

THE SOCIALISTS OF READING, PENNSYLVANIA AND WORLD WAR I—A QUESTION OF LOYALTY

BY KENNETH E. HENDRICKSON, JR.*

ONE of the most controversial issues among students of American radicalism is that of the impact of World War I on the Socialist Party. On the one hand Professor Daniel Bell argues that the party by opposing the war in 1917, embraced a "policy of adventurism" and thereby isolated itself from the mainstream of American political life.¹ On the other hand James Weinstein attempts to convince us that the anti-war posture of the SPA was relatively popular and that it was not until 1918 that the party buckled under the twin pressures of internal discord and repression.²

There is impressive evidence to be cited in behalf of the Weinstein thesis. Most significant is the fact that the party was as strong—if not stronger—by the end of 1917 as it had been at the beginning of the year.³ During that year—a time of anti-social raids and repression as well as unofficial persecution—party membership declined only slightly while in many areas of such states as Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, New Jersey, Maryland, New York and Pennsylvania, the Socialist vote actually increased. This would hardly bear out the Bell thesis that the party was in a state of collapse.

One measure of Socialist strength early in the war may be found in a study of the municipal elections of 1917. In many important industrial cities such as Dayton, Buffalo, Baltimore, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Rochester, the Socialists made astonishing

*The author is an Associate Professor of History at Shippensburg State College.

¹ Daniel Bell, "The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States," in Donald G. Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton, 1952), 328.

² James Weinstein, "Anti-War Sentiment and the Socialist Party, 1917-1918," *Political Science Quarterly* (June, 1959), LXXIV, 215-239.

³ David Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America* (New York, 1955), 104.

gains.⁴ In New York City, Morris Hillquit campaigned for mayor on a peace platform calling for an international conference to end the war. Although he ran third behind John Hylan and John Purroy Mitchell, Hillquit polled 21.7% of the total vote and was convinced that his performance represented a dramatic repudiation of President Wilson's pro-war policies.⁵ In the Reading, Pennsylvania, councilmanic election of 1917, which will shortly be considered at length, the Socialists won four of the eight places on the ballot in the primary and it was necessary for the Republicans and Democrats to fuse in order to defeat them in November.⁶

It is upon such evidence that the Weinstein thesis is built. However, aside from New York, few of the cities mentioned have been closely studied. The intention of this paper is to examine one of them, Reading, Pennsylvania, in order to demonstrate the relative popularity of the Socialist cause there and also to compare the attitudes of the Reading Socialists with those of Socialists throughout the nation during the World War I era.

To establish the proper perspective for a consideration of the response of the Reading Socialists to World War I, it is necessary to examine briefly the background and development of the Socialist movement in the city. For this portion of the study we are chiefly indebted to the work of Henry G. Stetler whose historico-sociological account of the Reading Socialists was published in 1943, and whose book remains today the only major piece of work on this important facet of American Socialism ever published.⁷

The beginning of organized Socialism in Reading dates from August 1, 1896, when a small group of members of the local Peoples' party founded a section of the Socialist Labor party. Very soon, however, the Readingites grew tired of the authoritarian leadership and dual unionist policies of Daniel DeLeon and cast their lot with Morris Hillquit's "Kangaroo" faction of the Socialist Labor Organization. Shortly after that, they affiliated with the "political action wing" of the Social Democracy, and in 1901 they

⁴ Weinstein, "Anti-War Sentiment . . .," 223; *New York Times*, November 7, 1917; *Reading Labor Advocate*, November 17, 1917.

⁵ *New York Call*, November 7, 1917.

⁶ *Reading News-Times*, October 2, 1917.

⁷ Henry G. Stetler, *The Socialist Movement in Reading, Pennsylvania, 1896-1936* (Storrs, Conn., 1943).

were represented at the Indianapolis Unity Convention which gave birth to the Socialist Party of America. Reading was officially chartered as a Local of the SPA on May 19, 1902, and retained this affiliation with almost no disruption until 1936.⁸

It is important to note that the leaders of the Reading Socialists at the turn of the century were the same men, for the most part, who led the party—and the anti-war movement—in 1917, and continued to lead the party until it came to power in the city in 1927. Thus, the Socialist leadership was deeply rooted in the community and could make a strong appeal on that basis. Among the most important of these leaders were the Maurer brothers, James and Charles, James H. Stump, and Charles Sands. All were leaders in organized labor as well as Socialists. James Maurer, for example, began his career in the Knights of Labor and was an official in that body while still a youth. Later he served as President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor for sixteen years (1912-1928); was elected three times to the State Assembly from Berks County (1910, 1914, 1916); and ran for the Vice-Presidency of the United States on the Socialist ticket in 1928 and 1932. Charles Maurer began his career as a labor organizer and leader but his major contribution in Reading was to serve as publisher and editor of the *Labor Advocate*, the local Socialist-Labor newspaper. Maurer controlled the paper until his death in April, 1918. Stump, who was later elected Mayor of Reading three times (1927, 1935, and 1943), presided over the Reading Federated Trades Council from 1916 to 1928, while Sands, a machinist by trade, was a tireless labor organizer.

