

# Why Political Democracy Must Go

By John Reed

VI

THE foundation of the Socialist Party of America proved that Socialism had become acclimatized. Born of Populism, Greenbackism, and Trade Unionism, it was grafted on to a Socialist tradition whose most important ancestor had been the teachings of Ferdinand Lasalle, imported into this country shortly after the Civil War. It was dominated by the prevailing American belief that the ballot controlled the State, and that the State could be conquered for the working class by the ballot. At the beginning it was still revolutionary—that is to say, it aimed at the capture of political power. At hand it had a native economic organization of the workers—the American Federation of Labor—already grown powerful. Instead of trying to create a rival labor organization, it realized that this was impossible, and set out to capture for Socialism the organization already existing.

In all respects, therefore, the Socialist Party was apparently equipped to enter the political struggle with the capitalist class for power. And this it proceeded to do at once, with results which justified its belief that at last the combination had been discovered by which Socialism could be made attractive to American workmen.

The first national campaign—that of 1900—tabulated 87,814 votes for the Socialist Party. Debs, who was very popular with the workers because of his activities in the American Railway Union, made a series of spectacular campaigns for the Presidency, culminating in 1912 with the country-wide tour of the "Red Special," when the Party rolled up almost a million votes. And this last campaign was carried on in the face of Roosevelt's dramatic crusade for "social justice," wherein the Progressive Party had incorporated many of the planks from the Socialist platform.

At the same time the Socialists in various parts of the country elected several members of State Legislatures, city aldermen and administrative officials. The most striking example of Socialist political success was in the City of Milwaukee, where Berger was elected Alderman-at-Large, and finally Emil Seidel was elected Mayor, with a large proportion of the City Council composed of Socialists. For a time, indeed, Milwaukee was looked up to by American Socialists as a shining example of what Socialist political action could do—just as, before the war, Germany dominated the International because of its powerful party organization and its millions of votes.

The real emergence of Socialism upon the arena of the political fight, however, did not occur until 1910, when Victor Berger was elected Member of the House of Representatives for the Fifth Wisconsin District, and for the first time a representative of the Party of the working-class took his seat in the Congress of the United States, the highest law-making body. He sat for two terms; and then, after a lapse of two years, Meyer London of New York succeeded him as Representative, to be followed again in 1918 by the re-election of Berger.

It is not necessary here to go into the record of Victor Berger as first Congressional Representative of the working class Party. His first act was to cast his vote for a substitute to the direct election of Senators. His maiden speech contained not one single reference either to the Socialist International or to the interest of the working-class as such; it was a purely reformist criticism of the capitalist state. The most salient feature of his tenure of office was the introduction of mild social reform legislation, of which his Old Age Pension bill is characteristic. For example, the pension was to accrue only after the worker's sixtieth year—and it is a well-known fact that the average life of an American industrial worker is forty years. It was to be denied to anyone convicted of a "felony"—even such a "felony" as that of which Victor Berger now stands convicted by the capitalist courts. It was to be denied to anyone, no matter how old, who had an income of six dollars per week. And finally, all "unnaturalized aliens", which compose the vast majority of the most exploited section of the American working class, were barred.

Add to this Berger's opposition to Woman Suffrage, on the ground that women were largely dominated by religion, and would therefore strengthen the reactionary political forces; and later, his advocacy of Intervention in Mexico; and we have a picture of a man in some respects less revolutionary than the bourgeois Jeffersonian Liberals.

In full consciousness of the desperate situation in which Victor Berger now finds himself, and in full respect to his courage, I do not wish to misquote Berger or misstate his position. I shall therefore quote extracts from his recent pamphlet, "Open Letter Addressed to His Colleagues in Congress", in order that he may speak for himself:

"I am one of the founders of the Socialist Party of

America. . . . I have always prided myself on strict obedience to laws, even when I do not like them. . . .

"The American Socialists were opposed to our entry into the war, but so were many Republicans and Democrats in and out of Congress. . . .

"The American Socialists held to the wise counsel of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and Abraham Lincoln—to keep out of European troubles. . . .

"That is the reason why we demanded legislation depriving any citizen or corporation of all profits from the sale of war supplies for the American government. . . .

"Many Republicans and Democrats believed and said the same. . . .

"Now Socialism is not Bolshevism. . . .

"Socialism is the collective ownership of the means of social production and distribution—while Bolshevism, as far as I understand it, is Communism combined with syndicalism. . . .

"The Communists want to produce and consume in common. . . .

"Socialism, however, wants to control only productive capital—not all property. A Socialist commonwealth will not do away with the individual ownership of property, but only with the individual ownership of socially necessary capital. . . .

"Communism denies individual ownership of all property. . . .

"The Bolsheviks discourage parliamentary action. They prefer direct action and the dictatorship of the proletariat. . . .

"The Bolsheviks want to break entirely with the past and start anew. The Socialists do not believe that a complete break is either possible or desirable. . . .

"If we are to remain a politically free people the inevitable outcome must be that the people must take possession collectively of the social means of production and distribution—and use them for the nation as a whole—and that is called Socialism. . . .

"The measures that the Socialists will take—must closely connect with the present system and evolve from it. . . .

"The Socialists believe that everything that is necessary for the life of the nation—for the enjoyment of everybody within the nation—the nation is to own and manage. . . .

"Everything that is necessary for the life and development of the state—the state is to own and manage. . . .

"Everything that is necessary for the life and development of the city—the city is to own and manage. . . .

"Everything that the individual can own and manage best—the individual is to own and manage. There will be plenty of enterprises left for the initiative of the individual. . . .

