

## 2 *The Hopeful Years*

American Socialism was much less homogeneous than the European, lacking the largely one-group structure of the latter, the industrial worker. American Socialism attracted people from various strata and for different reasons: workers, farmers, small businessmen and intellectuals. In their ranks were Marxists, humanitarians, pacifists, even religious people. This diversity in composition and approach denied the Socialist movement here the facade of Marxist "scientific Socialism." The uninterrupted discussion between the Marxist revisionists, adherents of Edward Bernstein, and the orthodox, followers of Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, was largely missing here.

The split in 1897-1898, that left the "impossibilist" Daniel De Leon and his followers in the Socialist Labor Party a mere political sect, removed but one obstacle in the path of the Socialist movement. The new body, the Socialist Party, formed in 1901, was troubled by other feuds, largely caused by the syndicalist elements of the Industrial Workers of the World and their belief in direct action. The syndicalist tail damaged party chances in the American Federation of Labor and exposed it to the accusation of condoning violence. And only in 1912 did the convention of the SP adopt a plank in the constitution closing the party on the adherents of violence as an instrument of class struggle. William (Bill) D. Haywood and his IWW friends were expelled. Significantly, a number of these syndicalists, William Z. Foster and Earl Browder among them, later turned up as leaders of the Communist Party.

### A TASTE OF ELECTION VICTORIES

Paradoxically, the lack of Marxist orthodoxy proved helpful to the party's growth. In the decade between 1902 and 1912, the Socialist Party registered notable gains of a threefold nature: in membership, in votes and in the number of elected office-holders. The party reached its zenith between 1908 and 1912. It had 118,045 members in 1912, with branches in almost every state of the Union, including such agricultural states as Oklahoma, Utah and Idaho. In 1910, Milwaukee elected Victor L. Berger the first Socialist congressman and Emil Seidel the first Socialist mayor. In 1914, the East Side of New York elected a Socialist congressman, Meyer London. He was re-elected with a comfortable majority in 1916. In the same year, New York City also sent two Socialists to the State Assembly, Abraham L. Shiplacoff for the second term and Joseph Whitehorn for the first. In 1916, too, Chicago sent a Socialist, William E. Rodriguez, to the Board of Aldermen. Hillquit, running for Congress in the 20th Congressional District—Harlem—in the same year, lost by a mere 108 votes, a highly doubtful loss in the face of evidence of Tammany election frauds. A year earlier, the party had 31 representatives in 13 state legislatures, widely distributed geographically, and a greater number of local governments.\*<sup>3</sup>

Eugene V. Debs, Socialist Presidential candidate, starting in 1900 with 94,768 votes, polled 402,400 votes in 1904, a somewhat larger vote in 1908, and 897,011 in 1912.

The Socialist movement was steadily penetrating the trade unions, and was able to put up an increasingly vigorous fight for Socialist demands at the conventions of the AFL. Quite an impressive number of trade unions cast their votes for these demands. In 1912, the Socialist Max S. Hayes, of the International Typographical Union, in a contest with Samuel Gompers for the presidency of the AFL, received about one-third of the total vote. However, the improved position of the craft unions after 1912 estranged them from any radical movement.

The increasing strength and the growing election appeal raised bright Socialist perspectives. SP enthusiasts saw in the near future a mass party on the scale of those of Europe.

Some of the recently arrived Socialists from Russia, hitherto disillusioned and pessimistic of the Socialist Party in this country, were

now imbued with confidence. Dr. Max Goldfarb (Lipetz), political writer on the *Jewish Daily Forward*, ventured to predict: "At last we are becoming a political power. . . . Without sensationalism, the citizens are placing their trust in the party. All agree that a truly new party has come to life in America, a party of labor, the Socialist Party. . . . It moves slowly, but it keeps advancing, and it is about to become an effective political force. . . ." \*4

Another writer, Zivyon (Dr. B. Hoffman), commenting on Woodrow Wilson's victory, frankly and proudly observed: "It is no secret that many convinced Socialists voted for Woodrow Wilson. . . . Wilson was actually elected with the help of Socialist votes. . . . In California, Allan L. Benson received 30,000-odd votes less than Debs polled in 1912. And Wilson won in that state with only 4,000 votes." \*5

Goldfarb and Zivyon had been leading members of the General Jewish Workers Party, the Bund.

Profound events soon intervened to frustrate the high Socialist expectations. The most decisive was the Bolshevik Revolution.

#### INFLUX OF FOREIGN-BORN IN THE SP

The second decade witnessed a substantial change in the party's composition. Its overwhelmingly native American stock was diminishing, and foreign-born were forming the majority. The primary reason was the social reforms that followed the end of the turbulent, soul-searching muckraking period. They siphoned off some of the restlessness that permeated many of the rural areas and much of the city population. Now it was mostly immigrants that swelled the Socialist ranks.