Indeed a very close working relationship existed between the Socialist movement and organized labor in Reading and as time passed they came to be virtually synonymous. From very modest beginnings the Socialist organization in the city grew rapidly. Its leaders were indigenous, native born Americans. Its appeal was to local issues and, although the ideological orientation of its leadership fell slightly to the left of center, only secondarily to the principles of "scientific" Marxism. It was well financed and very active in the unions; made consistent efforts to gain the support of unorganized labor; and carried out effective propaganda

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-40, 169.

campaigns whenever necessary, through the pages of the *Labor Advocate* and the systematic distribution of leaflets and pamphlets.

A few statistics serve to document the growth of the movement prior to the outbreak of the war. Before 1902, the Socialists never secured the support of more than about 300 voters for any of their candidates for public office. After 1902, however, the Socialist vote began to increase steadily until in 1910 James H. Maurer was elected to the State Assembly and in 1911 the Socialist candidate for Mayor, E. W. Leffler, polled over 5,000 votes and nearly won the election. In the same year the party actually succeeded in electing five men to the Common and Select Councils. In 1914, when Maurer was again elected to the Assembly, he polled 28.4% of the total vote and in 1916 he received 36.7%. Clearly the Socialist Party was well established in Reading by the time of the World War. Here, as in numerous other cities around the country, Socialists prided themselves in their accomplishments and confidently looked forward to the not-far-off day when they would witness the ushering in of the Cooperative Commonwealth in America. It should be noted in passing that the Socialist organization in Reading survived 1919 intact, continued to flourish during the Twenties, and gained control of the city in 1927.

With this background, let us now return to a consideration of the war and its impact upon the American Socialists, especially those in Reading. Generally, it can be said that the position of the Socialist Party on war prior to 1914 was confused. There was, of course, general opposition to war, but it was also held that desirable revolution might result if the circumstances were proper for its development. Thus, some Socialists were more reluctant than others to denounce war out of hand. When war came the Socialists of America were at once shocked and dismayed by the fact that their comrades in Europe abandoned the principles of internationalism almost entirely and flocked to the defense of their homelands. Only small minorities in each of the belligerent nations refused to support their governments.⁹ Morris Hillquit recalled this sense of shock in his memoirs, writing, "in common with hosts of others I was dismayed by the sudden collapse of

⁹ Gerald Friedburg, "Marxian Socialism in the United States: John Spargo and the Socialist Party of America" (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard, 1964), 164.

human reason and the ugly sight of the world denuded of its thin veneer of civilization." He blamed the "war enthusiasm" of the European Socialists on the "primordial instinct of national self-preservation."¹⁰ James H. Maurer of Reading agreed with Hillquit and he added his warning that America would have to guard zealously against the efforts of the Europeans to draw her into the conflict.¹¹

As the first months of the war passed, the Socialists of America wrestled with the problem of establishing a united policy on the war, but this proved very difficult because there was little agreement among them, and by mid-1915 they were engaged in a full-scale debate. Some followed Gene Debs who counseled that the war should go on. "To end the war prematurely . . ." he wrote, "... would mean another and perhaps even bloodier catastrophe."¹² His views were echoed by such men as Max Eastman and Louis Boudin.¹³

Other Socialists, however, led by Morris Hillquit, favored an immediate end to the conflict, urging adoption of the party's peace platform (of May 15, 1915) which called for "no indemnities, no transfer of territory, and no appropriations for war purposes"; and they opposed preparedness and conscription.¹⁴ This group included the Reading Socialists. From the very beginning of hostilities in Europe, the city's Socialist leaders, particularly James H. Maurer, spoke out forcefully against the war and any possible involvement by the United States. Maurer argued that workers could have no possible stake in the war, and he counseled that Socialists should resist all efforts to expend public funds on war or preparedness for war so long as economic injustice prevailed at home.¹⁵ While the Readingites at first praised President Wilson for his policy of neutrality,¹⁶ they soon became suspicious of his motives and turned openly critical. By the spring of 1915, they were already organizing successful anti-war demonstrations

¹⁰ Morris Hillquit, *Loose Leaves from a Busy Life* (New York, 1933), 145.

¹¹ James H. Maurer, *It Can Be Done* (Reading, Pa., 1938), 207-208.

¹² Debs, in *American Socialist*, January 9, 1915.

¹³ Eastman, "Let the War Go In," *The Masses*, October, 1914; Boudin, "Current Affairs," *New Review*, May 1, 1915.

¹⁴ Horace Petersen and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War* (Madison, 1957), 22-31.

¹⁵ Reading *Labor Advocate*, July 3, 1915.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1915.

in the city,¹⁷ and in June the Federated Trades Council of Reading, which was controlled by the Socialists, passed resolutions opposing the war, demanding that the government maintain neutrality, and calling upon all other labor organizations to do likewise.¹⁸

By that time, James H. Maurer had emerged as not only the leading anti-war spokesman in Reading, but also as a peace advocate of national stature. Three times he visited President Wilson, once in company with Hillquit and Congressman Meyer London, pleading for a policy of peace in both hemispheres. He also traveled across the country urging workers everywhere to demand peace. "The laboring man . . . will be called upon to fight the capitalists' battles for them," warned Maurer. "Only the poor will be asked to give their lives and property in defense of the nation. The rich will evade such obligations. Working men have always been tricked into killing each other, but this should be tolerated no longer. Let us remove the terrible economic conditions which persist at home before we undertake to fight others."¹⁹

