

THE SOCIALIST ADMINISTRATION IN READING, PENNSYLVANIA PART I, 1927-1931

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ON NOVEMBER 4, 1927, the voters of Reading named J. Henry Stump, Socialist, their Mayor. In addition, party members George S. Snyder and James H. Maurer were elected to the City Council, George D. Snyder and Raymond Hofses won seats on the School Board, and W. R. Hollinger became City Controller. Also, it appeared for a time that William C. Hoverter had been elected Treasurer, but a recount of the ballots denied him the office.¹ Reading thus became the third major city in the United States to have a Socialist administration. The victory of the Socialists came as the result of years of intense activity coupled with the skillful use of propaganda and the development of a significant issue. It was, nevertheless, a rarity in American politics, and even more so, when it is realized that in 1927 the Socialist party in Reading had only about fifty dues-paying members!² Let us examine this remarkable political phenomenon more closely.

The origins of the party in Reading go back to the late Nineteenth Century. From as early as the 1870's, there was a small group of labor radicals in the city who were at various times associated with the Knights of Labor, the Populist party, the Socialist Labor party, the Social Democracy, and finally, the Socialist Party of America. Within a decade after 1901, when the latter affiliation took place, a small group of dedicated and skillful men had emerged in positions of leadership among the radicals. Indeed, for a time, these men were themselves about

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¹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 12, 1927; Reading *Times*, November 4, 5, 1927; Reading *Eagle*, November 4, 5, 1927.

² Henry C. Stetler, *The Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists, 1897-1936* (Storrs, Connecticut, 1943), 58; James H. Maurer, *It Can Be Done* (Reading, Pennsylvania, 1938), 110; author's interview with Darlington Hoopes, June 17, 1968.

the only members of the radical group to be found. They included James H. Maurer, usually conceded to be the leader of the Reading Socialists, his brother, Charles Maurer, J. Henry Stump, Charles Sands, Andrew P. Bower, William H. Hollinger, Elwood Leffler, Milton Bortz, L. Birch Wilson, Jr., and a few others. Charles Maurer died in 1918, but most of the others remained alive and active in the movement throughout the next quarter century. They held the party together and they controlled it when it finally came to power in 1927.

Despite their lack of numbers, the Socialists were able to maintain their political visibility by means of intense effort. Reading was a non-union industrial city, and the Socialists constantly attempted to appeal to the working class voters on grounds that political and trade organizations would benefit them. Through the combined efforts of the party and the miniscule Federated Trades Council, which the party controlled, this appeal was conducted on a virtually never-ending basis, and as a result the Socialists very early began to poll a vote much larger than the size of their organization would seem to have warranted. Party and working-class propaganda deluged the public through the radical weekly newspaper, *The Labor Advocate*, through the distribution of Socialist pamphlets, and through various meetings, picnics and rallies which the party tirelessly conducted. To support their efforts the Socialists also went into business, particularly the manufacture of cigars. They prospered and were soon able to purchase and equip their own headquarters building which they called the Labor Lyceum.³

By 1910, the Socialists' efforts began to bear fruit politically. In that year James H. Maurer was elected to the State Assembly for the first of his three terms. (He was subsequently reelected in 1914 and 1916.) In 1911, the party ran a full municipal ticket for the first time and Elwood Leffler, their candidate for Mayor, nearly won. The election was extremely close, there were numerous contested ballots, and the Socialists always claimed that Leffler was defeated by fraud. In the same election, however, five members of the party won seats on the City Council. Although they subsequently exercised very little influence because

³ Stetler, *Reading Socialists*, 63; Maurer, *It Can Be Done*, 141-142. The local acquired title to an old factory building in 1904 and the members remodeled it themselves.

of their minority status, their election marked a significant breakthrough. Further prestige was added in 1912 when Maurer was elected President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor, a post he was to hold for the next sixteen consecutive years.⁴

During the World War I era the party led by Maurer opposed the policies of President Wilson and refused to endorse American entry into the conflict in 1917. Despite intense criticism from the community at large for their alleged lack of patriotism, the Socialists continued their opposition through the war years and maintained a large following. Indeed, in the municipal election of 1917 the Republicans and Democrats were forced to combine in order to defeat the Socialist candidates for City Council. Moreover, even though churchmen and industrial leaders combined with the politicians in an effort to destroy the party, they failed, and the Reading movement emerged from the wartime era virtually unscathed. The Reading Socialists also survived the party's internal squabbles of the period and unlike the local organizations in most other areas they did not split into factions in 1919.⁵

Despite the strength and resilience which the Socialists demonstrated during the war years, their movement did not continue to grow thereafter. On the contrary, it declined. The prosperous Twenties witnessed a booming local economy based largely on the manufacture of ladies' hosiery. Union membership declined and so did that of the party. None of the various issues stressed by the party in their campaigning seemed to catch on with the people until 1925 when, rather suddenly, the question of property evaluations and tax assessments became the burning issue of the day.

