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## Inheritance Lost: Socialism in Rochester, 1917-1919

By Maurice Isserman

“We’ve got a million voters, Hurrah, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah!  
Hurrah, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, Hurrah, rah, rah, rah!  
We’ll have ten million voters, Hurrah, rah, rah, rah, etc.”  
[Kendrick Shedd, “The Million Voters Song,” *Some Songs for  
Socialist Singers.*]

Kendrick Shedd, prominent Rochester Socialist, wrote this exuberant song shortly after the 1912 presidential campaign in which Eugene Debs won 897,000 votes. Shedd had his limitations as a lyricist, but his song accurately records the buoyant hopes of the members of Local Rochester of the Socialist Party in the last years before the World War. Though the growth of Local Rochester itself was not spectacular in this period, its members were sustained by a strong belief in historical inevitability. “We know,” declared a front page article in a 1908 issue of the *Rochester Socialist*, “That the private ownership of the means of production and distribution will give way to the collective ownership of these things. . . . We know that wage slavery will be abolished and that every

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worker will receive the full value of his produce. We arrive at this through a careful study and application of the great law of economic determinism.”<sup>1</sup>

This sense of possessing a special insight into the direction of history was reinforced by the election victories that Socialists were winning throughout the nation. In addition to Debs’ growing vote, Socialists celebrated the election of Emil Seidel as mayor of Milwaukee in 1910, Victor Berger’s election to Congress that same year, and George Lunn’s mayoral victory in nearby Schenectady in 1911. These socialist strongholds seemed to represent the first of an evergrowing series of election victories. As Shedd wrote in another song, the Socialists intended to “Mil-wau-kee-ize ev’-ry town! Schenect-a-dy-ize ev’-ry cit-y.”<sup>2</sup>

Any lingering doubts about the inevitability of socialism were laid to rest by the triumphs of the European Socialist parties. The first issue of the *Rochester Socialist* pointed out, “The Socialists of Rochester are but a small part of the great international movement which is the expression of the worldwide proletariat rising against a condition which renders all workers wage slaves.”<sup>3</sup> Rochester Socialists were as excited about the German Social Democratic Party’s (SPD) Reichstag gains in 1912 as they were about Eugene Debs’ vote in the same year.<sup>4</sup>

Rochester Socialists could also take pride in the steady increase of their vote in local election returns. In 1901, the first election in which the newly reorganized Socialist Party was represented, its mayoral candidate won 1,017 votes. Twelve years later its mayoral vote had increased threefold, to 2,902 votes.<sup>5</sup> One basis of the pre-war unity of the Rochester Socialists lay in the modest nature of these gains. The Socialists could draw reassurance in ultimate victory from their steady growth, but faced none of the divisions that inevitably emerge in a situation where real power is exercised.

Peter Nettl, a historian who wrote extensively on the German socialist movement, described the pre-war (SPD) as a “non-participating opposition” and distinguished it from both “revolutionary conspiracies and political parties acting through and within the system.” The SPD developed an

“ideology of separation . . . which equated participation in society with corruption, and claimed to provide within itself a superior alternative to a corrupt capitalism.” Cut off from the possibility of exercising power in contemporary society, the SPD was sustained by a “strong element of inheritance expectation, whether by voluntary handing over of power or as a result of a catastrophe.”<sup>6</sup> Like the German SPD, the pre-war socialist movement in Rochester developed an ideology of separation, which drew inspiration from Marxist doctrine, and was supported by a wide range of cultural and social institutions, including Socialist Sunday Schools, benevolent societies, singing groups, debates, forums and classes. Proud of their isolation, sustained by a sense of gradual but inevitable progress, and unacquainted with the grittier realities of wielding political power, Local Rochester functioned until 1917 along the lines of an “Inheritor party.” As Shedd put it, “No mere reforms will satisfy, with wrong no compromise we’ll try, of human ills we know the cause; Till they are cured right on we’ll go.”<sup>7</sup> Three years of war, repression, and the experience of holding some small political power would destroy this inheritance expectation and leave something quite different in its place.

### 1917

“Old Sherman said that war is hell, hell, hell, hell.  
He was right there, he knew it well, well, well, well.  
The Wall Street shirkers make the workers go, go go, go.  
While they stay home and get the dough, dough, dough,  
dough.”