While the debate over war policy went on, the collective attitude of the Socialist Party of America drifted to the left. Until 1914, the party was clearly dominated by a center-right coalition. By the end of 1916, this was no longer the case. Under the impact of the war the left wing experienced a rebirth of stature and power, and began to draw increasing support. At the same time the numerical strength of the party declined slightly while the percentage of foreign born membership increased.²⁰ Thus, the Socialist attitude toward political action, labor unions, immediate reform demands, compromise, and revisionism became increasingly negative after 1914, while the attitude toward direct action, syndicalism, and uncompromising revolutionary propaganda became increasingly positive.²¹

In relation to these developments the Reading Socialists remained closer to the center; and if there were any major ideological battles within the Local, they were not publicly aired. As an ex-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, June 15, 26, 1915.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 19, 1915.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, April 1, 1916. Also see: Maurer, *It Can Be Done*, 210-212, where Maurer, writing some twenty years after the fact, recalls how he felt about the war.

²⁰ Friedburg, "Marxian Socialism . . .," 193.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

ample of the Readingites position one can take their public attitude toward the left wing demand for the recall of Victor Berger from the party's National Executive Committee in 1916. Berger was perhaps the leading right wing spokesman of the party. Furthermore, although he was appalled by the war, he was among those Socialists who refused to dismiss categorically the right of a nation to defend itself and the obligation of a citizen to participate in that defense.²² As a result of these views, he was denounced by the left; and in April, 1916, Local Marion County, Indiana, demanded his recall. At first, the Reading Socialists were critical of Berger's position, specifically in view of his attacks upon the anti-preparedness ideas of Allan Benson, the party's presidential candidate,²³ but after the recall proposal, the Reading men drew the line. In an editorial appearing in the *Labor Advocate* of August 5, 1916, Charles A. Maurer wrote, "Comrade Berger may be soft on militarism and may even be a little pro-German, but he is a valuable leader of the movement who is entitled to his view. The *Advocate* thinks this referendum is foolish and advises all comrades to vote 'no.'" In addition to their views on Berger, the Reading Socialists were also critical of Bill Haywood and the I.W.W. saying their actions provided "grist for the plutes' anti-labor mills," and they opposed the general strike concept which was incorporated into the party's 1916 national platform.²⁴

During 1916, the Reading Socialists mounted an anti-preparedness crusade which was spearheaded by James H. Maurer. In April he appeared in New York to debate the issue of militarism with Henry Wise Wood of the National Security League. Here, Maurer enlarged upon the familiar Socialist argument that preparedness was a "capitalist plot" designed to stimulate the business of munitions makers and steel producers.²⁵ A week later Maurer spoke at the Washington Irving High School in New York along with Joseph D. Cannon of the Western Federation of Miners under the sponsorship of the Socialist Labor Forum. This ap-

²² *Ibid.*, 186-187. Also see: Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement* (New York, 1952), 117, for a discussion of Berger's philosophy.

²³ Reading *Labor Advocate*, April 8, 1916.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, August 5, 1916. There is no record of the vote in the Reading Local. Nationally, the recall proposal was defeated by a vote of 12,349 to 8,362.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, April 1, 1916.

pearance created a sensation both in Reading and New York City because in reporting Maurer's remarks several New York papers quoted him as saying in part, ". . . to hell with the American flag."²⁶ Despite the fact that the alleged "quotation" was a misrepresentation of his words, the press in Reading picked up the story immediately and used it as a part of the growing effort to discredit Maurer and the Socialists.²⁷ Meanwhile, Maurer's colleagues sought to counter the unfavorable publicity by attacking the capitalist press for what they termed its "deliberate misrepresentation of the views of important labor leaders." In the *Advocate* Charles A. Maurer further charged that the specific purpose of the "plot" against his brother was to destroy the YPSL's Labor Forum in New York City and drive it from the public schools.²⁸ Meanwhile, an investigation by the New York School Board revealed that Maurer had indeed been misquoted, and shortly after, the Central Federation of Labor of New York passed resolutions calling upon all workers to withdraw their support from those capitalist newspapers which "willfully and maliciously misrepresent labor officials by distorting their public utterances. . . ."²⁹

Maurer and his colleagues were sustained by the fact that shortly after this incident he was overwhelmingly re-elected President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor.³⁰ Moreover, in November the voters of Berks County returned him to the Assembly and nearly elected his running mate, James H. Stump. The results of that election showed that the Socialists carried twenty-eight of the fifty-six precincts in the City of Reading and recorded a gain of 2,000 votes over the preceeding election.³¹

By the end of 1916 the war situation, from everyone's standpoint, had grown critical. President Wilson, having just won reelection on a platform which exalted him for having "kept us out of war," now found himself and the nation drawn inexorably toward the conflict. With the German proclamation of unrestricted submarine warfare at the end of January, 1917, American in-

²⁶ *New York Times*, April 10, 1916.

²⁷ *Reading News-Times*, April 9, 1916.

²⁸ *Reading Labor Advocate*, April 15, 1916.

²⁹ *New York Times*, May 11, 1916; *Reading Labor Advocate*, April 22, 1916.

³⁰ *Reading Labor Advocate*, May 13, 1916. The Proceedings of the P.F.L. Conventions prior to 1930 are lost.

