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# The Strength of American Socialism

by James Oneal

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There are those who sincerely believe that the Socialist movement in the United States is declining in prestige, power, organization, and votes. One of the main reasons for this belief is the comparatively small increase of the Socialist vote cast in 1920. Compared with the vote of 1912 the increase is admittedly small, but comparisons are illusory when they fail to take into account any factors which entered into one election and not into the other. Are there any such factors worthy of attention? I think there are.

The election of 1912 occurred in a time of peace. Socialists freely competed in the open forum of discussion with the other political parties. In 1920 conditions had changed. Our candidate for President, Eugene V. Debs, was in prison. Our press was all but destroyed by the *ukases* of Mr. Burluson. In the first months of the war several thousand local organizations of the Socialist Party were swept aside, destroyed, by the extralegal action of our opponents. No meetings could be held, no literature distributed. Thousands of the smaller cities and towns were in the grip of local war dictatorships. The old spirit of tolerance had passed. Uniformity of opinion was decreed, and for the period of the war and long after the armistice unorthodox views were regarded as impertinent and suppressed as "seditious."

From personal knowledge, as a member of the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party,

I can testify to the wreck of the organization we had in 1920. But in addition to the shower of blows that rained upon us from the outside there developed an internal schism within the Socialist Party. There were those who were obsessed with the idea of an immediate revolution and they attempted to take the organization by storm. They were defeated, but the internal struggle with its inevitable loss of membership left the Socialist Party prostrate when the campaign of 1920 confronted us.

## Radical Forces Scattered.

As an organization, the Socialist Party had become so exhausted that it had no funds and its organizations had disappeared in many of the states west of the Mississippi. In quite a number of these states it



was even necessary to send men from the East for the purpose of seeing that an electoral ticket was placed upon the ballot. In other states many members found their way into the Farmer-Labor Party, the state of Washington becoming a complete loss to us from this source. In the Dakotas, Minnesota, and a few other states former members of the Socialist Party became allied

with the Non-Partisan League of farmers.

The "radical" forces in general were scattered and demoralized in 1920. The coercion and persecution

of the war period had not yet spent itself and these forces had no opportunity to crystallize. Amusing enough, a Chicago Congressman announced that there was reason for believing that we were in receipt of millions of Soviet gold! When this statement appeared in the press the National Executive Committee was unable to ascertain whether it would be able to find the funds necessary to pay the expense of a single session!

In short, the Socialists of the nation waged a campaign in 1920 under tremendous difficulties. In the smaller communities of the West we have reason to believe that thousands of voters were intimidated and refused to vote. In the face of all these obstacles the Socialist Party received nearly 1 million votes. The Farmer-Labor Party received nearly 300,000 votes, and in some respects its program was similar to ours, especially concerning the recognition of Soviet Russia.

That we would have made more progress if we had been able to protect ourselves against coercion is evident from the vote in New York state. In this state Debs received 63,000 votes in 1912; Allen L. Benson received 46,000 in 1916; Debs received over 200,000 in 1920. In the larger cities of the state, and particularly in Greater New York, we were able to preserve our right to a public hearing with the results noted above.

### **Insurgent Movement Grows.**

But there are other factors to be considered before conclusions can be drawn regarding the future of the Socialist movement in the United States. For the first time since 1893 there is an insurgent movement in many of the progressive labor unions in favor of independent political action by the organized masses. Its program is somewhat vague, but it bears a "socialistic" cast. In the recent convention of the American Federation of Labor at Denver this insurgency carried a resolution in favor of nationalization and democratic management of the railroads, coal mines, and other "basic industries." The Farmer-Labor Party represents the advanced section of this insurgency.

In the Northwest there is an insurgent movement in the rural sections, more or less allied with the organized masses of the cities. Large sections of this movement are forever lost to the old historic parties of

American capitalism. This insurgency has not reached a stable basis. Here it has worked in alliance with the Farmer-Labor Party, there it is known as the Non-Partisan League. In Montana, owing to the terrorism fomented by its enemies, it even went into the Democratic primaries and captured them. In Colorado a similar situation occurred. There are other cross-currents in the West which indicate new alignments.

Nor is this a return to the populism of the 1880s, with its stressing of cheap money. Instead of pressing questionable money nostrums, this vague coalition of rural and urban workers is advancing economic programs and issues intimately related to the economic welfare of the producing masses. The amazing insolence of its reactionary enemies during the war period, the persecution to which thousands were subjected because of their economic beliefs, have made it impossible for the parties of capitalism to obtain a reconciliation with those active in this insurgent movement. Every political revolt in American history since the adoption of the Constitution has issued out of the West. This region now offers an interesting study to those who think that the Harding vote is any basis for judging the situation.

### **Cynicism is Rampant.**

In addition to all these factors is the further fact that there is widespread disillusionment regarding the outcome of the world war. Cynicism is rampant. Millions who heartily believed in the statements and promises of the diplomatic sharps believe themselves the victims of a cruel hoax. They believe that they were promised what they never received and that they have received what they were never promised. The Carthaginian peace, the quarrel over petroleum, the greed of the victorious powers, increasing armaments and the tremendous campaign at home for the destruction of the labor unions have all contributed to this disillusionment.