[Shedd, “War What For?” *Some Songs for Socialist Singers.*]

When the SPD delegates in the German Reichstag voted unanimously on August 4, 1914 in support of war-credits, they profoundly shocked Socialists around the world. For the American Socialist leader Morris Hillquit the beginning of the World War represented the

collapse of human reason and the ugly sight of the world denuded of its thin veneer of civilization. But added to this feeling and rendering it unbearably poignant was the recognition of the failure of the Socialist International in the supreme hour of crisis, the shattering of cherished illusions about the temper and power of the Socialist movement, and the desertion of so many of its trusted leaders.<sup>8</sup>

The early equivocation of American Socialists on the war issue, along with disillusionment with the European Socialists' support for the war cut into the Party's strength; membership dropped by almost 25,000 in the months right after the start of the war, Rochester Socialists shared in the general decline: the local Socialist vote in 1914 dropped by over a thousand from the previous year. The Party continued to lose votes in the 1915 and 1916 elections and Local Rochester lost some of its most active members.<sup>9</sup>

Had President Woodrow Wilson lived up to his 1916 campaign promises to maintain U.S. neutrality, the American Socialist Party would probably have continued its graceful and rapid slide into political oblivion. However, when it became apparent in the early months of 1917 that the United States might soon enter the war there was a dramatic change in the political prospects of the Party. Opposition to the war brought the differences between the Socialists and the two major parties into sharp focus.

On February 3rd Wilson broke United States diplomatic relations with Germany. On February 18th, the Executive Committee of Local Rochester adopted a resolution calling on citizens of the city to write to Wilson and Congress in opposition to any further steps towards involvement in the European war.<sup>10</sup> They also called a meeting for February 26th at the Avon Theater, over which George Weber presided. Walter Rauschenbusch, the Rochester theologian and well known Christian Socialist, addressed a large crowd. Rauschenbusch warned of the dangers of war-time intolerance: "I say it is a higher brand of patriotism to stand against the war clamor than to bellow with the crowd. I am proud to stand for peace on a socialist program. The Socialists are against the war because they represent the working class, and the working class has no interest in the war."<sup>11</sup>

The Socialists were not the only opponents of America's entry into the war. The American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), founded in the autumn of 1915 by a coalition of religious pacifists, social workers and Socialists, had grown in 1916 to the largest peace group in the country.<sup>12</sup> The Rochester chapter was led by Ada Chase Dudley, who organized a

contingent of Rochester women to visit Washington bearing anti-war petitions. And, speaking before an apparently sympathetic audience at the City Club, Dexter Perkins, the young history professor at the University of Rochester, urged caution in abandoning neutrality: "America cannot give her unqualified support to a peace that means merely the tipping of the balance of power from one alliance to another." On February 12th, the city's ministerial union drafted a resolution opposing conscription.<sup>13</sup>

Anti-war sentiments were by no means unopposed. Among the city's clergy there was more pro-war than pacifist sentiment. The Rev. Henry Barstow of the Westminster Presbyterian Church offered his parishioners these Christian sentiments in his Easter sermon: "Without shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin. Evil must be attacked sometimes even at the price of human blood, and those who represent it must sometimes be destroyed, not because we hate them, but because they love evil." The city's newspapers were pro-war, and increasingly intolerant towards anti-war dissenters. Mayor Hiram Edgerton sought to organize pro-war sentiment by sponsoring a "Loyalty" petition to be forwarded to the President. The mayor's Committee on National Defense took out quarter-page advertisements in the city's newspapers on March 24th, declaring, "While small groups have clamored against any action to uphold American rights, the great majority have had no means of registering their views. . . . Give the country and the President concrete evidence of how small a proportion of the people advocate surrender."<sup>14</sup>

The Socialists returned to the Avon Theater on March 25th for an anti-war meeting that attracted an overflow crowd. Abraham Shiplacoff, Socialist state assemblyman from Brooklyn, was the featured speaker. According to a local reporter: "The audience, noticeably of the working class, was loudly insistent in its applause of passages in the addresses which attacked the principles of war and capitalism." George Till, Buffalo Socialist and union leader

. . . attempted to vindicate the red flag, saying that its prominence in Russia was an argument against the claim that it stands for lawlessness and disorder. Probably putting the whole world under one flag, he suggested, would do away with some of the

things which are supposed to argue in favor of war, and he intimated that the red flag would not be a bad one for this purpose.

The meeting unanimously adopted a resolution protesting against “the systematic inflammation of the public mind” in the newspapers, provoked, they believed, “by those who would profit from bringing this country into the abyss of war.” The resolution backed the Socialist Party’s official demand that no declaration of war be made without a popular referendum approving it. It hailed “the advent of the newest democracy, Russia” and expressed the hope that its newly-enfranchised masses, would “throw off the control of imperialist ambitions and military methods along with autocracy, oppression and racial prejudices.”<sup>15</sup>

Local Rochester stayed in close contact with the Socialist Party’s national anti-war strategy. Faced with the growing certainty of American entry into the war, the National Executive Committee called for an Emergency Convention to be held in St. Louis on April 7th. William Hiladorf, Jr., financial secretary of the local and a member of the Lithographers Union, was named a delegate to the conference representing Monroe, Orleans, Ontario and Niagara counties.<sup>16</sup>