³¹ *Ibid.*, November 11, 1916.

volvement appeared to have become inevitable, and emotions ran high. The hostile response of the Wilson Administration to the German policy was denounced by almost all the Socialists as part of the alleged "plot to lead us into the war," and the Readingites were no exception. Though dying of cancer, Charles A. Maurer continued his propaganda efforts through the pages of the *Advocate*, although more and more of the burden was now carried by his young colleague, Birch Wilson. "The House of Morgan," they observed, "is behind this latest move to arm our merchant vessels. . . . And this German-Mexican-Japanese 'plot' looks mighty suspicious coming as it does at the psychological moment. If Congress were not 'hell bent' to get us into the war it would not waste a moment upon it."³²

Simultaneously, James Maurer stood alone in the Pennsylvania Assembly in his refusal to vote endorsement of President Wilson's severing diplomatic relations with Germany and arming merchant vessels. When he attempted to explain himself he was rudely shouted down by his colleagues and declared out of order by the chair. His prepared statement, however, was published by the *Advocate* and in it Maurer argued that such hostile acts as these should not be undertaken without reference to the will of the people; that the working men he represented opposed the moves.

By this time a rather clear division of opinion about the war was observable in Reading and during the next two years it was translated into open hostility in the political, social and economic arenas. As war approached, most opponents of the Socialist view chose to believe that the peace advocates were pro-German and of course this meant treason. In March, 1917, a patriotic rally was held at the First Presbyterian Church of Reading. During the main address of the evening by the Rev. Dr. Robert M. Blackburn, the first formal public reference was made to the Socialists as "pro-German." The men at the *Advocate* reacted at once to the charge in an editorial declaring, "We are not pro-German, but we are pro-working class, pro-justice and pro-humanity. Let the master class fight their war; we have our own (the class war) to fight."³³

³² *Ibid.*, March 10, 1917.

³³ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1917.

Shortly after this incident, during the second week of April, 1917, the Socialist Party of America convened an emergency meeting in St. Louis to consider the next step. While the delegates were in session war was declared and their deliberations took on an aura of immediate urgency. The most significant development at the St. Louis Convention was the adoption of the majority report of the Committee on War and Militarism which for the most part reflected the views of Morris Hillquit. It declared the party to be opposed to the war and warned that Socialists would not support the government in the conduct of military activities. Alternative reports were submitted by both the extreme right and extreme left, but they were defeated. Reading was represented at this convention by James H. Stump and Birch Wilson who voted in favor of the majority report.³⁴

In Reading the *Advocate* carried much favorable commentary on these proceedings and soon after the return of Stump and Wilson to the city the official position of the party was translated into action with the founding of a local anti-conscription league. On May 12, 1917, the league was officially launched as "The American Union Opposed to Conscription," and Birch Wilson was named President. The Socialists claimed great public interest in the anti-conscription movement and insisted that the organizational meeting was attended by over three hundred persons.³⁵ Subsequently, the *Advocate* claimed an enrolled membership of more than 2,500 after less than one month of activity.³⁶ This claim was no doubt an exaggeration, but nonetheless, in succeeding weeks the *Advocate* published numerous stories on the AUOC and its growth, and fought a constant duel with the opposition press which sought to belittle the Socialists' efforts and convince everyone that the anti-war movement was a total failure.³⁷ After the passage of the Selective Service Bill, however, the controversy died out and there was apparently little significant effort by the Socialists to obstruct registration procedures in Reading.³⁸

³⁴ *Proceedings of the Emergency Convention of the Socialist Party of America, St. Louis, Mo., April 7-14, 1917*, Tamiment Institute Library of New York University.

³⁵ Reading *Labor Advocate*, May 5, 19, 1917.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, June 16, 1917.

³⁷ Files of the *Labor Advocate* and *News-Times*, May-June, 1917.

³⁸ Files of the *Labor Advocate*, summer, 1917; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, June 6, 1917.

Meanwhile, at the 1917 convention of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor in Harrisburg, James H. Maurer led the delegates in passing resolutions demanding that organized labor be given a voice in war planning. Shortly thereafter, Maurer was re-elected President of the P.F.L. by a vote of 415 to 186 over Steven McDonald of Scranton. The *Advocate* hailed his success as "an historic event in the annals of Pennsylvania labor history"; claiming Maurer had held his ground against the "plotting" of the Manufacturers' Association, the legislature, and the machine directed parties. They all failed, it was claimed, because the anti-Maurer propaganda was not believed by the unions and because Maurer outmaneuvered each attempt to make him look bad.³⁹

While the papers in Reading were battling over the conscription issue at the end of May, 1917, the Socialist press all over the nation proclaimed the founding in New York City of the Peoples' Council of America. This organization resulted from the fact that Socialists and other pacifists found themselves isolated by Samuel Gompers' decision to lend the full support of the A.F.L. to the Administration's war program. Casting about for a rallying-post, they found their model in the workingmen's councils of socialist Russia, and undertook to form a similar organization at home for purpose of actively resisting both Wilson's and Gompers' pro-war policies. The March Revolution in Russia and the Bolshevik peace proposals provided the program around which Socialists and pacifists could gravitate. A series of spring conferences took place, and eventually an organizing committee was formed. James H. Maurer of Reading was a member of this committee. Out of their deliberations emerged the decision to stage a Madison Square Garden Rally on May 30-31, 1917—which would be called the First American Conference for Democracy and Terms of Peace. Dr. Judah L. Magnes, the Jewish pacifist, served as chairman of the meeting and in his opening remarks denied that the conference had been called for "obstructionist" purposes, but rather, to seek a "speedy and universal and democratic peace." Maurer also spoke at the rally and opened the May 31st session with a blistering attack on American business for its pro-war activity.⁴⁰

³⁹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, May 19, 26, 1917.

