Why Political Democracy Must Go

By John Reed

IV.

THE history of Socialism in America is of the most absorbing interest. Every new theory of cohorts for a descent upon the 3d, 5th nings of the factory system, had its immediate repercussion in the New World. The present Left Wing movement in the Socialist Party, with its reflex of the new tendencies of European Socialism, is, in that characteristic, not exceptional.

For example, in 1826 the Englishman, Robert Owen, moved to America and started his New Harmony colony. About the same time Albert Brisbane (father of Arthur Brisbane, Mr. Hearst's right-hand man), introduced into America the philosophy of Fourier, to which he converted Horace Greeley; this resulted in a series of communistic experiments in co-operative industry and agriculture. Greeley abandoned pure Fourierism, and tinkered with "profit-sharing" and other varieties of cooperation, that led to the great movement for producers' and consumers' cooperatives in New England, which culminated and then died down in the eighties.

The characteristic of native American social ideas was their intense individualism. The economic reason for this was, the historical condition of American social development, which identified the concentration of labor and capital in cities with the loss of individual liberty characteristic of a population largely agricultural and scattered thinly over a great area.

One of the earliest native social philosophies was transcendentalism, which took various forms, including the esthetic individualism of Thoreau; the intellectual individualism of Emerson—whose ideas, however, were considered so dangerous to society that he was not permitted to lecture at Harvard University; the "associationist" cooperative activity of Channing, grafted onto Fourierism; and finally, the revolutionary ideas of Orestes Brownson.

Brownson, of the above, was the only real member of the working-class. It is interesting here to quote from his article, "The Laboring Classes," published in 1840, an account of the factories of New England, where the workers were mostly women:

"The great mass wear out their health, spiritis and morals without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. We know no sadder sight on earth than one of our factory villages presents, when the bell at break of day, or at the hour of breakfast or dinner, calls out its hundreds or thousands of operatives."

Read this, and then go to Lawrence, or Providence, or Fall River today. The only difference is that now the workers are foreign women, while then they were Americans.

Brownson had had never seen the Communist Manifesto. Yet in 1840 he advocated the overthrow of the capitalist state, and declared any means justifiable. It is startling at this time to read what he says:

"And is this measure to be easily carried? Not at all. It will cost infinitely more than it cost to abolish either hereditary monarchy or hereditary nobility. It is a great measure and a startling. The rich, the business community, will never voluntarily consent to it, and we think we know too much of human nature to believe that it will ever be effected peaceably. It will be effected only by the strong arm of physical force. *It will come, if it ever comes at all, only at the conclusion of a war, the like of which the world has yet never witnessed, and from which, however inevitable it may seem to the eye of philosophy, the heart of humanity recoils with horror.*

"We are not ready for this measure yet. There is much previous work to be done, and we should be the last to bring it before the legislature. The time, however, has come for its free and full discussion. It must be canvassed in the public mind, and society prepared for acting on it."

Another direction taken by native American social theories was reform of the systems of exchange and banking.

Josiah Warren, the "first American anarchist," opened a series of stores where goods were sold at cost, and the labor of the salesmen was paid for by an equal amount of labor by the purchaser. He founded several colonies, which were based on the principle that price should be determined by labor-cost. He was followed by William Beck, with his "ticket-system" of doing away with banks, and the substitution of purchasing power for currency. Then came William Weitling, the German immigrant, with his plan for a "bank of exchange," in which price would be fixed by "labor-time." This was a compromise with the ideas which he had first brought from Europe in 1847—*common ownership of all property and centralized management of production and exchange.* The reason for this change is very significant. Both in Europe and America the merchant-capitalist was the dominant enemy of the working class. But in Europe it was realized that a social and political revolution was necessary to get rid of him (indicated by the Revolutions of 1848), while in America the workers demanded *economic reforms which would not destroy existing political institutions.*

The first appearance in this country of Marxian Socialism was in 1852-3, when Joseph Weydemeyer, a friend and disciple of Marx and Engels, came to New York and organized a short-lived revolutionary society known as the *Proletarierbund.* Then he attempted to spread his ideas in the ranks of the trade-unions forming at the time, and organized an association among the German workers called the General Workingmen's Alliance, which began the publication of a Communist paper called *Die Reform.* The movement spread. A similar organization was started among the English-speaking workers. But the growing wave of trade unionism finally overwhelmed it, and Marxian Socialism, with its conception of the class struggle, its recognition of trades-unionism and political action, disappeared until after the Civil War.

The First International, founded in London in 1864, for which Karl Marx wrote the inaugural address, began with an organization of British trade-union leaders to prevent the importation of strike-breakers into England from the continent. It developed into a sort of general Workers' Union, in whose ranks two theories battled; that of Mazzini, advocating the harmony of the interests of capital and labor (from which the philosophy of the A. F. of L. is directly descended), and that of Marx, who emphasized the class solidarity of labor in all lands. Not until the Bakuninites almost captured the movement in the early seventies did the actual program of Socialism become the leading issue. The early philosophy of the International was based on the economic organization of the workers into trade unions and cooperatives, to precede the seizure of the political state. It took ten years for this idea to become firmly established in America.

On the other hand, the Lasallean agitation of 1863 in Germany was immediately reproduced here. Lasalle emphasized political action, the political capture of the State *first*—this capture to be followed by the organization of the working class into co-operatives assisted by State credit.