The St. Louis Convention opened one day after Congress declared war on Germany. The delegates united behind a strongly worded anti-war resolution, reaffirming their “allegiance to the principle of internationalism and working class solidarity the world over, and . . . [their] . . . unalterable opposition to the war just declared by the Government of the United States.”<sup>17</sup> The St. Louis resolution received overwhelming endorsement by the Party’s membership across the country. However, a group of leading intellectuals, and several important trade union leaders left or were expelled from the Party over the issue of supporting the war. Only a few Rochester Socialists followed their lead. On May 27th Local Rochester held a special closed meeting at the Labor Lyceum to vote on the St. Louis resolutions. After a discussion of the convention, the 370 members in attendance voted unanimously in favor of the majority anti-war resolution. Party spokesmen

also proudly announced that 57 new applications for membership had been received.<sup>18</sup>

Local Rochester, which traditionally had kept its meetings open to all comers, had good reason to adopt a more defensive posture. A *Democrat and Chronicle* editorial that appeared two days after the meeting suggests that the relative tolerance the Socialists enjoyed before the war was finished: "The police of the city of Rochester were recreant in the performance of their duty in time of war if they did not carefully check up every individual who attended" the meeting at the Lyceum. The fact that the group endorsed "the treasonable resolutions adopted at a recent convention of the Socialist Party at St. Louis would in itself justify the conclusion that the spirit of this gathering . . . was un-American in its purpose and dangerous to the safety of the Union."<sup>19</sup>

Intolerance and fears of disloyalty were nationwide phenomena during the World War. In Rochester, a wave of "flag-kissing" incidents immediately followed the declaration of war; workers who refused to contribute to buying American flags for their factory were manhandled by their fellow-workers and forced to kiss the flag. One socialist tool and die maker was fired from the Kodak Cameraworks and blacklisted when he refused to contribute to a flag fund and spoke against the war.

President Wilson is supposed to have remarked on April 2nd: "Once lead this people into war and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance." Putting his liberal regrets behind him, Wilson proceeded to set up the repressive machinery that would guarantee the suppression of civil liberties during the war.<sup>21</sup> On April 2nd, the administration-backed Espionage Act was introduced into Congress. The core of the bill was the provision that anyone who "shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny or refusal of duty in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlisting service of the United States" could be punished by a fine up to \$10,000 and a jail sentence of up to twenty years. Another provision of the Act instructed the Postmaster General to ban treasonable matter from the mails, a power that was quickly

used to suppress dozens of Socialist newspapers and magazines.<sup>22</sup>

The city and federal government cooperated closely during the war in attempting to control anti-war elements. Even before the war was officially declared, Rochester police chief Joseph Quigley wrote to the United States Attorney General and promised his department would do "everything possible to restrain pernicious agitators who may incite persons to work against the interests of the United States."<sup>23</sup> Rochester was fortunate in having John D. Lynn assigned as U.S. Marshal during the War because Lynn was, by all accounts, a fair-minded and calm guardian of the law. Due to his influence there were no indictments of Rochester citizens under the Espionage Act during the war. But there were limits even to Lynn's tolerance. In the first weeks of the war he became concerned with the number of street corner speakers in Rochester who made speeches and distributed literature in foreign languages. By the time his agents were able to translate the speeches and determine whether they were seditious or not, the speaker might have already left town. Lynn admitted that the general run of speeches, once translated, were found to be anti-war but "rarely pro-German." The problem was that "it would be difficult to suppress them if they could invoke the protection of the free speech and free press clauses of the Constitution." Despite his concern for constitutional niceties, which was rather unusual for the times, Lynn got around his problem by banning all foreign-language speeches and leaflets, reasoning that "the Constitution in guaranteeing free speech and free press, meant free speech and free press in the language in which that document was written. . . ."<sup>24</sup> In a city where a third of the labor force was foreign-born this could have a serious effect on the efforts of groups like the Socialists; before the war speeches at Socialist and labor meetings were regularly delivered in Yiddish, Polish and Italian.

One of Marshal Lynn's major concerns was to guarantee the smooth functioning of the Selective Service Act passed by Congress in May 1917. Federal officials feared repetition of the anti-draft riots of the Civil War, and Lynn considered it prudent to establish a force of three hundred special deputies, reinforced by state and Rochester police, to prevent



disturbances on Registration Day, June 5th. No disturbances were reported that day, and in fact at its meeting of May 27th Local Rochester leaders advised Party members to register for the draft. There was, however, at least one serious disturbance in the city when the first calls went out for physical examinations in August. According to a report in the **Post-Express** there was a “near riot” among 200 men called before one of the city’s draft boards. “District 5 is strongly foreign, most of the people being Jews from Russia and Poland. For weeks the draft has been a doleful subject of conversation, and there has been much weeping among the women and not a little worry among the men called by the draft. It had its culmination in the scenes in the school house this morning.” The disturbance was only quieted when police appeared on the scene.<sup>25</sup>