Reading was a city of homeowners. According to the Census of 1920, there were 25,202 homes in the city, and of these, 11,603 or 46.6% were owned, while 13,291 or 53.4% were not. Between 1920 and 1930, the ratio of homes owned increased and the percentage of encumbrances increased as well. The

⁴ Stetler, *Reading Socialists*, 72; Maurer, *It Can Be Done*, 168-169. Also see: William C. Pratt: "The Socialist Party of Reading, Pennsylvania: A Study in Working Class Politics" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1968), 161.

⁵ See: Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "The Reading Socialists and World War I—A Question of Loyalty," *Pennsylvania History*, XXXVI (October, 1969), 430-450.

major reason for the trend seems to have been that houses were much in demand and rents were high. As a result many workers chose to buy modest homes rather than pay rent.⁶

The increasing indebtedness of the local workers made them very sensitive to the problems of municipal debt and taxation and the Socialists attempted to capitalize on the growing resentment. In the 1925 election, for example, when two Councilmen, the school directors, and various county officials were to be chosen, the party issued a four page weekly bulletin called "The Loan Question," in which they emphasized the mounting debt burden, opposed further bond issues, cited alleged extravagances on the part of the incumbent Democratic administration, and advocated a pay-as-you-go municipal spending policy. The Socialists also advocated two new methods for increasing local revenues. The first of these was for the city to engage in whatever municipal revenue producing activities were permitted to a city of Reading's class by the state constitution; and the second was to equalize property assessments in such a way that corporations and large owners would pay their fair share of public expenses.⁷ Even though all their candidates for office were defeated, so were all the bond issues which were submitted to the voters save one, and the Socialists were encouraged to believe that they were finally making headway.⁸

In the campaign of 1926 municipal finance was again the major issue and the Socialists once more urged a pay-as-you-go policy. In this election again there were three bond issues before the voters for a new disposal plant, house sewers, and the water system. The total amount of bonded indebtedness involved was \$3,405,000. While most of the city's business leaders, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Republican and Democratic politicians favored the bond issues, the Socialists did not, and they conducted a feverish campaign of opposition. Maurer and Andrew P. Bower ran for the legislature in this campaign and even though they were defeated their relatively high vote encouraged party leaders further to believe their arguments were gaining a wider audience, particularly since all the bond issues were de-

⁶ From the United States Census Reports of 1920 and 1930 as quoted in Stetler, *Reading Socialists*, 167.

⁷ Files of the Reading *Labor Advocate*, September-November, 1925.

⁸ *Ibid.*, November 12, 1925. A \$750,000 bond issue for high school construction was approved by the voter.

feated as well.⁹ Shortly after this election the Socialist Local held a lengthy meeting to evaluate their political situation. Pleased with their apparently growing voter appeal, the party leaders decided to campaign virtually all year in 1927 stressing the issue of municipal taxation, and at the same time to undertake a concerted effort to induce the workers to register and vote Socialist.¹⁰

By this time financial conditions in the city were made to order for the Socialists' political purposes. In 1926, the assessed valuation of property in Reading had been \$110,680,443; and the tax rates were 18 mills and 14 mills respectively for the city and the schools. In 1927, Democratic Assessor Thomas Duval submitted a new set of evaluations which increased the total to \$163,533,500, or 60% of the total actual value. In an apparent effort to appease the taxpayers, however, the millage rates were reduced to ten and twelve respectively. Nevertheless, the new assessments created a storm of protest and the Socialists assumed the leadership in the campaign of opposition through the Northeast Civic League which was founded by the party and the leading spokesmen for which were Stump and Maurer. They emphasized that high taxes were made necessary by the extravagance and corruption of the administration of Mayor William E. Sharman. They also undertook to show the people that even a slight increase in taxation would place a heavy burden upon the working class. Third, and most important, they argued that the new assessment discriminated in favor of big property owners so that despite the lower millage rates the small property owners paid more while the big owners paid proportionately less.¹¹ They continued to stress these points throughout the municipal campaign of 1927. For campaign purposes also, the Socialists stressed three instances of alleged extravagances and corruption on the part of the Sharman Administration: the "Lindbergh Bridge Affair," the "Ontelaunee Dam and Lake Extravagance," and the purchase of the Angelica Water and Ice Company by the city.