⁴⁰ Milton Cantor, "World War I and the Socialist Party, 1914-1918," a paper read at the OAH Convention of 1966, Cincinnati, Ohio, 17-18.

Maurer was very active in the promotional work of the Peoples' Council during the summer and autumn of 1917. Shortly after the May rally in New York he embarked on a speaking tour throughout the nation while his colleagues under the direction of Morris Hillquit and Louis Lochner proceeded with more specific organizational tasks. Later, Maurer participated in the first convention of the Peoples' Council, held under very trying conditions in Chicago, and also lent the prestige of his name to the Executive Committee of the organization. Later, in February, 1918, Maurer agreed to serve as official representative of American radicals at the projected Inter-Allied Conference of Socialist and Labor Organizations. However, he was denied a passport by the Department of State.

Although Maurer was convinced that the Council, rather than Gompers' American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, spoke for the majority of American working men, he must have been troubled by the internal discord between radicals and moderates which racked the organization during its brief lifetime. It is very difficult to make any concrete statement concerning his attitude. Maurer's personal correspondence has been lost and the People's Council Collection at Swarthmore College gives no clue to his views. Because his ideology was somewhat to the left of center, one might surmise that he was more sanguine in his attitude toward the Bolsheviks than were his more moderate colleagues. In any event, by the spring of 1918 Maurer's ardor seemed to have cooled measurably. Of course, it could be that persecution was partially responsible. The Peoples' Council suffered from severe external difficulties; its meetings were repeatedly disrupted by soldiers, sailors and police; and on more than one occasion Maurer was forced to flee for his personal safety while attempting to speak on its behalf.⁴¹

In Reading there was an immediate effort to organize the Council on a local scale. For some weeks after June 1, 1917, the *Advocate* was full of stories about the popularity of the movement and its rapid growth, and Birch Wilson, the local chapter president, claimed that applications for membership were coming

⁴¹ Files of the Peoples' Council of America, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College. Also see: Maurer, *It Can Be Done*, 226-227 for references to Maurer's work on behalf of the Council.

in faster than they could be handled. But suddenly, toward the end of the summer, all mention of the Council disappeared from the *Advocate* and never recurred. This may have been the result of threats made by federal authorities as the daily papers claimed, but there is no concrete evidence. When Birch Wilson was asked to explain the mystery during an interview in June, 1968, he claimed to have forgotten all about it. This seemed curious indeed since his memory was incredibly sharp on many other points.⁴²

One thing is certain, however, by the summer of 1917, tempers in the city of Reading, like the weather, were hot. Led by the press and the clergy, as well as many prominent business and professional men, the local campaign to vilify the Socialist anti-war position had grown intense. People were warned to "steer clear" of the Socialists for their activities were under "close surveillance" by agents of the Federal Government.⁴³ In public meetings as well as in the newspapers, well known local leaders denounced the Socialists repeatedly as "pro-German traitors" for almost everything they said and did.⁴⁴ Thus, as the councilmanic election of 1917 approached it was heralded as a battle between good and evil; Americanism and un-Americanism; loyalty and disloyalty. The results of the campaign and election, however, were to provide further proof of the relative popularity of the Socialist stand on the war—despite all the efforts to discount it—so it would be well now to turn our attention to a consideration of those events which culminated on November 6, 1917.

The election was conducted under the non-partisan provisions of the Clark Law which was in force in Reading from 1915 to 1919. In the primary election held in September there were twenty-three candidates for the eight places on the general election ballot, among whom were James H. Stump, George Snyder, Charles Sands and Birch Wilson representing the Socialists.⁴⁵ A study of local newspapers prior to the primary day reveals little fear of a Socialist victory. Aside from the normal amount of anti-Socialist propaganda which the papers had been printing for

⁴² Files of the *Labor Advocate*, June-August, 1917. Interview with Birch Wilson, June 17, 1968.

⁴³ *Reading News-Times*, July 14, 1917; *Reading Telegram*, July 2, 1917.

⁴⁴ Files of the *Reading News-Times*, August-October, 1917.