During the summer Local Rochester began planning for the fall’s municipal elections. Veterans of the Rochester Socialist movement still look back at the 1917 election campaign as the most exhilarating period of their lives, a time when their belief in an inevitable Socialist victory was transformed into belief in an imminent victory.<sup>26</sup> On August 10th the Socialists met at the Labor Lyceum to choose their candidates. George Weber was selected as the mayoral candidate along with a full slate of candidates for state, county and city office. Officers of the Local reported that its membership had increased by 50% since the outbreak of the war, and the Party’s treasurer announced that the funds of the Local were in good condition to wage the fall campaign.<sup>27</sup>

The Socialists carried out a vigorous campaign of street corner speeches, leafleting and mass meetings, stressing their opposition to the war, and support for the women’s suffrage amendment. By October 21st they had distributed 250,000 campaign folders, and expected to give out another 90,000 before the polls opened. The Socialists also carried out a voter-registration drive in the wards they felt strongest in. The newspapers attributed the record registration of new voters achieved in the last days of the campaign largely to Socialist efforts.

A week before the election the Party held a campaign rally in Convention Hall. The main address of the evening was given by Gustave Strebel of Syracuse, a frequent campaigner for state office on the Socialist ticket. The *Democrat and Chronicle* carried this summary of Strebel's remarks:

Mr. Strebel said that the capitalists were not fighting the war, but that the war was fighting the capitalists; that they had started something they couldn't finish. He said he would not talk against the war because it was dangerous in this land of democracy to do that, but that the world was now standing at the death of the old economic system and the birth of a new one.<sup>28</sup>

Strebel was wise in being circumspect in condemning the war. The government was actively suppressing anti-war sentiment. On September 5th I.W.W. offices across the country were raided by Federal agents, and 166 wobblies were subsequently indicted for violating the Espionage Act. A number of Socialists also faced indictments for expressing anti-war opinions in speeches, and sometimes even in private conversation.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the pro-war Socialists who had left the party after the St. Louis convention were now actively working against their former comrades. Charles Edward Russell traveled to Russia with the Root Commission in the summer of 1917 to convince Russian Socialists that American workers supported the war. Rochester Socialists had good reason to remember Russell; they had cast nearly 2,000 votes for him in the 1910 election when he ran as the Party's gubernatorial candidate. On his return from Russia, Russell made a speaking tour and stopped in Rochester on September 22nd to address a rally in Convention Hall. He told his 4,000 listeners that

Men who talk peace now are either cowards, knaves or lunatics. . . . We have a habit in this country of using pacifists and pro-Germans, whereas the one word 'pacifists' conveys the same meaning. I am for conservaton of words as well as food. Every word said for peace today is undermining the republic and bringing victories to Germany.<sup>30</sup>

Statements of this kind were played up extensively in the newspapers; the *Post-Express* headline over the Russell story read: "German's political power based on fraud and lying; pacifists for those things." Undoubtedly they served to scare

some potential voters away from the Socialists' election campaign with its out-spoken anti-war platform. Votes for the Socialists "will represent the pro-German, peace-shouting sentiment in Rochester," a Republican party leader stated the day before the election.<sup>31</sup> Opponents predicted the Socialist vote would be less than 5,000. But Thomas Milford, Local Rochester organizer, estimated that the Socialist ticket would receive between five and ten thousand votes, and said he hoped they would be able to elect an alderman or two out of the 5th, 8th and 17th wards.<sup>32</sup>

Milford's predictions proved an accurate assessment of Socialist strength. When the votes had been counted on November 7th, Rochester Socialists had scored their greatest electoral victory, electing three constables, two aldermen and two supervisors. Their strongest showings were in the 8th and 17th wards, in each of which they elected an alderman, supervisor, and constable. In addition, they had elected a constable in the 7th ward and replaced the Democrats as the second party in the 7th and 5th wards. George Weber received 8,272 votes, just 2,000 votes fewer than the Democratic candidate. His 20% of the total vote represented a five fold increase of the vote received by the Socialist mayoral candidate in 1915.<sup>33</sup>

The Socialists celebrated on election night at the Labor Lyceum and exchanged confident predictions that in the next election they would win the mayor's office.<sup>34</sup> Socialists in other parts of the state and nation shared their enthusiasm. The Socialist tallies in New York City, Schenectady, Syracuse and Albany had jumped dramatically.<sup>35</sup> Socialists were also cheered by the state-wide victory of the women's suffrage amendment, a victory they felt they had played an important part in winning.<sup>36</sup> The districts of the city in which the Socialist vote was concentrated consisted of solidly working class and heavily foreign-born neighborhoods. One Socialist later estimated that 75% of the Party's votes came from Jewish clothing workers though other accounts stress the contribution of both German and Polish voters.<sup>37</sup>