⁹ Files of the Reading *Labor Advocate*, September-November, 1926; November 10, 1926.

¹⁰ *New Leader*, September 6, 1930; Reading *Labor Advocate*, February 5, 12, 1927.

¹¹ Reading *Eagle*, October 11, 1927; Reading *Labor Advocate*, January 8, 15, 22; June 18; August 27; September 3, 1927

The first of these issues, the Lindbergh Bridge, they characterized as a "beautiful monument to either the incompetence or the corruption of the old party officials." The problem with the Lindbergh Bridge was that it had a curve in it. Or, as the Socialists preferred to say, "it was crooked." The curve was there, they claimed, because while the bridge was under construction the city suddenly called in a consulting engineer who recommended that its route be changed. This recommendation necessitated curving the structure. It also meant that an acre of land adjacent to the original route had to be purchased for the construction of supports. This land, it was found, belonged to a group of speculators known as the Hessian Camp Development Company who had previously acquired 27 acres adjoining the bridge for a total price of \$35,000. The city now purchased one acre of this land from the Hessian Camp Development Company for \$45,000, thus providing a neat profit for someone. The Socialists claimed that "old party politicians" were behind the entire affair, and no one satisfactorily countered this charge.

The second issue which the Socialists exploited in their efforts to emphasize the alleged extravagance of the old party politicians was that of the water supply and the Ontelaunee (or Maiden-creek) Dam project. Sometime previously, the Sharman Administration concluded that a new reservoir was necessary and set about to build one. When it did, the price of land in the vicinity of the project began to increase and the city was constrained to pay \$325.00 per acre for land which had formerly been valued at \$85.00. Some 3,500 acres were condemned and 1,000 of these were purchased using 6% revenue bonds. The dam itself cost \$506,289.00. The Socialists charged that the dam was not vitally necessary; that its construction could have waited another twenty years; that the existing water system could have been repaired at a fraction of the cost of the Ontelaunee project; and that the total cost of the project, some \$1,600,000.00, was mostly waste.

Finally, there was the case of the Angelica Ice and Water Company. This organization had for years provided water to a small district just outside the city limits under the terms of a franchise granted them free by the city. Shortly before the election of 1927, this area was annexed by the city and became the eighteenth ward. Its residents asked that the city begin

to supply them with water, and responding to this request the council began negotiations for the purchase of the franchise and all the company's equipment. The city engineer, William O'Reilly, conducted a survey and recommended a purchase price of \$93,000 but for some unknown reason the council ignored his advice and paid \$222,000. Since the company had originally obtained its franchise from the city for nothing; since the equipment which was purchased for the princely sum mentioned above later proved to be virtually worthless; and since all of this occurred during the campaign, the Socialists were able to make a great deal of it and to benefit politically as a result.¹²

By far the most important issue in the campaign of 1927, however, was that of the real estate assessments. In order to create the greatest possible impact with this issue, the Socialists continued their propaganda campaign in regard to taxes. They also set out to show that the workers in Reading were badly paid by comparison with those in cities of comparable size, and thus could ill-afford to pay higher levies. A study done by John P. Troxell, Educational Director of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor, was published, showing that in 1925 the average wage in Reading was \$1,190 as compared with \$1,278 in the rest of the state. Moreover, U. S. Labor Department studies showed that in 1925 a family of five required an income of \$2,188 in order to maintain "minimum health and decency." The difference between the average annual income and the necessary minimum was made up insofar as possible by means of employing women and children and figures gathered by the Reading Federated Trades Council indicated that during 1925 alone child labor in the city increased by 28%.¹³

The Socialists also published figures on the assessment which they thought would be damaging to old party politicians. Stump studied the records at City Hall. Then, in the pages of *The Labor Advocate* and in their pamphlet literature the Socialists confronted the public with numerous examples of inequity. For example, Councilman William J. Smith, the voters were told,

¹² —, "What the Old Party Politicians Did," a 1929 Socialist Campaign Leaflet found in the Socialist Party Collection, Duke University. Hereafter cited at SPC.

