

SOCIALISM IN THE U.S.—FROM UTOPIA TO SCIENCE

Socialism first came to the United States early in the 19th century in the form of communitarianism as espoused by the British and French utopians, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Étienne Cabet. The efforts of these men and their disciples were directed toward building communal settlements which they hoped would serve as models of the perfect society. The United States was largely an agrarian nation at the time, with much available land, and this condition made the new nation an attractive area as a laboratory for utopian experiments.

Although all these communitarian endeavors ultimately failed, their failures are instructive for socialists today. The idealism of the utopians appealed to the egalitarian impulse that has been a basic undercurrent in American culture, and this communitarian tendency still surfaces from time to time, as happened in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

All the utopians recognized that something was basically wrong with the society of their day; and some of them, particularly Fourier, had penetrating insights into the primacy of the economic element in social evolution. They all, however, had totally unrealistic solutions for solving social ills, for they failed to discern that a basic reorganization of the overall structure of society could not be effected by withdrawal from that society and the establishment of isolated, artificial communities.

Robert Owen, the humanitarian British factory owner, had successfully established a model community connected with his textile mills in New Lanark, Scotland, where he had reduced the hours of labor and had established quality schools and good housing for his workers. He was a strong believer in the view that environment shaped character.

In 1825, Owen sought to export the New Lanark model to the United States. He bought an abandoned community and 20,000 acres of land in southwest Indiana and named it New Harmony. More than a thousand settlers joined the community, but a large number proved to be opportunists, more individualistic than cooperative, and in the case of some members, seeking speculative profits for themselves. Others frittered away their time in long debates over the type of government the community should have. New Harmony failed in a little over a year, and Owen lost four-fifths of his fortune in this unrealistic enterprise.

The sad example of New Harmony did not deter other experimenters,

who continued to hold on to the vain endeavor to build little islands of cooperation in the midst of an overwhelming sea of capitalist greed.

Fourierism was quite in vogue in the United States prior to the Civil War and attracted some of the leading literary figures and reformers of the day, such as Horace Greeley, Albert Brisbane, Parke Godwin, and the members of the transcendentalist literary settlement at Brook Farm. Enthusiastic disciples of Charles Fourier established a number of phalanxes, as Fourier termed his complexly organized settlements. All of them petered out well before 1860.

The Icarians, followers of Étienne Cabet, had little more success than the Fourierists; although two of their colonies hung on until 1884 and 1895.

Communitarianism had its last gasp in the 1890s with Julius Augustus Wayland's ineptly organized Ruskin Colony in Tennessee and Eugene V. Debs's Social Democracy. The latter was a grandiose plan to colonize and capture for socialism a sparsely populated western state. Both communal endeavors soon came to naught.

A Foregone Conclusion

These experiments were destined to fail for material, economic reasons. They did not have the same access to capital, to developed means of production, that the capitalist firms and fledgling corporations had, nor could they accumulate capital at the same pace as firms that exploited workers to the hilt. Thus, while workers in the utopian communities may have been better off than their peers elsewhere initially, their condition worsened in the same measure that the community became uncompetitive with private capitalist production and remained mired in outmoded and more labor-intensive production methods.

Thus, as Karl Marx was to observe in 1864: “The experience of the period from 1848 to 1864 has proved beyond doubt that, however excellent in principle, and however useful in practice, cooperative labor, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries. . . . To save the industrious masses, cooperative labor ought to be developed to national dimensions, and consequently, to be fostered by national means.”

In sum, efforts to build islands of socialism in a hostile sea of competitive

capitalism could not succeed. Rather than build from scratch, the workers must organize to gain ownership and control of the means of production that they have already built under capitalist rule.

Scientific Socialism Arises

Fortunately for the U.S. working class, the scientific socialism of Marx and Frederick Engels was rising in the United States while the utopian socialist experiments were failing.

It had made its first appearance in this country with the German immigrants who had fled Germany after the failed Revolution of 1848. Best known among these transplanted socialists were Otto Wedemeyer and Friedrich A. Sorge, both of whom formed organizations emphasizing the class struggle and working-class economic and political activity.

In 1872, Marx and Engels transferred the headquarters of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) from London to New York to keep it out of the hands of the anarchists. Sorge, placed in charge of the IWA, kept the organization alive four more years and laid the foundation for the future of scientific socialism in America.

The German socialist immigrants, often isolated and unassimilated into American society, had organized their own small and struggling political groups. Three of these—the Labor Party of Illinois, the IWA, and the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party—merged at a meeting in Philadelphia in 1876 to found the Workingmen's Party of the United States.

The very critical economic situation in the United States in 1877, when the country witnessed nationwide strikes, violent government suppression, and widespread unemployment, provided the impetus for socialists to organize a political party that would recognize the class struggle and speak to the workers' condition. At its Newark, N.J., convention in 1877, therefore, the Workingmen's Party transformed itself into the Socialistic Labor Party, with Phillip Van Patten, a native-born American, as its first secretary.

A further influx of German socialists, fleeing Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's antisocialist laws, strengthened the fledgling Socialistic Labor Party in 1879 and thereafter, but intensified its German language and German cultural character. It would not be until the party, as the Socialist Labor Party, re-emerged in 1890 that a serious Americanization of the organization would take place and bring it into the mainstream of American politics.

From that day forward—at the same time as the last of the utopian socialist experiments were nearing their inevitable deaths—scientific socialism has had a sound organizational foundation in the United States.

The People, September 22, 1990

Please report errors to

**Socialist Labor Party of America
P.O. Box 218,
Mountain View, CA 94042-0218
USA**

fax: 408-280-6964

www.slp.org — socialists@slp.org