been rapidly growing in political importance, so much so that even the New York Times published a major article on the movement and called it "an important new dimension to participatory democracy in this country." Harry Boyte, the main theorist of the neighborhood movement, has felt confident enough to write that it has shown that "ordinary people can learn public skills necessary for exercising some control over their lives and institutions. The neighborhood movement of the 1970's has opened a kind of 'free space' at the grassroots
of American society where people gain a rare taste of democratic community."

Of course these groups do not encompass the entire Movement in the U.S. In fact, the socialists must be seen as a recent addition to the groups that are ordinarily included under this umbrella. On the one hand, there are the small and obscure Leninist sect groups that regularly denounce the socialists as reformist. These sect groups remain bound to stultifying Marxist ideology and hence have failed to achieve any political significance.

On the other hand, there is the dynamic and growing part of the Movement, much of it the legacy of the 1960's, which has rejected both the rigid revolutionary politics of the Leninists, as well as the socialists' comparatively tame preoccupation with influencing public policy. These groups have made impressive advancements in areas such as women's and gay rights, resistance to government repression, the campaign against nuclear power, and the struggle for occupational health. Yet despite their gains, in most cases these groups have not received anywhere near the public attention accorded the socialists. The explanation for this is found in the nature of the socialists' activities.

One of their favorite issues is the campaign for national health insurance. Both Fraser and Winpisinger have been strong supporters of the program proposed by Senator Kennedy, one that is hardly comprehensive, but is still considered too ambitious by many members of Congress. The failure on the part of the two union leaders to link this demand with the matter of workplace safety fits with their desire to negotiate with political leaders who, they think, would be apprehensive about making such a connection. This timid approach - seen in other socialist pursuits - brings publicity and the support of a few politicians, but has done little to deal with the crisis of health care.

Another major area of involvement for
But what is the significance of the socialists' presence?
In the context of a worsening economy and a stampede of rightwing muscle, the socialists' ability to maintain ongoing visibility is surely useful. So is their emphasis on democratic organization and on the needs of working people and the poor. However, in evaluating the long-term implications of their approach, one encounters problems pertaining to both their analysis and the position of socialists vis-à-vis others in the Movement. They seek to be planners; they often sound like social engineers. Changing policy is their thing. In fact, although they sometimes use revolutionary language, they essentially accept the legitimacy of existing institutions. Their goal is to "democratize" and "revitalize" them. They argue that business and government have allowed corporate greed and bureaucratic ineptitude to undermine truly efficient social planning.

The socialists argue that they could restore that efficiency. Winpisinger, for example, has been quoted as saying, "You've got to fine-tune capitalism with a dose of socialism."

Related to this is the elitism of numerous socialists. This is clearest in the case of Winpisinger and Fraser, whose political activities have been carried out apart from their memberships. Fraser's idea of rank and file participation was indicated in August 1979, when he called a whopping six-minute strike so autoworkers could send postcards to their congressmen calling for an "effective energy program."

It is clear that tension is developing between the socialists' efforts to provide leadership and rank and file or grass roots struggles which refuse to be led from above. This contradiction is certain to become more serious once the overall Movement regains the offensive.

Yet at least some of the socialists have raised the crucial question of what it means for the Movement to gain power. Boyte's notion of "free space," despite the fact that he does not carry it far enough, is an essential first step in this regard, for it suggests a way out of the trap in which various struggles do nothing more than change the terms of oppression, or even seek to solve the crisis of capital, rather than helping to establish genuine alternatives. The debate concerning free space, "liberated zones," "autonomy"--or whatever it is called--must be the cornerstone of the radical political discussion of the future.

To the Reader:
This is the last issue of the American Owl for the present time. The publishers of the Owl plan to spend an extended period of time outside the U.S. When we return we would like to join with other people in publishing an expanded version of the Owl.

In the meantime, we would appreciate your comments on the past issues of the Owl as well as your suggestions for the future publication. You can write to us at the New York address and the mail will be forwarded.