⁴⁵ *Reading Labor Advocate*, July 7, 1917.

some time, there seemed to be more emphasis upon the need to defeat the old council and provide the city with fresh leadership.⁴⁶ In view of this fact, the results of the primary must have astonished many people because all four of the Socialist candidates won places on the ballot. Quite suddenly, it became necessary for Reading's political leaders to face the distinct possibility of a Socialist victory in November.⁴⁷

The Republicans and Democrats responded quickly and on October 2, the daily press carried headlines announcing the creation of a fusionist organization to be known as the American party; pledged to support the four old-party candidates, J. H. McConnell, Peter Holl, B. F. Ruth, and John K. Stauffer.⁴⁸ Immediately, public meetings were held in all the non-Socialist wards to secure the endorsement of the rank and file for the fusion scheme. At one of these meetings in the 16th ward, the tenor of the campaign which was to follow, and indeed, of the duration of the war-time era was set when William A. Bechtel, a prominent attorney, remarked, "There are many men walking our streets today whose hearts are black with treason and whose lips are white with the hypocritical and lying pretense of loyalty. They should be stood up against a wall tomorrow at sunrise and shot."⁴⁹

The campaign may be described as having been one of vicious mutual abuse. The fusionists variously categorized the Socialists as incompetent, unrepresentative, boss-ridden, unpopular, unfriendly and un-American. As evidence of the last charge voters were reminded that the Socialists favored the Peoples' Council which was "obviously a German front organization"; and opposed Liberty Bonds, the Y.M.C.A., the Y.W.C.A., and the Boy Scouts. Just before the campaign ended one enthusiastic speaker summed it all up by exclaiming, "This is not an ordinary election. The Socialists intend to teach and make (the people of Reading) practice their principles. They are against existing religious, political and social institutions. They even teach their women to repudiate their duties as wives and mothers. . . . So if you are satisfied

⁴⁶ Reading *News-Times*, September 13, 1917.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, September 20, 1917.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, September 20; October 2, 1917.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, October 4, 1917.

to ruin your home life, your daughter's morality, and your city's government, vote Socialist."⁵⁰

All the while continuing their criticism of the war, the Socialists answered the fusionists charge for charge and insult for insult. Attorney Bechtel, who was chairman of the American Party campaign committee, was scored as ". . . a prehistoric, motheaten caveman of politics" for his suggestion that the Socialists should be "shot at sunrise." Candidates McConnell, Holl, Ruth and Stauffer received relatively little attention, but were curtly dismissed as "utterly incompetent." To the frequent charge that they were "un-American" or "traitorous" the Socialists responded by demanding public debate on the issues, but they were ignored. "This charge," said an editorial in the *Advocate* probably written by Birch Wilson, "was nothing more than the rallying cry of desperate and defeated politicians . . . willfully and deliberately (setting out) to assassinate the characters of men better than themselves."⁵¹

All of this doubtless had little effect on the outcome of the election, for the Socialists had no chance to win against the combined efforts of the two major parties. The fusionists prevailed and the headlines in the *News-Times* proclaimed on November 7, "Americanism is sustained in Reading. We are still an American city by a vote of two to one."⁵² However, the Socialist defeat was not as overwhelming as the fusionist press portrayed it. It must be remembered that the Socialists had to face the electorate twice during the fall of 1917. In the September primary they secured the second largest number of votes and it was this primary result, of course, which forced the old parties to combine. Also, it should be noted that, until 1927, the Socialists rarely polled more than one-third of the vote in any election. The two-to-one defeat in 1917 was, then, the result of a coalition in which the opposition vote was no greater than usual.⁵³

One other factor should be emphasized, and that is the enormous influence of James H. Maurer which is reflected in his record both as Assemblyman and President of the P.F.L., and which suffered very little throughout the year despite the momentous

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, October 20, 22, 25, 31; November 2, 3, 1917.

⁵¹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, October 7, 13, 20, 1917.

⁵² Reading *News-Times*, November 7, 1917.

⁵³ Stetler, *Socialist Movement in Reading*, 79.

efforts to discredit him. Since his reelection to the legislature in 1914, Maurer, in addition to his vehement denunciations of the war, had championed a large number of social and labor reform measures including workman's compensation, widows and orphans pensions, mine and factory safety and sanitation, and the concept of collective bargaining. Also, he was a consistent opponent of the highly controversial railroad full-crew repealer bill and also the state police, to whom he and his friends contemptuously referred as the "Black Cossacks."⁵⁴ There can be no doubt that Maurer's great influence among working men helped to account for the popularity of the Socialists in Reading throughout 1917.

The end of that year brought a significant change in the war situation with the Bolshevik success in Russia. Now, the great revolution so long anticipated by Socialists all over the world had come, and it was a product of the war they abhorred! American Socialists were forced to re-examine their war policy and the reaction was mixed. On the right, Victor Berger was restrained predicting the eventful collapse of the Bolshevik Movement; the center reacted in a generally positive way, while the left was most ardent in its defense of the Bolshevik cause saying it had to be defended against both Germany and the war.⁵⁵

Amid this confusion the Reading Socialists remained in the center. They appeared to be sympathetic to the more radical leaders in the Council Movement like Scott Nearing, but on the other hand they did not repudiate the St. Louis Platform. They chided Gene Debs for temporarily reconsidering his views on the war, but they also praised the Bolsheviks and called repeatedly for the recognition of the Soviet regime, economic aid to Russia and the withdrawal of American troops from Siberia.⁵⁶

The internal discord mentioned above, together with the growing hostility of the United States Government and the public, caused a significant decline in the fortunes of Socialism during 1918. The Peoples' Council practically collapsed and the party in general began to disintegrate. In Reading, however, these pressures were only lightly felt. Although unofficial persecutions continued, there were no raids; no sacking of party headquarters

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁵⁵ Friedburg, 241-242.

