
Building the Social Democratic Party

by Emil Seidel

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Our party was growing and we, including myself, were growing with it. From the Socialist *Vereinigung* [Association] I transferred to Branch 1 [of the Social Democratic Party of America], organized by Eugene V. Debs. It was our first English-speaking branch in Milwaukee. We met in the Ethical Hall on Jefferson Street. Here I got to know Charley Whitnall, Howard Tuttle, Thomas C.P. Myers, Frederic Heath, Eugene Rooney, Nick Schwinn, and other Socialists of more or less purely native stock.

The *Vereinigung* having served its purpose, disbanded. Most of its members joined their respective Ward branches; the remainder reorganized the German-language branch. Eventually, we had a dozen or more such foreign language branches in Milwaukee County, all of them affiliated nationally and having a weekly paper. The Jewish comrades maintained even a daily — the *Forwards*. These foreign language Socialists counted among our most loyal comrades and were the hardest workers for our cause — the backbone of the bundle brigade.

We aimed to maintain a local branch in every ward. Among the earliest, we had enough signatures to apply for a 20th Ward charter. I transferred my membership from Branch 1 to Branch 20. Many of the charter members have crossed the great divide but the branch they started lives on to continue their work.

And there was work to be done. Whichever way I turned, the jobs fairly cried out for attention. Somebody had to make a start. So I pitched in to talk about things that the people could see, feel, and understand. The streets were dusty — inches deep, waiting for the next gust of wind to pick it up and carry it into our homes for us to breath. And we inhaled it with all its germs. When a shower or the sprinkler laid the dust the roads were muddy and the kids carried the mud into our homes, germs and all, with their shoes or bare feet. Was it a wonder babies died young and the weakest went down with consumption?

Some Eastern smarties called ours a “Sewer Socialism.” Yes, we wanted sewers in the workers’ houses; but we wanted much, oh, so very much more than sewers. We wanted our workers to have pure air; we wanted them to have sunshine; we wanted planned homes; we wanted living wages; we wanted recreation for young and old; we wanted vocational education; we wanted a chance for every human being to be strong and live a life of happiness.

And we wanted everything that was necessary to give them that: playgrounds, parks, lakes, beaches, clean creeks and rivers, swimming and wading pools, social centers, reading rooms, clean fun, music, dance, song, and joy for all. That was our Milwaukee Social Democratic movement. There was but one way to get all of that — *go after it and get it.*

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We had the message for our fellow workers; we must get it to them. But we had little money to put it over. Our weeklies, the *Social Democratic Herald* and the *Vorwärts*, reached only a limited number. So we hit upon street corner meetings. But we also lacked orators. We had one German speaker in our branch, Carl Kleist. But German did not appeal to the young generation

which we were after. We got one F.G.R. Gordon¹ from the East; he could hold a street crowd with a lot of statistics on wages, prices, profits, which he could rattle off like a talking machine, all from memory.

One evening after he spoke for our Ward branch I had him at my home; we two sat on his bed until after midnight, talking. From him I learned how to hold a crowd. When he had returned East, the papers reported that F.G.R. Gordon had recanted, admitting that his statistics were purely fictitious. He was through after that, and we were wary of outsiders. From that experience I drew my lesson: Keep faith with the “street crowd.”

Our cause was too grand to require such shyster methods, I held. With genuine statistics we could do much better than did F.G.R. Gordon. Comrade Berger had an official volume on manufacture from the latest U.S. Census reports on invested capital, labor employed, wages paid, costs of material used, and value of products. He gave me that book. Here was visible evidence that could not be refuted. And it was authentic.

I made charts, perhaps a half dozen or so, about 2 by 3 feet in size, the lettering large enough to be read a hundred feet away, containing federal statistics on wages, prices, values of products, I wanted to convey. Every chart carried its own lesson. After a little practice, it was easy to hold the interest of my branch with a talk of more than 30 minutes. And we were agreed that we would have open-air meetings in our ward.

A Presidential campaign was on; our own candidate was Eugene V. Debs. I made a scarlet banner with gold lettering: “For President — Eugene V. Debs” with the picture of our candidate in the cent. And I made a transparency with the lettering: “Workers of the World, Unite!” We got a fife, a snare drum, and a bass drum. Fred Reuter, a Spanish War veteran, was a member of our branch and could play fife or drum. He got someone to

¹ Seidel discretely calls Gordon “F.G.R.G.—” in the manuscript.

help him and in a pinch I could beat the bass drum. We managed to get about two dozen kerosene torches to make a show and have light for our charts....