A few days after the election Rochester Socialists learned of events that dwarfed their own victories. On November 7th

Lenin's Bolshevik Party seized power in St. Petersburg. Rochester Socialists, like others in the United States were, in those first months of Bolshevik rule, enthusiastic supporters of the Russian Revolution. They shared the sentiments of the Socialist Party's National Executive Committee when it declared dramatically, "The revolution of the Russian socialists threatens the thrones of Europe and makes the whole capitalist structure tremble . . . . They come with a message of proletarian revolution. We glory in their achievement and inevitable triumph."<sup>38</sup>

But there were other voices still to be heard from, voices less than enthusiastic about Socialist victories in Russia or in Rochester. As the *Times Union* noted in a sour editorial the day after the election: "The victory of Socialists in two of the wards of the city should serve to remind us that the menace of this cult of despotic government is growing and that all the forces of liberty should array themselves as strongly as possible against it."<sup>39</sup>

### 1918-1919

"All the dailies in the land, Sow their lies on ev-'ry hand,  
And the truth of course is rare-ly spoken."  
[Shedd, "Milwaukeeize," *Some Songs for Socialist Singers.*]

In an influential essay published in 1960 sociologist Daniel Bell suggested that the failure of American socialism lay with its "inability to resolve a basic dilemma of ethics and politics." Combining a reformist political practice with a revolutionary ideology, the Socialists "could never resolve, but only straddle, the basic issue of either accepting capitalist society and seeking to transform it from within . . . or of becoming the sworn enemy of that society." According to Bell, the Socialists needed to choose between living "in and of" the world, or living "outside of it and against it." In 1918 and 1919 Rochester Socialists confronted a dilemma even more perplexing than that posed by Bell. In a political atmosphere poisoned by war-time repression, fear of the Russian Revolution and post-war labor unrest, the Socialists were unable to live either "in" or "outside" of the world. As a tiny minority in the city

government they did not wield enough power to serve the practical needs of their constituents; they could not even offer the kinds of services that any good machine politician could deliver. At the same time, while everyone agreed the Socialists owed their election to the political and moral revulsion many Americans felt towards the World War, they were not permitted to voice these ethical concerns of their constituents. The mildest criticism of the war effort was met with threats of impeachment and prosecution. Daniel Bell was disappointed that American Socialists did not live up to his model of sensible political behavior in a pluralist society, that is, forgetting about moral and political absolutes and restricting themselves “to the specific problems of social action in the here-and-now, give-and-take political world.”<sup>40</sup> Given the actual conditions in the United States in 1918 and 1919, it is not surprising that this line of reasoning had little following within the Socialist ranks and that many Socialists turned either to emulation of the Russian Revolution or dropped out of active politics altogether.

Apart from the activities of its elected representatives, Local Rochester kept out of the public eye in 1918. Public expression of anti-war sentiment became increasingly dangerous that spring as the United States Justice Department attempted to silence the Socialists and other war opponents. There was also confusion within the national Party over whether the campaign against the war should be continued. Sympathy for the Russian revolutionaries was easily translated into hostility towards the German generals who forced the harsh provisions of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty on them in March. Wilson’s liberal promises in his January “Fourteen Points” declaration also made the war seem more palatable.<sup>41</sup> Rochester’s Socialist officials carefully avoided the issue of the war during their first months in office. The two Socialist Aldermen, George Stahley and Charles Messinger, soon discovered the problems they were going to face in a Common Council made up of themselves one Democrat and twenty-one Republicans. In February, Stahley proposed that the city government be empowered to purchase and sell fuel and food in an effort to overcome war-time shortages. When he sought a resolution

from the Common Council appealing for an early report on this proposal he received the support of only one of his colleagues, Messinger. Stahley and Messinger met the same response when they sought substantial reforms like city ownership of the street railway and a municipally operated milk plant, though the latter proposal won the support of a number of union locals, The *Times-Union* and the director of the Rochester Board of Health. According to one Party veteran the only practical achievement of the Socialist aldermen in their two years in office was getting a section of Joseph Avenue repaved.<sup>42</sup>

