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ARTICLE

## THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT IN AMERICA.

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**H**ISTORY cannot be written until there is an ample supply of material therefor. As history is not mere chronology, and is essentially descriptive, the present status of a Movement can not be properly described before there is at hand a sufficiency of consecutive data to enable the historian, with some degree of certainty, to gauge the trend of events. It may seem paradoxical, yet it is true, that real history must not be “retrospective” only, it must be “prospective” also. While the past tells us whence we come, the present, and the future developments which the present point to, are material in understanding the past. Upon these general principles the history of the Socialist Movement in America is hardly yet to be written. The present is still in too chaotic a state to justify accurate conclusions upon the past, much less to justify accurate forecast. Under present circumstances, “Histories of American Socialism” are mere catch-penny undertakings. A sketch is all that to-day the subject allows. Such a sketch—and a very rough one at that—is all I can present to our Hungarian comrades.

There is ever a morbid desire to rise to the very source of a Movement. The endeavor to “trace the Socialist Movement of America to its source” illustrates the morbidity of that failing. It illustrates even more—it illustrates how purely dogmatic these Marxists are who have attempted the job of “tracing to its source,” and how skin-deep their Marxism is. Their “tracings” sound like the talk of a geographer would sound who started to “trace the source” of a river in the clouds. No doubt the water that a river is made of comes to a large extent from clouds. But

the clouds we see may never descend into that particular river; moreover, obscure underground springs may be important feeders to the stream. I shall omit the “source-hunt.” I shall limit myself in this sketch to the citing of a series of facts. Let others co-ordinate them and write their history.

From a vast amount of material, Marx generalizes that the bourgeois Republic of the United States, being at the stage of its physical development, was still at the conservative stage. The classes had not yet acquired that consistency which is unacquirable so long as visions exist of material success. That was the material that Socialism had to work upon. As to such material Socialism was premature.

The prematureness of Socialism in America was emphasized by the circumstance that those who, a generation or so ago, introduced the word “Socialism” were not, generally, what the introducers of Socialism had been in Germany—a native intellectual injection ahead of the material conditions that would call for a Movement. They were neither active nor, as a rule, intellectual. They were expatriated Germans whose Socialism consisted mainly in negations, and whose intelligence of the subject was so superficial that it kept them from a correct understanding of the conditions of the country of their adoption. This lack of understanding caused that element to divide into two legitimate opposites. One element threw Socialism wholly overboard. Its slogan was: “Socialism is good enough in Germany, but not in America. Here everyone can grow rich. Look at me. I am only a short time here and already I have got a good business, and have my own house (mortgaged).” Or: “Socialism is good enough in Germany, but not in America. Don’t you see I don’t need to serve in the Army here.” The other element clung to the word “Socialism” as to a superstition. Its slogan was: “The Americans are too hopelessly stupid and corrupt. They can never understand Socialism”—and with this slogan they consoled themselves for their misfortune in having come to “Malheurica,” their favorite pun upon America. This double circumstance threw an extraneous obstacle in the path of Socialism. The use of the name by such elements rendered the thing itself unpleasant.

Simultaneous with these events economic development went on. Its sediment of experience—however crude, however imperfect or visionary—was a series of Utopian outbreaks. The first was the Greenback Movement in the early seventies;

the second was the Single Tax Movement; the third was the Nationalist (Bellamy) Movement. It is a notable fact that each of these Movements, in succession, began outside of the camp of the Working Class; each was captained and crewed by intellectuals of the middle and upper classes—Peter Cooper, Henry George, Edward Bellamy; each refused to recognize the working class as a separate socio-political entity; each proposed to bring salvation “to the people”; and each went down, leaving the extinguishing candle in the hands of workingmen—the only element that stuck.

Out of these various sediments—aided step by step by economic evolution—rose the first party of Socialism in the land, the Socialist Labor Party, in 1890.

The appearance of the S.L.P. in 1890 was the first substantive manifestation of a Socialist Movement in the United States. The Party started not merely upon abstract principles of Socialism, it started with some very concrete principles of practice. The former need no mention, they are international. The latter were more typical of American conditions. These principles of practice turned upon UNIONISM. This fact must be distinctly kept in mind. It explains all subsequent developments.