¹³ Reading *Labor Advocate*, April 2, 1927; *New Leader*, September 6, 1930.

owned property which had previously been valued at \$5,000 and was now valued at \$5,700. In 1926 he paid \$184.50 in taxes on his property, yet in 1927 he paid only \$125.40, a saving of \$69.10. Similarly, Councilman F. G. Hodges saved \$171.10; the Berkshire Hotel, \$2,496.60; Pomeroy's, Inc., the largest department store in town, \$4,750.00; William H. Luden, Inc., the cough drop manufacturer, \$1,740.50; and there were many others. On the other hand, since the evaluation of small properties had been increased proportionately more, their owners paid more taxes. It was, cried the Socialists, a classical example of the manner in which the existing political system operated to cheat the common man.¹⁴

As if to add insult to injury, the City Council proposed a new revenue bond issue during the campaign. This move played into the Socialists' hands and they attempted to make the most of it. "They seem to be on a last minute debt-making spree," wrote Raymond Hofses in *The Labor Advocate*. "They seem determined to exercise their power up to the limit of the law. Unfortunately, nothing can be done to stop them while they are in office. Vote them out of power!"¹⁵

The techniques used by the Socialists in the campaign of 1927 were traditional with them. They conducted a vigorous registration drive. As noted above, they filled the pages of *The Labor Advocate* with their propaganda. Also, they distributed thousands of pamphlets and leaflets such as *The Pioneer* which were carried to every house in the city on Sunday mornings by groups of volunteers known as the "Flying Squadrons." They also followed their usual practice of holding numerous street-corner meetings and large outdoor mass meetings in the public parks. Their efforts drew large crowds and as each week passed they grew more and more confident of victory. This confidence was justifiable, for the evidence indicates that the Socialist propaganda campaign caused 7,000 more voters to register in 1927 than had registered in 1926. The total registration of 27,314 was the highest ever in a non-Presidential election year, and given the outcome of the election, it is fair to assume that

¹⁴ Reading *Labor Advocate*, January 15; February 12; July 30; August 20; September 10, 17; October 8, 15; November 5, 1927.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, October 1, 1927.

many of those who were stirred to action voted for the Socialists.¹⁶

Of the two daily newspapers, the *Times* and the *Eagle*, the former gave the campaign of 1927 the most attention although, as usual, little was said until just a few weeks before election day. The *Times* maintained a remarkable objectivity and did not attack the Socialists editorially or publish any feature which might have been damaging. In fact, the stated editorial policy of the paper was "nonpartisanship," and a desire to support those individual office seekers who would do the best possible job for the city regardless of party affiliation.¹⁷ In line with this policy, the *Times* supported the candidacy of *Labor Advocate* editor Raymond Hofses for the school board arguing that he was an able man who would make a good showing against the "dictatorial" policies of Superintendent George Beggs. The *Times* ignored Hofses' Socialist running mate George D. Snyder and instead gave equal support to Democrat Andrew Jackson Fink. The latter openly registered his displeasure at having his name linked with that of a Socialist, but the *Times* piously responded, "We are not in party politics. We want honest control of the schools."¹⁸

On October 25, the *Times* invited all the candidates for Mayor to submit their answer to a series of published questions. These were: 1) What is your policy regarding open and closed Council sessions? 2) What type of assessment and taxation program do you favor? 3) What, in your opinion, are the most needed improvements in the city? On October 29, the candidates' answers were published. Former Mayor John K. Stauffer, the Republican candidate, said he favored open council meetings, but he gave no answer to the other questions. Mayor William E. Sharman said that he too favored open council meetings, that he would urge the adjustment of all inequitable taxes and assessments, that he would oppose any increase in the existing tax rate, and that Reading needed new sewers, a complete traffic light and sign system, and provision for an adequate future supply of water. He also took advantage of the opportunity to defend the

¹⁶ H. G. Hodges, "Four Years of Socialism in Reading, Pennsylvania," *National Municipal Review*, XX (1931), 281.