The fragile truce between the Socialist officials and their pro-war colleagues was broken at a meeting of the County Board of Supervisors in early April. The Board of Supervisors had received an invitation to participate in a parade for the third Liberty Loan drive. When the Board voted to accept the invitation, Supervisor Jacob Levin of the 8th ward objected to the loan drive: "I do not approve of it. It places the burden on the masses of the people." In its place he advocated a tax on corporate excess profits. Levin went to great pains to show that his opposition to the loan did not mean he was opposed to the war. "It has nothing to do with the war. . . . When we are in the war we must go through with it. This must not be interpreted as meaning opposition to the war." Levin might just as well have saved his qualifications. Floor Leader John Mengerink objected: "Such declarations are treason. Any man who is opposed to the loan is not fit to sit on this board." He proposed that a committee be established to determine whether impeachment proceedings should be launched against Levin. Mengerink's proposal was supported by every supervisor except Levin and John Schidakowitz, the Socialist supervisor from the 17th ward, who argued unsuccessfully, "Supervisor Levin is not against the war. Neither am I."<sup>43</sup>

The city's newspapers were scandalized. An article in the *Times Union* the next day noted that Levin was born in Russia, and questioned whether he was ever naturalized. Several days after the incident, the Monroe County Attorney turned over evidence in the Levin case to the U.S. Attorney in Buffalo to determine if Levin's remarks constituted violations of the

Espionage Act. The storm continued for two weeks until the U.S. Attorney informed the Board of Supervisors that Levin could not be prosecuted under existing laws. However, he reassured them that "there is now pending before Congress a modification of the so-called espionage bills which will take care of situations of this kind."<sup>44</sup> The U.S. Attorney soon got his new powers in the form of the Sedition Act which passed the House against the single dissenting vote of Socialist Congressman Meyer London of New York. Supervisor Levin avoided such controversial votes after that, and there was no further talk of impeaching or prosecuting him.

Local Rochester conducted a low-key campaign for the Party's gubernatorial candidate in the 1918 election, but their vote, despite the new enfranchisement of women, fell to only 4,500.<sup>45</sup> The Socialists had special reason to be thankful when the war ended in November, with the hope that war-time intolerance would quickly subside. They were soon to be disillusioned, since habits of war-time suspicion and intolerance lingered on after the armistice. Socialists and I.W.W.s, so recently seen as agents of the Prussian Junkers, were now accused of serving new masters, the Russian Bolsheviks.

The first shot in Rochester's anti-Red campaign of 1919 was fired by Police Chief Joseph Quigley. At a special press conference in February Quigley announced that "There is a veritable 'nest' of Bolsheviks in Rochester, and we are going to drive them out." One reporter described how the Chief pounded his desk determinedly while he spoke "as if to emphasize this clarion call for all patriots to assist." According to Quigley, "If Bolsheviks anticipate transforming Rochester into a Petrograd they are destined to a humiliating surprise" and he concluded that "now that the city and national authorities are aroused the Bolshevik path will be strewn with obstacles and machine guns if necessary."<sup>46</sup>

In August two major strikes broke out in Rochester that seemed to some jittery citizens to confirm their worst fears of impending class war. Organizers of the newly founded Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America began recruiting workers in Rochester in 1915, and by 1918 had built a nucleus

of several hundred union members. In the summer of 1918 the union's president Sidney Hillman came to Rochester, and wrested union recognition, a reduced work week and a substantial wage increase from the Rochester Clothier's Exchange. Amalgamated strength in Rochester shot up to 7,000.<sup>47</sup>

In 1919 the ACW faced only one major hold-out, the firm of Michaels, Stern and Company. In late July, Hillman came to Rochester for negotiations which, at the company's request, were delayed for a few days. Back in New York City he learned that the company's president was negotiating with the AFL's United Garment Workers Union to organize the plant. As Hillman prepared to return to Rochester, Michaels, Stern and Company and United Garment Workers officials seemed prepared to turn a jurisdictional disagreement into a last ditch battle against the Revolution.<sup>48</sup>

In the meantime a strike broke out in August at Bausch and Lomb under the direction of a locally organized union, the Amalgamated Optical Workers. Rochester Socialists were among the strike's leaders, notably John Komorowsky, a young Russian immigrant. Bausch and Lomb officials quickly dubbed the strike as "IWW, anarchist and bolshevist" and told reporters that 80% of the strikers had not applied for naturalization.<sup>49</sup>

On his way up to Rochester, Hillman stopped off at Utica, where he was met at the train station by a hostile crowd organized by the police and the Chamber of Commerce, and forced to leave town. Frank Doyle, a member of the UGW's national executive council told Rochester newspapers that

The Utica Chamber of Commerce and other business interests struck down the menace to their industries before the demon had a chance to show its fangs. Rochester has permitted it to get a bite on its vitals but while this city has been slow, it is not entirely too late. This is not a fight for higher wages or better conditions, but a fight of Americanism against Bolshevism.<sup>50</sup>

The day after Hillman's arrival in the city, scuffling broke out between strikers and strikebreakers in front of Michaels, Stern and Company. The *Post-Express* reporter on the scene noted that most of the strike-breakers were native-born Americans and quoted an "eye-witness" to the effect that