The S.L.P. of America started its existence with the question of Unionism as its cornerstone. The Unions in existence were “pure and simple,” that is, they held to the principle of brotherhood between Capital and Labor, and “No Politics in the Union.” The two principles rendered the Union a corrupt body, managed by the capitalists through their labor lieutenants, the officers of the Unions. The S.L.P. took an emphatic stand, and declared that the Union could not help but be steeped in politics, hence the bona-fide Union was bound to be in Socialist politics. A stand like that, once taken, was bound to develop to its logical conclusions, and at the same time drop whatever errors originally clung to it. The development was rapid. In 1896 the S.L.P. was mainly instrumental in setting up the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, an economic organization that proclaimed its intimate relations with politics and pronounced the S.L.P. its political expression. The S.T. and L.A. was no sooner launched, than it became the target for the bitter assault of the A.F. of L. The struggle was, of course, carried into the Party by the representatives of the A.F. of L., and a conflict ensued that culminated in a split in 1899. One portion of the S.L.P. pulled out and declared “Neutrality” toward Unionism, while the body of

the S.L.P. pronounced “Neutrality” only a mask behind which to conceal partisanism in favor of corrupt Unionism. The struggle, up to 1899, carried within the S.L.P., now continued between the S.L.P. on the one side, and, on the other, a new party, in which the bolters from the S.L.P. were incorporated.

This new party consisted of heterogeneous elements. It had sprung up in the West under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs. As far as the Western party received a character from Mr. Debs, its policy was hostile to that of the bolters from the S.L.P. Mr. Debs had risen into prominence as a founder of revolutionary Unions against the reactionary Brotherhoods of railroad employees. His name stood essentially for exactly the opposite of the bolters from the S.L.P., who proposed to “bore from within” only, a slang phrase that meant “Don’t disturb the labor leaders.” Unity between the Debs element and the bolters from the S.L.P. would have been impossible but for the circumstance that the Question of Unionism was not considered essential by the Debs element. The point of contact between the two was the Utopianism of both—the bolters from the S.L.P. held to the Utopian idea that the “Union was a vanishing thing” and therefore should be humored; the Debs element held to the Utopian idea that votes would be enough to overthrow capitalism. The two Utopianisms merged into one. The Socialist party was formed.

The formation of the Socialist party gave impetus to the development of the Socialist Labor Party principle. The S.L.P. principle soon took shape in the principle that the Union was an essential factor in the emancipation of the Working Class. The Marxian motto, “only the Union can give birth to the true party of Labor,” became the guiding light of the S.L.P. The Party laid main stress upon the organization of the Working Class into revolutionary Unions, and considered the ballot, however important, useful and necessary, a secondary consideration. The S.P., on the contrary, held the Union to be unimportant, the ballot everything.

Within five years after the issue had been thus presented, the economic events of the land gave birth to a manifestation that confirmed the S.L.P. principle. The Industrial Workers of the World was organized, mainly by revolvers from the A.F. of L.. The S.T. and L.A. joined the new body. Experience had clarified many a division of the S.P., and they gave their adhesion to the I.W.W. Immediately the scenes enacted when the S.T. and L.A. was founded began to be re-enacted. The I.W.W.

became the target for a fierce onslaught. A conspiracy was concocted to disrupt it and came nearly succeeding in 1905. The conspiracy being baffled, the Socialist Movement entered upon its present stage.

The S.P. principle of “Neutrality” was thoroughly discredited. Every day the struggle between the two parties brings out clearer and clearer that “Neutrality” means, on the one side, economic corruption and encouraging of craft union scabbery; on the other side, political corruption through the sacrifice of principle to votes.

The S.L.P. principle that the vote is worthless and political victory calamitous if there is not ready organized the Industrial Union ready to take and hold the reins of government—that principle is steadily gaining ground.

The S.P. vote is dropping heavily. Votes being all that the S.P. had, its downfall is inevitable.

As to the S.L.P., the conflict has greatly affected its voting strength also. But seeing the S.L.P. had a principle, which is triumphantly asserting itself, its victory is assured.

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