WHERE DID IT GET US?

In Retrospect — Fifty Years of Socialism

"Sectarians!", "Spittoon philosophers!", "Armchair theorists!" Down through the last half century scornful words, ridicule, even invective, have been hurled at World Socialist Party speakers and writers by diverse opponents from the "Left." "You will never amount to anything," they assured us, "because socialists have got to participate in the day-to-day struggle of the workers, have got to identify themselves with the immediate aspirations of the oppressed and hungry. Otherwise it is hopeless to expect sympathy from the workers for your organization." This, in essence, has been the main criticism of the WSP by our radical opposition. The Socialist Party of America, the Communist Party of the U.S., the Socialist Workers Party together with the groups that splintered off these organizations threw themselves into the day-to-day struggles in a mad competition to gain converts. The Socialist Labor Party (De Leonist), while remaining aloof from the struggle for reforms, continued to advocate their "Industrial Republic of Labor" rather than a system of society based upon common right of access of all mankind to all production and services. And the Socialist Labor Party, despite the finger of "sectarian" scorn that was also pointed at them by social democrats and "communists," has not hesitated to use the same tactics when compelled to acknowledge our existence. In a letter to a correspondent, Mr. Arnold Peterson — National Secretary of the SLP — says of us: "They claim, appropriately enough, to have their headquarters in Boston, the hub of the universe! Their grandiloquent title is in inverse ratio to their size and importance." (W. S. No. 4-1964).

So there it is. We have remained small because we have refused to understand (1) that a socialist organization must take part in the day-to-day-struggle of the working class, or (2) because we have refused to advocate a system of society based upon a government composed of industrial unions. Let us look a little more closely at what we might have accomplished. Supposing, for example, we had elected in July of 1916 to work within the Socialist Party of America.

CASE OF MISSING "SOCIALISTS"

In 1916, the Socialist Party of America was a relatively large and powerful organization. Although not by any means a threat in national politics they did manage to elect a number of mayors and representatives on both state and national levels. "Socialist" personalities such as Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and millionaire Gaylord Wilshire (whose name is preserved in Los Angeles' swank Wilshire Boulevard) were not to be dismissed lightly. They did make an impact on the American political scene. Furthermore, the tally of ballots in Presidential elections had disclosed a startling fact, that millions of people in America — if one included the not-yet franchised women "socialists" and the membership too young or otherwise unqualified to vote—were now manifesting a sharp interest in what was commonly known as socialism. For in 1912, Eugene V. Debs polled a total of 897,011 votes in his bid for the Presidency on the Socialist Party ticket.

But now begins a mystery worthy of a Nick Carter (a fictional sleuth of the period). In the Presidential election of 1916, A. L. Benson — the new nominee of the "Socialists" polled 538,221 votes and someplace along the line almost 359,000 "socialists" had disappeared. Were they caught up in the great surge of support for Woodrow Wilson who had (as of then) kept the country out of the European War? Possibly, because by 1920 the prodigal sons returned bringing some extra "socialists" with them and Eugene V. Debs, running from his prison to which he had been sent for opposition to the war, polled 917,799 votes for President. By this time, the members of the recently-formed WSP might have been excused had they elected to join the swelling throng, the "wave of the future," the mass party. But the WSP was stubborn, and still maintained that a socialist revolution required *socialists* first, that those who cast their ballots for the Socialist Party of America were, generally speaking completely unacquainted with socialist understanding.

In the elections between 1928 and 1964, the Socialist Party of America reached a high of 884,781, with Norman Thomas to a low of Norman Thomas actively campaigning for Lyndon B. Johnson and the mystery of America's lost "socialists" might now make the basis of a Perry Mason TV story. For despite its efforts in the last fifty years in the field of immediate demands and reforms, the Socialist Party of America stands today a shell of its former numerical greatness, with scarcely more support than the World Socialist Party and without the saving factor of baing able to proclaim whatever support it has as socialist.* The fact that hundreds of thousands of erstwhile "socialists" appeared to desert their Party for avowedly capitalist leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and the unsuccessful Adlai Stevenson — not to mention John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson — would certainly stamp that Party as just another advocate of capitalist reform. America's "socialist" voters, generally, terrified that a "greater-of-two-evils" might be elected, threw their support time after time to what they naively believed to be a "lesser-of-two evils." And the avowedly capitalist parties frequently found Socialist Party planks to be completely compatible with their own platforms and "stole" these "socialist" planks quite cheerfully.

Had the W.S.P. merged with the S.P. of A. at any time in our history it can hardly be argued that the fortunes of either Party could have improved.

THOSE "FIGHTING" COMMUNISTS

But what about the Communist Party? While the champions of the Soviet Union in America never received more than about 103,000 votes (1932), and usually but a small fraction of this total, for President and is all but bankrupt today — not alone because of U. S. Government persecution but also because of the contradictions within Soviet state-capitalist society — they have exerted some influence during their history in America. Could we have accomplished more by "uniting," at least in the relatively mighty "United Fronts" with those "champions of peace and democracy"? The Communist Party did manage to fill Madison Square Gardens in New York and other large halls throughout the country in their various crusades. They were especially concerned with the task of actively demonstrating against fascism and nazism (excepting for the period of their honeymoon with Hitler in 1939 and 1940); and they helped send an "Abraham Lincoln" Brigade to aid the Loyalists of Spain in their Civil War with Franco.

Yes, it certainly might have been stirring to be able to participate in a mass demonstration, wave hammer and sickle red flags, gaze with awe at huge banners that proclaimed "Long Live The Class Struggle" (!) and that bore the "hallowed" photographs of the great men of the Third International (Communist). So why

* In 1924 the Socialist Party of America supported Robert M. LaFollette who ran on both the Progressive Party and Socialist Party tickets, polling nearly five million votes. In 1928, back on their own, the S.P.A. (with Norman Thomas) received 267,420 votes; in 1932 (Thomas), 884,781 votes; in 1936 (Thomas), 187,720 votes; in 1940 (Thomas), 99,557 votes; in 1944 (Thomas), 80,518 votes; and by 1956 (with Darlington Hoopes the new Presidential candidate) a mere, 2,126 votes. (Source: World Almanac).