The girls going to work and running the gauntlet of that mob of gibbering foreigners were a plucky lot. They tore loose from the grasp of the mob and went bravely to work. It must be remembered that this demonstration is not one for higher wages, shorter hours or better conditions, but to get Michaels, Stern and Company to recognize a Bolshevik outfit.<sup>51</sup>

The picket-line violence was denounced by Mayor Edgerton who declared, "Those who came to this city to disseminate disloyal doctrines and to promote mischievous propaganda, are hereby notified that their presence will not be tolerated." George Eastman wrote an open letter to the "men at the bench" in his factories, warning them that "One of the very reasons why in some countries and in some localities, the poison of anarchism has gained a foothold . . . is because it was not crushed when first it raised its vile head . . ." <sup>52</sup>

The only organized voice raised within the city in support of the strikers was that of the Socialist Party. At a meeting in the Labor Lyceum on August 19th, Alderman Charles Messinger told Bausch and Lomb strikers to remember Mayor Edgerton's statements at the next election. Messinger warned the workers against AFL intentions: "Beware of their 'help.' They're here to disorganize labor, not to organize it. They do the dirty work for the capitalists." The strikers themselves seemed bewildered by the ferocity of the attacks they faced. Frank Beuhlman, a Swiss-born optics worker, asked at the meeting, "is it Bolshevism to ask for higher wages?" <sup>53</sup>

The combined attacks of the employers, the AFL, the newspapers and the government finally prevailed. Bausch and Lomb strikers began drifting back to work in late August. A temporary injunction granted by the New York Supreme Court prohibited union picketing and leafleting and broke the back of the clothing workers' strike at the end of September. <sup>59</sup>

The strikes of August and September 1919 saw Local Rochester more active than anytime since the autumn of 1917. Municipal elections were coming up in the fall, and a unified party might have been able to build a new increase in Socialist electoral strength out of their close contact with the strikes. But unity was in short supply in the Socialist movement that summer and fall.

By the spring of 1919 a widespread movement had developed within the Socialist Party seeking a decisive shift to

the left in its political orientation. A convention of left-wing dissidents in the New York City Socialist Party outlined the new orientation in a manifesto published in February 1919. They declared: "The party must teach, propagate, and agitate exclusively for the overthrow of capitalism, and the establishment of socialism through a Proletarian Dictatorship." By April the manifesto had been endorsed by seven foreign language federations and a number of important state and city organizations, including Local Rochester.<sup>55</sup>

The developing split among Rochester Socialists resembled the split within socialist ranks in other cities. As elsewhere, Rochester Socialists disagreed over the lessons of the Russian Revolution. Edward Schnepf, who sided with the left-wing, brought back from a trip to New York City one of the first copies of Lenin's "Lett to American Workers" to reach Rochester. Local Rochester printed and distributed 10,000 copies of Lenin's letter, which called on workers to adopt "Communist, Bolshevik tactics," though recognizing that the American proletarian revolution would not break out in the near future.<sup>56</sup> Some Rochester left-wingers became increasingly impatient with what they felt were the reformist tactics of their leaders and elected officials. At a bitter meeting in July the left-wing mustered enough votes in the 8th ward to deny Charles Messinger renomination as candidate for alderman, choosing instead their own candidate, Harry Greeley.<sup>57</sup>

Had Rochester's left continued to follow the general pattern of development, its convictions would have led it into one of the two new rival communist organizations, the Communist Party or the Communist Labor Party, founded in separate conventions in Chicago in the beginning of September. Outside observers like the Lusk Committee and the newspapers, little versed or interested in the Byzantine factionalism of American radicalism, simply assumed that Rochester's leftists had joined the Communist Party. Local Rochester did, in fact, send John Komorowsky as a delegate to the Communist Party convention. But largely through the influence of one man, Charles M. O'Brien, Rochester's leftists chose to ally themselves with the Michigan-based Proletarian Party, a curious and beleaguered group that in a period of six

months was thrown out of first the Socialist Party and then the Communist Party.

O'Brien came to Rochester in early 1919 and became an organizer for the city's Socialist Party. He promptly set up a series of study groups which became the nucleus of the future Proletarian Party in Rochester. As late as mid-October, O'Brien and his group remained within the Socialist Party, but relations were increasingly strained; O'Brien organized a debate among the mayoral candidates for October 19th and neither the Democratic, Republican nor Socialist candidates showed up.<sup>58</sup>

Wracked by internal dissension, local socialists were unable to repeat their electoral success of 1917. The vote for the Socialist mayoral candidate, Charles McKelvey, declined to 6,246 votes, 2,000 less than George Weber had won in 1917 from a smaller electorate. None of the Socialist incumbents was elected.<sup>59</sup>