⁵⁶ Reading *Labor Advocate*, March 2; May 18; July 6; August 17, 24, 1918; January 11, 1919.

as in other cities. Neither, apparently, did the Reading Local suffer from major internal discord such as demoralized Socialist organizations in so many other areas, and thus the party here was able to continue its development while its sister organizations elsewhere deteriorated.⁵⁷ The city, moreover, was a fertile area for the Socialists' efforts because of growing labor unrest during the latter stages of the war and the immediate postwar period.

There were two major labor disputes in Reading during 1918. The first involved the employees of the Carpenter Steel works and the second involved most of the city's machinists and their various employers including Reading Iron, the largest manufacturer of iron pipe in the country. The problem at Carpenter Steel arose after five union organizers were fired for alleged insubordination by Superintendent Ernest J. Poole. Poole, who was also President of the local Manufacturers' Association, was quite clear in stating his position: Carpenter Steel had been an open shop since its founding in 1889, and intended to remain open. Workers were free to air their grievances, but there would be no collective bargaining. The employees at Carpenter, who were affiliated with the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers of America, responded by threatening to strike and then agreeing to refer the matter to the National War Labor Board. This was done and in February of 1919 the NWLB issued a finding in favor of the employees' demands for reinstatement of the dismissed workers, higher wages, the eight hour day, and union recognition. The company made some adjustments voluntarily, but refused to recognize the union and declared that the NWLB no longer had jurisdiction over its affairs because the war had ended.

Meanwhile, the demands of the city's machinists were also reviewed by the Board and on March 2, 1919, an award was issued in their favor. Once again, however, although there were some voluntary adjustments, the employers, led by Reading Iron, refused to recognize the jurisdiction of the Board.⁵⁸

All of this labor activity, with the open support of the Socialists, was accompanied by the rise of the great "Red Scare." While an

⁵⁷ Interview with Birch Wilson, June 17, 1918.

⁵⁸ The description of these disputes is based upon material located in the Federal Records Center, Suitland, Maryland. This material bears the following designation: Record Group 2, files 913 and 416; Record Group 280, files 33-2223 and 33-601.

hysterical fear of revolution swept the entire nation, the local Socialist press in Reading persisted in calling for the organization of the working class and the recognition of the Russian Revolution. These efforts had their effect and the fortunes of the Reading Socialists suffered a momentary reversal. In common with Socialists almost everywhere their candidates were badly defeated and even James H. Maurer failed in his bid for a third consecutive term in the State Assembly.⁵⁹ It should be noted, however, that an earlier A.F.L. backed effort to unseat him as P.F.L. President failed dismally.⁶⁰ Furthermore, temporary failure did not seem to dampen the spirit of the Readingites significantly and they continued their efforts to capitalize on the deterioration of local economic conditions which followed the war. The *Advocate* constantly reminded workers that prices were increasing while wages were not, clear proof of the inadequacy of the capitalist system. Furthermore, charged the Socialists, the actions of management during the recent disputes showed that a conspiracy existed among local industrialists to eliminate all the gains which labor had made during the war.⁶¹

Meanwhile, both locally and nationally, great efforts continued to discredit Socialist and radical leaders. In Reading James H. Maurer was still the primary target. The local press made much of the fact that he was listed as a "dangerous pro-German radical" in a confidential report made by the Bureau of Military Intelligence to Senator Lees Overman of the Committee Investigating German Propaganda. The report contained the names of sixty-two purported "dangerous radicals," and when the names leaked out Maurer and many of the others demanded that the charge be proved or dropped, but no official action was taken.⁶² Shortly, however, Maurer further alienated himself from his neighbors by publicly announcing that he was a Bolshevik. In an article published in the *Advocate* Maurer wrote, ". . . (Bolshevism) is a new phrase to fool the public. The I.W.W. and Bolshevism have replaced the 'Yellow Peril' and 'Prussianism' as the great menaces. . . . If it is 'Bolshevik' to believe the Soviets have a right to express their views; to think the Russian people should work

⁵⁹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 9, 1918.

⁶⁰ Shannon, *Socialist Party*, 118.

⁶¹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, April 12, 1919.

⁶² *Ibid.*, February 1, 18, 1919.

out their own destiny; to believe in industrial democracy rather than industrial autocracy, then I am Bolshevik.”⁶³

In view of his sentiments Maurer should not have been surprised when the Federal Government intervened to prevent his making another trip to Europe later in the summer. Maurer had been appointed to the Pennsylvania Old Age Pension Commission by Governor William Cameron Sproul and was empowered to go abroad to study existing pension programs. There were many delays, however, and finally, on August 26, 1919, as Maurer prepared to board the steamer *Lapland*, he was detained by federal agents and told he could not go. In Reading, the *Advocate* reflected Socialist outrage, “Fearing that James H. Maurer would come back from his trip to Europe, whither he had been sent by the Pennsylvania Legislature . . . with real news favorable to the working class government of Russia, federal agents prevented him from boarding his ship last Tuesday.”⁶⁴

The Philadelphia *Public Ledger* put the matter somewhat more realistically, “. . . Maurer’s radical views and his alleged community of ideas with certain violently disturbing elements in the Old World caused the State Department to look upon his presence in Europe at this time as dangerous. The State Department clearly does not want an American radical operating anywhere in Europe where political and economic conditions are very delicate.”⁶⁵

The government, on the other hand was downright evasive. Responding to a P.F.L. resolution in support of Maurer, a representative of the Justice Department replied, “The department will investigate and report the circumstances under which Maurer and Abraham Epstein were prevented from taking passage to Europe. It is obvious that whatever action was taken by the State Department, either on its own motion or at the suggestion of the Justice Department, there was no desire to prevent the dissemination of information regarding old age pension systems.”⁶⁶

The episode merely added to the hostile climate in Reading. Maurer was supported by the *Advocate*, most of the unions and the Federated Trades Council as he lashed out at both the gov-

⁶³ *Ibid.*, March 22, 1919.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, August 30, 1919.