¹⁷ *Reading Times*, September 29, 1927.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, October 22, 24, 1927. There was much general opposition to Beggs and the incumbent school board for their spending policies.

policies of his administration. Finally, Stump, the Socialist, answered that he too believed that public business should be conducted in public, that under a Socialist administration taxes and assessments would be equalized, and that even though the party believed in public improvements, the financial security of the homeowner was more important.¹⁹

Claiming to base their policy on the questionnaire, the men at the *Times* came out against Stauffer. "The election is between Sharman and Stump," wrote editor Abe Hurwitz "and the voter can take his choice depending upon his views." In his general coverage of the campaign Hurwitz devoted most of his editorial space to financial issues and said nothing at all about political ideology.²⁰ This was the last election during the entire period of organized Socialist political activity in Reading when that would be true.

The victory achieved by the Socialists in this election was impressive. As mentioned above, all but one of their major candidates were elected in a landslide which saw the party carry fourteen of the eighteen wards and poll a substantial vote in those four which were not carried.²¹ Quantitative studies of the election provide further proof, moreover, that the party was very successful in its appeal to the working class. Henry G. Stetler, for example, in a study published in 1943, has shown that in this election, as in all which followed during the 1930's, the Socialist candidates were consistently supported by the workers. Homeowners, the majority of whom belonged to this group, supported the party very heavily in every election between 1927 and 1939. Furthermore, Stetler's analysis of the correlation between economic status and voting behavior reveals that mass support from among the lower income groups was

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, October 25, 29, 1927.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, October 31; November 1, 2, 3, 7, 1927.

²¹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 5, 12, 1927; Reading *Times*, November 9, 1927; Reading *Eagle*, November 9, 1927; New York *Times*, November 10, 27; December 5, 1927. Stump polled 12,304 votes as compared to 7,071 for Stauffer and 5,268 for Sharman in the Mayoralty contest. Maurer and Snyder polled 11,749 and 11,549 votes respectively for Council. The Republican candidates, Wetherhold and Ruth, polled 7,685 and 7,399; while Democrats Witman and Schafer polled 5,087 and 4,775. Charles A. Kershner, the Democratic candidate for treasurer, demanded a recount. Socialist candidate George Hoverter agreed and as a result was defeated.

successfully recruited by the Socialists, while higher income groups tended to support the Republicans.²²

Immediately upon taking office Mayor Stump and his associates began a drive to "clean up city government." They announced that condemnation proceedings for the controversial dam project would be slowed down and that land owners might expect a much less sympathetic attitude from the council in the future. They announced a crackdown on prostitution and gambling, and informed the police that greater efficiency would be expected in everything from vice control to the collection of parking tickets. They also set out to make the city administration more efficient and economical through the establishment of a purchasing office, a city owned machine shop to maintain equipment, and later through the mechanization of garbage collection.²³ They were remarkably fair in their dealings with the old party incumbents of appointive offices, dismissing very few.²⁴

The daily press, particularly the *Times*, at first expressed an open-minded attitude toward the Socialists. The day after the election Hurwitz wrote that, "the Socialists, but not Socialism are now in power in Reading. We will judge them on the basis of their accomplishments. Acts alone are important. There is no room for ideology or party politics in city government."²⁵ Within a short time, however, the *Times* would drop its objectivity and emerge as the greatest source of criticism for the Stump Administration.

Two major issues dominated local politics in Reading during the first two years of Socialist rule. These were the "scientific

²² Stetler, *Reading Socialists*, 117, 120-122, 185. Stetler's calculations show that the greatest negative deviation from the mean rental value in Reading occurred in wards 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 16. Such a deviation would indicate low income neighborhoods such as those of workers. All of these wards were carried by the Socialists in addition to wards 14, 15, 17, and 18. Likewise, the greatest negative deviation from the mean home value in the city occurred in wards 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, and 18. Again, this would indicate relatively low income neighborhoods inhabited for the most part by workers, and again all these wards were carried by the Socialists.

²³ Reading *Labor Advocate*, January 7, 14; March 24, 1928; Reading *Times*, January 4, 12, 28; February 4; March 3, 31; May 12, 19; June 16, 1928.

²⁴ Reading *Eagle*, August 3, 1930. Also see: Pratt, 101-102.

²⁵ Reading *Times*, November 10, 1927.

assessment" and the City Hall. Both were highly controversial and merit detailed attention.