Among the election, the Socialists also lost their traditional meeting room in the Labor Lyceum. O'Brien led his supporters out of the Socialist Party and the Rochester Proletarian Party took over its headquarters. Despite the left's voting strength within Local Rochester, few members followed O'Brien into the new party; estimates of Proletarian Party strength in the year after the split range between 25 and 40 members. A larger number remained in the Socialist Party, but most simply left the radical movement.<sup>60</sup>

The remaining Rochester activists, Socialist and Proletarian, had more trials to face. In June 1919 a New York State Legislative committee under the chairmanship of Senator Clayton R. Lusk began investigating radical activities in the state. In a series of well publicized raids on leftist offices, meeting halls and schools, the Committee claimed to have uncovered evidence of a plot to overthrow the government.<sup>61</sup> In December Lusk Committee agents shifted their attention to upstate cities. On December 29th, a detachment of Rochester police under the direction of Senator John Millan of the Lusk Committee raided the Proletarian Party's headquarters in the Labor Lyceum. The police loaded the Party's library into laundry bags brought for that purpose. A *Democrat and*

*Chronicle* reporter, invited along on the raid, described how “ ‘Industrial Autocracy,’ ‘Soviet Russia,’ ‘The Communist,’ ‘The German Spartacist,’ ‘The Proletarian,’ tumbled into the bag along with Marx, Liebknecht, Karl Kartosky (sic), Engles and Louis Fraina and hundreds of mean little pamphlets by authors of unpronounceable names.” O’Brien, Komorowsky and a third Proletarian Party member, Michael Maisies, were arrested and charged with criminal anarchy. Police predicted that twenty to thirty more arrests would follow. The Committee also raided several other radical halls in the city, and the offices of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.<sup>62</sup>

Events forced Local Rochester out of the comfortable isolation of the pre-war years. For a period in the summer of 1919 it seemed as though Local Rochester had learned how to live both “in” and “against” the world. Rochester’s Socialist officials experimented with a new strategy, allying themselves with militant union struggles, confronting both the government and AFL officialdom, without falling into illusions about the revolutionary potential of the situation. The opportunity to win a stable constituency in Rochester’s working class community existed, but an internally divided party was unable to take advantage of it. The Party’s left would no longer be placated by what they felt were reformist half-measures; Rochester leftists deprived Alderman Messinger of the chance to run for re-election just a few weeks before he played a leading role in rallying support for the Bausch and Lomb strikers. The final split between right and left produced two distinct groups; one which would eventually abandon the goal of socialism in the hope of affecting society as it existed; the other which abandoned the hope of having any effect on the existing society while preserving the goal of socialism.

Local Rochester did not suddenly disappear in 1920. In the next two decades it continued to campaign for socialism, running candidates and sponsoring forums as it had before the war. An outside observer looking at the Party’s electoral returns in the early 1920s might have concluded that the Socialists were as strong as ever. Eugene Debs ran for the Presidency in 1920 and received 9,941 votes in Rochester, a new record for a Socialist candidate in the city. In 1924 the

Socialist Party endorsed the presidential campaign of Robert LaFollette, and nearly 12,500 Rochester voters cast their ballots for Socialist electors pledged to the Wisconsin Senator. Rochester socialism in those years seemed to be holding its own, if not growing substantially.<sup>63</sup>

A closer look reveals a movement in retreat. Debs' vote in 1920 represented a personal tribute and a protest against his imprisonment, not a real commitment to the Socialist Party. Debs ran ahead of the rest of the Socialist ticket in Rochester by margins of up to 2,300 votes. The Socialist decision to back LaFollette in 1924 shows how far the Party had changed since the pre-war period, when an endorsement of a "bourgeois" politician would have been scorned. When the Party sought the Presidency in its own name in 1928 they received a sharp reminder of their real strength; Norman Thomas received only 3,486 votes in Rochester (which still put the Socialists well ahead of their leftist rivals in the Workers [Communist] Party, whose candidate attracted 179 votes.) In the 1920s the Socialist Party ceased to be an "inheritor" party. At best they came to hope for the formation of a progressive or labor party, along the lines of the British Labor Party, whose program they could have some influence on. Harry Suskind, who joined the Rochester Socialist Party before the First World War and remained in it until the Second, shared this changing vision: "What we became was a goading party, goading other people to the left."<sup>64</sup> With the advent of the New Deal the Socialists could take an ambivalent satisfaction in the fact that Roosevelt's program included so many traditional Socialist demands; but by 1936 most of their remaining cadre and constituency had been swallowed by the amorphous New Deal coalition.

The American Socialist Party passed from a naive and optimistic youth to a resigned and passive old age, without ever having a chance to experience political maturity. The shock of the war in 1917 at first promised to lead to a new awareness of political reality and a new level of political effectiveness within the Party. It was a promise cut short by the trauma of repression and splintering in 1918 and 1919.

## NOTES

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