In 1865 there was formed in New York the General German Workingmen's Union, which subsequently became Section I of the International. Its original declared:

"Under the name of the General German Workingmen's Union are united all Social-Republicans, particularly those who regard Ferdinand Lasalle as the most eminent champion of the working class, for the purpose of reaching a true point of view on all social questions . . . . *While in Europe only a general revolution can form the means of uplifting the working people, in America the education of the masses will instill them with the degree of self-confidence that is indispensable for the effective and intelligent use of the ballot, and will eventually lead to the emancipation of the working people from the yoke of capital.*"

Seven years before this, however, there had been established a Marxian organization, the Communist Club, based on the *Communist Manifesto,* among whom were many members afterward prominent in the American International, and who conducted a voluminous correspondence with Marx, Engels and Becker.

In 1868, the Communist Club and the Workingmen's Union united to form a political party, the Social Party of New York and vicinity. It is interesting to note here that this party was, out of deference to the English-speaking workers, a distinctly social reform party, advocating progressive income taxes, abolition of national banks, right of issue of paper money reserved to the Government, an eight-hour law, etc. The campaign of 1868 proved it a failure. In December of 1869, it joined the International, and began work of Socialist study and general Socialist propaganda, on the basis of Marx's *Capital.*

In the next two years a number of new sections of the International were organized, consisting mostly of foreign immigrants. There was a French section, a Bohemian section, and several Irish sections. But besides the foreign immigrants, there was another group, Americans, who joined the International. This was made up of intellectuals, inheritors of the traditions of transcendentalism and Fourierism in the forties and fifties. They had formed an organization called the New Democracy, whose platform advocated electoral reforms, such as the referendum, and State Socialism.

In 1870 the New Democracy disbanded, and its members joined the International as sections 9 and 12, of New York. Section 12, under the leadership of two sisters, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, well-known advocates of "social freedom," quickly became famous. It turned its attention to all sorts of extraneous matters, such as a "universal language," woman suffrage, "freedom of sexual relations." This imperilled the very successful propaganda of the Central Committee among labor organizations. Section 12 pursued its activities in the name of the International, refusing to recognize the authority of the Central Committee, and appealing to the General Council in London to become the leading Section in America—which was rejected. Finally the foreign sections decided to put a stop to the activities of Section 12. The delegates of fourteen sections met and dissolved the Central Committee, reorganizing under the name of the Federal Council, and excluding Section 12 and a few sympathizing sections, which they offered admittance on the basis of the following propositions:

"1. Only the labor question to be treated in the organization.

"2. Only new sections to be admitted two thirds of whose members are wage laborers.

"3. Section 12 to be excluded, as strangers to the labor movement."

Section 12, being entirely composed of intellectuals, refused. The German sections called a national convention to legalize their coup d'etat. The General Council in London made an investigation, and in 1872 Section 12 was expelled from the International. But Section 12 and its followers refused to accept the decision, and called a national convention of its own, in which were represented thirteen Sections, mostly English-speaking. This convention denounced the interference of the General Council in American affairs, and declared its intention to appeal to the General Congress of the International, at the Hague, in 1872.

Although Section 12 and its adhering Sections opposed the Marxians, they did not ally themselves with Bakunin and his faction—although at the Hague Congress Bakunin supported the delegates of Section 12, who were expelled with him from the International. The new organization dominated by Section 12 turned its attention to politics. At the same time, the convention of the regular International in America proclaimed as its intention "to rescue the working classes from the influence and power of all political parties, and show that the existence of all these parties is a crime and a threat against the working classes." It did not recognize that the time was yet ripe for political action.

In the Hague Congress, Sorge, representing the orthodox Marxian organization in America, gave as his reason why the native American Sections were not entitled to representation, *that the native Americans were practically all speculators, while the immigrants alone constituted the wage-earning class in America.*

The headquarters of the International was transferred to New York in 1873. From then strife developed within its ranks, until the convention of 1874, when the two opposing conceptions of political action pure and simple, as against the organization of trade-unions as a basis for political action, again split the American International, and the political actionists permanently withdrew, and started the Social Democratic Party of North America. At the same time, the Labor Party of Chicago was formed.

In Europe, too, the workingmen were building up political parties in place of federations of the International. And this had its effect upon the American labor movement. But the chief reasons for the tendency toward political organization were the disastrous effects of the panic of 1873, which practically destroyed the American trade union movement, and *a desire to make Socialism more attractive to the American workers*—that is, to the small property holders.

But at the same time the American workingmen were perfecting the first of their powerful economic organizations, the two even then beginning their struggle for mastery on the industrial field—the Knights of Labor and the craft union movement. Politically, the rank and file of both these organizations were entirely impregnated with petit-bourgeois psychology. The Pittsburgh General Labor Convention of 1876 was captured by the Knights of Labor, who endorsed Greenbackism, from cheap money to the protective tariff, and thus cut adrift from the Socialists, who withdrew from the convention.

The result was to unite the Socialist factions, which came together and adopted a declaration of principles taken from the General Statutes of the International, and organized the Workingmen's Party of the United States, which immediately plunged into politics.

My purpose in thus reviewing the early history of the American Socialist movement in detail, is to call attention to the nature of its action in the American political structure. Of course it is obvious that the influence of Socialism upon the American state up