This is nothing but State Capitalism in its most complete form. Mr. Hearst will cheerfully endorse it. In it there is not a word to indicate that the proletariat must control the State, and that it must, as Marx points out, break down the capitalist State apparatus and re-build anew the entire machinery of government and of production. There is very little difference between this ideal and the industrial organization of Imperial Germany before the war.

Meyer London's career in Congress began little better. In a speech supporting the Jones bill giving citizenship to the Porto Ricans, London threatened that if Congress denied the ballot to these people it would be placing in their hands "the bomb of the revolutionist and the assassin's knife." Immediately the House was in an uproar; the members sternly threatened that they would discipline the Socialist Congressman unless he withdrew his remarks, so Socialist Congressman Meyer London apologized and ate his words.

From that time on, outside of a few speeches concerning the housing situation in the District of Columbia and other minor matters of that sort, Congressman London remained silent. On the resolution declaring war on Germany, he voted "nay". On the military appropriation, however, he did not vote. Finally, the fearful pressure engendered by the war, and the savage patriotic persecution in the Congress beat down his half-hearted resistance; so that in 1918 he was the Congressman selected to deliver an address of eulogy commemorating the third anniversary of Italy's entrance into the war!

Taken to task by his comrades in New York for his chauvinistic utterances, Comrade London declared that although born a foreigner, he had been made in America, and he would be true to his country; furthermore, he added that he was responsible to all his constituents—and that these constituents were not only Socialists (working men) but all the people of his district. The disastrous records of Socialists elected to office are endless. Mayor Seidel of Milwaukee appointed many non-Socialists to posts in the city administration, and when criticized, declared that he represented all the people—not merely the Socialist Party. Mayor Lunn of Schenectady did the same thing; when taken to task for his un-Socialistic behavior, the Mayor proudly resigned from the Socialist Party—but remained Mayor, and afterward became one of the chief pro-War Democratic Congressmen. Mayor Van Lear of Minneapolis, after election to office of an anti-War program, joined Samuel Gompers' Alliance for Labor and Democracy, which was formed by the reactionaries of the American Federation of Labor to support the War; and when the Non-Partisan League put up a candidate in a local election, Mayor Van Lear made a public speech in favor of this candidate, although a candidate of his own Party was running. His last act in office was to refuse to veto a Red Flag law passed

by the City Council of Minneapolis against the Socialists.

But after all it is not these examples of the failure of Socialist officials in office which forms the most damning demonstration of the failure of old-style Socialist political action. The War intensified and brought out the real nature of political power and control. For example, in cases where the Socialists in office actually tried to follow Socialist principles, capitalist action was swift and merciless. In Minneapolis, for instance, Mayor Van Lear having manifested a mild hospitality toward free speech, the State government promptly took away his police power and governed the city through the State Council of National Defense, which was composed of the representatives of big business. Mayor Hoan, Socialist Mayor of Milwaukee, was completely divested of his power as a city executive by the business interests of Wisconsin acting through the Governor and Council of National Defense. In Cleveland two Socialists were elected to the City Council; one was disbarred, because a woman reported that twelve months before he had been heard to say that he did not believe in the Red Cross—and the other Councilman was expelled because he belonged to the same political Party as his colleague. Victor Berger ran for United States Senate in Wisconsin in the Spring of 1918. In order to prevent him from taking his seat, the business interests of his State and of the country at large secured his indictment in the Federal Courts, on charges much less grave than those upon which many Socialists had already been acquitted. Berger then ran for the House of Representatives. This was the signal for still further indictments. He was elected by an overwhelming vote—and another indictment was clapped upon him; and after the armistice had been signed, Berger was tried and convicted, and sentenced to twenty years in jail.

At the height of the Socialist Party's career, in 1912, more than nine hundred votes were cast for its Presidential candidate—about one-fifteenth of the entire vote cast for President, and one-sixth of the ballots cast for Woodrow Wilson, the winning candidate. Roughly, the Democratic and Republican electorate was represented in Congress proportionally to their Presidential vote; but the Progressives—the Party of the rebel small property owners—was not represented in proportion to its vote; and the Socialists, with one-fifteenth of all the ballots, got one Congressman, although on the face of it they were entitled to about thirty. True, many Congressional Districts had no elections in 1912; but this does not alter the essential truth of this statement. In Europe the development of such political strength by any party would have immediately showed in the legislative body; this is true even in Germany, in spite of restrictions to the franchise. But in America it can be readily seen that, although political democracy more or less accurately reflects the comparative strength of the bourgeois parties, it operates to block the adequate representation of all classes contending with the great capitalists for State control.

Why is this so? Why is it that in Europe the political Socialist movement was able to develop great strength in the legislative bodies, and exercise an important influence on the Governments?

This results from the fact that nowhere in the world is the capitalist class so strongly organized and so firmly entrenched as in America. In America, from the first, the capitalist class controlled the State, and there was no other class in society except the working class. In Europe the capitalist class had to fight against the remnants of the feudal class. Almost up to the Great War, in some parts of Europe there was a dual revolution going on: the capitalists were striving with the dying feudal system to gain control of the State, and the rising proletariat was also beginning to battle for power. Both feudal class and capitalists used the working class against each other, and thus the Socialists became an important factor between the two contending class-factions. And thus, above all, the capitalists were compelled to fight in two directions at once, and in the meanwhile, to give concessions to the working class in return for its aid against the feudal system.

In America, however, there was no feudal class to divert the capitalists from their war against the working class. More than that, the ballot enabled the American capitalist class to blind the workers with illusions of "democracy" until they had perfected their hold upon the throat of the republic.

For the last decade the history of the American Socialist Party has shown a continuous tendency to draw away from the proletariat. The policy of "boring from within" in the American Federation of Labor resulted in the virtual capture of the Party, for a period, by the Federation—which by that time had become a definitely wage-conscious,