Thus equipped, we organized our forces. We fixed upon definite evenings and went out marching from one prominent corner to another; at each stop we made a talk of no more than 20 or 25 minutes. In that way we could hold three or four street meetings of an evening. Each one had his part to play. We stirred the ward as it had never been agitated before. Several times neighboring branches invited us to their ward. On Sunday mornings our bundle brigade went into action — every home in the ward got a campaign leaflet or a *Voice of the People*. These were as a rule County Central Committee publications, issued during a campaign.

One time the Democrats were having a huge rally downtown. Our marching club staged a counter-attraction. We marched from our headquarters on 19th and Locust Streets to the elder John Doerfler's saloon on Winnebago and Chestnut Streets, our downtown headquarters. On the way we were repeatedly cheered. We wouldn't keep our lights under a bushel. Returning we were nearly home when we were attacked with stones and frozen tomatoes from a cornfield on the northeast corner of 17th and Center Streets. Our banner was soiled, our transparency damaged, but no one hurt.

Soon I was as fluent with our statistics as F.G.R. Gordon had been; and we retracted nothing but added to our indictment of Capitalism. We were growing; I, too.

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One winter day some years later we had a very heavy snow-storm. It had been snowing all day, all night before, all the previous day, and was still snowing. Streetcar service was in bad condition though the snowplows were constantly at work. It was

on a Thursday, the evening of our branch meeting. When after supper I got ready to go out again, Lucy warned, "You ought not go out in this storm; you'll find no one there."

"Maybe not, but it's all the more a reason why I should go."

I trudged a full three-quarters of a mile through the snow. At the hall, on Clark and Teutonia Avenue, there was a crackling fire in the huge cannon stove. Five young comrades, converts all who had recently joined as a group, stood around the stove to get dry. The air was thick with the smell of wet clothes. I joined them, waiting for more who did not come.

"There's no quorum, so we'll have no meeting," I announced. "But we can have a social gathering."

They drew up chairs and we sat with our wet footwear on the rail, chatting and smoking. Being the veteran among them, they asked me to talk of our early experiences and our struggles. They asked questions.

For nearly two hours we sat snugly, chatting of many things while the storm raged on outside, rattling the windows as if trying to get at us. Among others, I also told of our marching club and of the cornfield and our injured banner.

At that point the young comrades became very still. Conversation lagged. One of them asked timidly, "Comrade Seidel—"

"Yes?"

"D-did you ever find out?"

"Find out what?"

"Whoever threw the stones at your parade?"

"No, we never tried to find out."

More hem and haw, then, "Would you like to know?"

"Well, it might do no harm to know — nor much good either."

He hesitated, then took heart to speak.

"I'll tell you — it was a bunch of us boys. We thought it a good joke. We couldn't tell anybody, it didn't seem right, so we agreed to all join together."

It was near 10:00. We broke up our session. All had enjoyed it; I, too. We checked the fire, put out the lights, and tramped homeward through the storm.

I told Lucy about the evening.

“Good thing you went,” she remarked.

And we laughed.

* * *

Branch 20 had a sound nucleus of veteran German Social Democrats who loves song. They started the Vorwärts Männerchor [Vorwärts Men’s Choir]. Our branch meetings were regularly opened with singing the first verse of the “Arbeiter Marseillaise,” and the last verse at its closing. When the old comrades passed away and the new generation ruled — which did not know the song — then we had no more singing at the meeting. Our meetings went “American.” I translated the pledge and ritual into English, but we sang no more because we had no appropriate English labor hymn.

Our branches had autonomy, each managed its own affairs. The County Central Committee was made up of delegates from the branches and had charge of county affairs. It elected a County Executive Committee. The State Executive Committee was elected by the state convention. This latter committee also appointed a State Secretary and fixed his salary. Charters, dues stamps, and other supplies were issued from the State Office, through the county to the branches.

To raise funds the county arranged picnics, shows, bazaars, and carnivals on a large scale. Only the largest halls sufficed. Our annual carnival was held in the old Exposition building until it was destroyed by fire. When the Auditorium was done we used that. The picnics of the party were the largest (and perhaps greatest) held in Milwaukee.... These were annual get-together affairs always featuring the most prominent speakers to be had

in the labor or political movement. These picnics left a lasting impression upon Milwaukee's development — social, political, and cultural.

It was the resourceful Edmund T. Melms, receiving \$33.33 a month from the city as alderman and \$5.00 a week from the party as county organizer, who organized and managed these picnics. It was Comrade Victor L. Berger who always knew where to get the best speaker as a drawing card for the day. The two made a fine team. And Milwaukee? Well, it just trekked for the day to the Social Democratic picnic, by the tens and tens of thousands as to an annual pilgrimage.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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