The published statistics of dues-paying members in 1908 showed that two-thirds were American-born. In percentages, they made up 71 per cent, while those born in Germany were eight and a half per cent; the Scandinavian countries, five per cent; Great Britain, four per cent; Finland, two per cent; and all others, nine and a half per cent. The great majority of delegates to party conventions in 1901, 1904, 1908, 1912 and 1917 were native Americans of at least several generations.\*6

The picture changed rapidly after 1912. In that year, out of 118,045 members, less than 16,000 belonged to foreign-language groups.

However, in 1919, out of a membership of 108,504 more than half came from these groups. (The party suffered a decline from 1912 to 1919.) The changeover from a native mass base to a foreign-born one had a direct bearing on the stormy events that rent the party apart at the end of the decade.

This influx of foreign-born differed fundamentally from the early Germans, French, Scotch, Welsh and Irish who had guided the Socialist movement in the second half of the 19th century. They had been strangers for a short period only, and both by their intellectual level and occupational skills had been quickly absorbed in the new environment. With the possible exception of the Irish, they had retained but faint ties with their home countries. In the Socialist movement they were concerned primarily with things American. This applied even to the Germans who for a long time maintained their own organizations.

But the new recruits to the SP were largely products of the great mass immigration from Eastern, Central and Southern Europe that began streaming in at the turn of the century. They were Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Slavic groups and Balkan people, Jews and Finns. These immigrants, handicapped by their intellectual and occupational limitations—a large proportion came from the village and farm and were unskilled—had, for sheer self-preservation, to settle in compact neighborhoods of their own, creating voluntary ghettos. Industrially, they made up the greater part of the vast non-skilled labor force recruited for the expanding mass production industries.

The wide net of local associations—mutual aid, social and cultural—that mushroomed among them served to satisfy elementary social needs and, what is perhaps of greater importance, to preserve their human dignity during the painful period of acclimatization. Without a geographical concentration and organized group life these people would have felt lost, and that much poorer socially and spiritually. At the same time, this understandable early separateness tended to slow down the process of their integration in America.

#### FEDERATIONS FACE PROBLEMS OF THEIR OWN

Those who came from the empires of the Romanoff's and the Hapsburg's belonged, for the most part, to oppressed nationalities. Re-

sentment against foreign rule heightens national consciousness. In most of these areas a national liberation movement drew popular support. This was paralleled by labor and Socialist bodies of varying strength and scope also fighting for national independence. These movements helped to maintain a keen interest here in the fortunes of the folks at home.

Thousands of these immigrants, connected with radical groupings in the old country, joined the Socialist Party, forming, with the party's consent, their own bodies, called language federations. In 1915, there were 14 federations in the party. The federations were autonomous, their membership divided into branches. They collected party dues, held conventions, elected their own executive officers and issued their own literature. Their branches came in contact with the other units of the party only through a delegated body, a city committee where such a committee existed.

Internal autonomy was only part of the picture. Most of the federations, functioning in a closed community of their own, did not confine themselves to purely educational activity, as had been the original intention of the party. They had to face problems that were of little concern to the party. Revolutionary struggles or outbreaks among their countrymen often excited their rank and file more than political happenings in America. Moreover, the former required immediate action. The energies of the federations were also taxed in the constant fight with non-Socialist elements in their community for the minds of the people. This imposed a special approach, the nature of which was not always appreciated by the party as a whole.

The federations did strive to Americanize their people, acquainting them with the American past and present, and imbuing them with the consciousness that they were part of American labor. However, this commendable attempt at "opening" America to the recent arrivals was partly negated by the consistent policy of preserving their separate identity.

In the nature of things, no organization, not even one created for a temporary and specific purpose, is prepared to disappear after that purpose has been accomplished. Usually the accumulated vested interests within contrive to find other justifications for its existence. This was particularly true in the radical movement. As a result, the SP, never as tightly knit as the European parties, was becoming, in

the second decade, more decentralized and loose. The veteran Socialist writer, James Oneal, wryly observed that many federations "constituted small national Socialist parties attached to the American organization." \*7

The changing composition of the party was also reflected in the Socialist press. In 1912, the ratio of English dailies to foreign-language papers was five to eight, while in 1916 it shrank to two to 13. English weeklies in 1912 were 262 to 36 in foreign languages, while in 1916 this ratio was 42 to 22. Monthlies were ten to two in 1912, and 12 to nine in 1916.

The language federations did not exhaust all the foreign-born Socialists; a number of them belonged to English branches. This was particularly true of Jewish Socialists.

Small wonder that when faced by the crucial test, to remain with the American Socialist movement or to follow the exciting and alluring call of the Bolshevik Revolution that was rolling over their native lands, a majority of these "small national Socialist parties" chose to answer the latter.