⁶⁵ Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, August 29, 1919.

⁶⁶ John T. Creighton, Special Assistant to the Attorney General, to C. F. Quinn, Secretary, P.F.L., November 20, 1919, RG 60, file 202244, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

ernment and his local foes, demanding satisfaction,⁶⁷ while his enemies demanded that he be dealt with more harshly. However, nothing further was done.⁶⁸

Bad feeling was also stimulated by the development of more labor troubles during the same period. In April of 1919, the *Advocate* reported that Reading was "seething with discontent," and this was not too great an exaggeration.⁶⁹ The Socialists attempted to take advantage of the unsatisfactory conditions by organizing a massive unity parade for May Day, predicting they could rally 15,000 participants.⁷⁰ While this claim was an exaggeration, there can still be little doubt that the Socialists' plans caused apprehension among the city's leaders. There were threats and rumors of violence, and some employers refused to honor the union's request for the day off, but nonetheless the parade went on. The next day, however, when approximately 650 men from Carpenter Steel returned to work, they found themselves locked out. They responded at once by declaring a strike and soon the plant was entirely shut down. Meanwhile, workers in other industries began to walk out demanding higher wages and shorter hours so that within a short time eight strikes were in progress. Federal conciliators on the scene predicted gloomily that settlement would be difficult and that local businessmen seemed determined to "get the reds."⁷¹

With the Socialists calling for a showdown between the working class and the "master class," the situation became very serious in Reading as time approached for the elections of 1919. Many of the Socialist leaders armed themselves and it is fair to presume that some of their opponents did likewise.⁷² The files of the local

⁶⁷ Files of the *Labor Advocate*, August-December, 1919; Harold Seibert to A. Mitchell Palmer, December 8, 11, 1919; Adam R. Hafer to Palmer, December 8, 1919; United Brewery Workers Local No. 198 to Palmer, December 7, 1919, in *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Files of the *Reading News-Times*, August-December, 1919; Harvey M. Watts, Philadelphia Public Ledger, to Palmer, August 30, 1919, RG 60, file 202244, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

⁶⁹ *Reading Labor Advocate*, April 19, 1919.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, April 26, 1919.

⁷¹ *Reading Labor Advocate*, August 23, 1919. Also see: James Purcell to William B. Wilson, June 21, 1919; Purcell to E. J. Cunningham, June 11, 1919; Purcell to H. L. Kerwin, May 27, 1919, RG 280, file 33-2223; and Purcell to Wilson, May 27, 1919; Purcell to H. L. Kerwin, May 22; June 15, 1919, RG 2, file 913, Federal Records Center, Suitland, Maryland.

⁷² Interview with Birch Wilson, June 17, 1968.

newspapers reflect equally as bitter a campaign as that of 1917, and even though the American Party had evaporated, there can be little doubt that a cooperative frame of mind persisted between the Republicans and Democrats. Even so, Socialist strength increased. James H. Stump, the party's candidate for Mayor, was defeated, to be sure, but he polled 5,869 votes, or 33.5%, and placed second in the three-way race. Also, Socialist registrations, never very numerous, increased rather than declined during this period of tension from 5.5% (1916) to 6.9% (1919).⁷³ The fact that the unions were solidly Socialist was even conceded by the opposition press,⁷⁴ and the Socialists claimed a great moral victory.⁷⁵ But for Socialism at large, Reading was a hollow triumph at best. By late 1919, the Socialist Party as a national organization worthy of the name was all but dead. The new left wing had bolted and the radical foreign language federations were expelled. The Reading group represented an organ without a body, but still it survived and was able to maintain the balance of power it had grasped in the city until 1927 brought victory.

To conclude, a revision of at least one well known interpretation of American Socialism is in order. It is usually argued that one reason for the long-run failure of the party was its inability to establish class-consciousness. This generalization may be true when applied to American society as a whole, but clearly it breaks down when applied to certain specific localities. The Reading Socialists, in fact, appealed successfully to working class consciousness over a very long span of time. During the World War I era they called upon working men to denounce the war because it was in their best interest to do so. Many responded positively despite ridicule, hostility and potential danger. A study of the two decades following the war would, it is believed, reveal that appeals to class-consciousness continued to meet with a favorable response from a significant sector of the population of the city. Such a study, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Let it suffice to finish, therefore, by stating simply that in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1917, when partiotis and leaders called for consensus, a very large minority dissented.

⁷³ Stetler, *Socialist Movement in Reading*, 171, 173, 178.

⁷⁴ Reading *News-Times*, November 5, 1919.

⁷⁵ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 7, 1919.