The present period is reminiscent of the 15 years before the election of Lincoln to the Presidency. The anti-slavery segment of that period found expression in the Free Soil Party. In 1848 Van Buren was accepted as the Free Soil candidate and that party polled nearly 300,000 votes, the largest it ever received. In the next Presidential election the vote was reduced by more than

one-half. The 60 or more anti-slavery papers published in 1848 had been reduced to 16 two years later, which was less than the number published in 1840. Van Buren's return to the Democratic Party after the election of 1848 was followed by general demoralization, factional struggles, and prostration of the anti-slavery political movement.

Yet that movement was only 12 years later to triumph with the election of Lincoln. The heavy decline in the Free Soil vote after 1848 made its enemies rejoice. Yet the period of prostration was followed by crystallization of Conscience Whigs, Liberty Men, Free Soilers, Anti-Slavery Democrats, and Independents into a new party that was to carry the anti-slavery banner to victory. Many gathered into the new organization did not fully comprehend what was happening until the election of 1858 unfolded the one dominating issue of the politics of that period.

#### **Few Publications Survive.**

Today the same scattering of forces is apparent and only a small fraction of the Socialist publications have survived the reactionary storm of the war period. There is groping for new light and a feeling for a new alignment. Perhaps it is in process of realization. The recent national convention of the Socialist Party [Detroit: June 25-29, 1921] adopted this significant resolution:

Resolved, That the incoming National Executive Committee be instructed to make a survey of all radical and labor organizations in the country, with a view of ascertaining their strengths, disposition, and readiness to cooperate with the Socialist movement upon a platform not inconsistent with that of the party, and on a plan which will preserve the integrity and autonomy of the Socialist Party.

Resolved, That the National Executive Committee report its findings with recommendations to the next annual convention of the Socialist Party.

It is possible that this decision may result in the formation of a powerful organization like the British Labour Party, each affiliated organization maintaining its own autonomy yet each cooperating with all in a national movement for independent representation of the workers of the nation. The program could be nothing else than one with a Socialist objective, for this is the drift of the striving of the organized masses in all modern nations of the world. There is within

this movement the possibility of a repetition of Free Soil history. Who knows?

After all, politics is the organization of economic interests with the view of incorporating these interests into laws. Mighty impersonal economic forces at the base of society work their will regardless of what we wish. The plantation system served by slave labor died because of the development of an economic factor over which politicians had no control.

Intense cotton culture exhausted the rich soil of the South. The Southern ruling class had to expand into new territory or its economic regime would become bankrupt. The Southern leaders intrigued to secure Cuba for new slave territory and failed., They waged war in Kansas for new territory and failed. Facing the need of territorial expansion to save the slave region, knowing that a Republican triumph meant no more slave territory admitted as states to the Union, the election of Lincoln was the death knell of the old regime. The issue was drawn by the rapid exhaustion of the soil in the south, and this important economic factor registered its decree in the politics of that time.

#### **Consolidation of Capital.**

The modern system of large scale production also faces a similar need of expansion into new territory and it is this factor that decides political events and the future of the United States as it does the future of all nations organized on a capitalistic basis. The tremendous consolidation of capital into great organizations has evolved powers of production no other age has ever known. Surplus capital accumulates at such a rate that domestic opportunities will not absorb it. It must find an outlet into other territories, hence expansion, hence increasing investments overseas.

But the investor cannot invest his capital in Mexico, Central America, or China without becoming interested in the laws, customs, habits, and institutions of these countries. These often serve as so many barriers to the "development" of the resources of these backward areas. They must be swept away. They are swept away. Hence the need of armaments to protect trade, loans, and investments abroad.

There is no choice, no more than there was for the leaders of the old South. Accumulating surplus capital must find an outlet to avoid stagnation at home,

yet capitalism cannot go abroad without coming into conflict with the social life and political institutions of the weaker peoples. The lower social systems must capitulate to the higher, either by “assimilation” or by force of arms. Two fundamentally antagonistic social systems could not exist side by side in the United States. We are reaching a stage when two or more opposing social systems cannot survive in the same world. The weaker ones will either be conquered by imperialist might or they will consent to be transformed into an image of the menacing big capitalist powers.

This means imperialism, armaments, censorship, aggressive diplomacy, and the certainty of war. The United States cannot be an imperialist bully abroad and a benevolent ruler at home. What it does abroad it must do at home in an effort to silence criticism. The same is true of the other modern states that have entered the cycle of modern capitalistic production. As the governments come more and more to serve the investing and financial interests of the nations abroad, as the need of expansion to serve an imperialist interest becomes more apparent, the idea of dying for the glory of American oil investors in Mexico will appear ludicrous to increasing numbers of thinking people.

#### **Future of Capitalism.**

Finally, just as the territory into which the old slave regime of the South could expand was limited,

so the territory into which the modern imperialist powers may expand is limited. As this territory narrows, as the world becomes capitalistic, the surplus of capital for overseas investment increases while the area for its investment decreases. What this means for the United States may be apparent to all.

I have no fears as to the future of the Socialist movement in this country. In fact, a close study of many financial journals for the past year convinces me that the “best minds” of the present social order are much more puzzled about the future of capitalism. The whole world drifts, the statesmen and financiers known not where. They hope for the best and yet are possessed with fear. The old order seethes with economic contradictions which they are unable to solve. Millions in need of American goods and nearly 4 million unemployed here. The Allies want a German indemnity and when the Germans offer goods these are spurned as a pestilence. Yet masses in both France and England could use these goods. Capitalism depends on a trade revival and up goes the highest tariff wall in our history.

The future of capitalistic “civilization” is a more important item on the international agenda than the future of the Socialist movement. We can take care of ourselves, but it is doubtful if that can be said of the protagonists of the existing “order.”

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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