The first move of the Socialist administration in regard to the assessment problem was to remove Assessor Duval and replace him with Milton Bortz, a local real estate salesman who was also a long time party member.²⁶ Secondly, after much discussion among the Council members and also within the Socialist Local, it was decided to hire a firm of real estate experts to assist in the "scientific" establishment of property values. This decision was made entirely by the three Socialist members of the Council, Stump, Maurer, and Snyder. The two holdover members, McConnell and Smith, went on record in favor of existing assessment figures and refused to participate in further planning. The organization chosen to assist the city was the Manufacturers' Appraisal Company of Philadelphia which had already aided many other cities in the establishment of assessment rates, and the fee which the city agreed to pay for the service was \$75,000.²⁷

The technique used to determine property values was known as the Somers Plan, or "the unit-foot price system." It involved the selection of a "comparison block" in a high value area in relation to which land values in all other parts of the city could be calculated. The basic unit of value under this system was a parcel of land one hundred feet in depth and one foot in breadth. The task of the appraisal company was merely to act as adviser in the establishment of values. Assessor Bortz and his assistants actually assigned values and determined tax levies. The process took about five months at the end of which time Bortz made the new assessment figures public.²⁸ The tax rates of ten and twelve mills were to be levied against an assessed valuation of sixty percent, as before, but it soon became clear that even though the new technique produced lower values than the previous assessment, the reductions were proportionately greater for small properties than for large ones. This meant tax savings for the working class and the Socialists proudly an-

²⁶ Reading *Labor Advocate*, January 7, 1928; Reading *Times*, January 3, 1928.

²⁷ Reading *Labor Advocate*, January 21; February 11, 18; March 10, 28, 1928; Reading *Times*, March 15, 1928.

²⁸ Reading *Labor Advocate*, October 6, 1928.

nounced that for nearly three-fourths of city's property owners the system would work beneficially.

Unfortunately, many large taxpayers were dissatisfied with the outcome and exercised their option of appeal to the City Council for revision of their tax bills. Some 1,650 such appeals were considered and in most cases there was a satisfactory settlement. However, 117 large property owners remained unhappy even after the adjustments and took their appeals to court. Most of these cases were eventually settled without litigation, however, through compromise agreements negotiated by Milton Bortz and City Solicitor John Rothermel. This procedure in turn caused further controversy and many people who had not previously challenged their assessment now did so, demanding that the entire assessment be thrown out. To make matters worse, and to add to the embarrassment of the Socialists, the President of the Manufacturers Appraisal Company, Walter R. Pollack, accused the city of incompetence in handling of appeals. By agreeing to arbitrary settlement without reference to the unit-price system, he contended, Bortz and Rothermel had unwittingly nullified the entire scientific assessment procedure. Eventually, the Socialists were constrained to re-assess the entire city and the result was a set of values almost identical to the Duval Assessment of 1926. "Except," proclaimed their critics, "that it had cost \$75,000."²⁹

The second major issue dealt with by the Socialists during their first term in power was that of the City Hall. In 1925 the voters had approved one bond issue which authorized \$750,000 for the construction of a new, and badly needed, City Hall. The authority was never used, however, because Mayor Sharman thought the amount was inadequate. Further, there was controversy as to the location of the new structure. Real estate speculators, soundly denounced by the Socialists for their greedy behavior, wished to see the new building located at an inconvenient downtown site so they could profit from the sale of land to the city. Others with land holdings in the West Reading area attempted to encourage the city to build there by offering a free building site provided a new Court House was built on the same location. The Socialists charged that this offer really

²⁹ *New Leader*, September 13, 1930; *Reading Times*, January 10, 14, 1927; November 6, 7, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 22; December 5, 1930.

reflected nothing more than the desire of the landowners to profit by the increased land values which would surely occur wherever the new public facilities were located.³⁰

In order to solve the problem, Socialist Councilman Maurer proposed that the city buy an old abandoned high school building from the school board and convert it to a city hall. He argued that this could be done easily within the budget of the city and leave money to spare. The building Maurer had in mind was known as "the Old Boys' High School," and it had been standing empty for two years. It was twenty-two years old and in a bad state of repair. However, it was conveniently located and Maurer argued that the process of conversion and renovation would be a relatively easy task. After lengthy discussion, Maurer's proposal passed the council by a vote of three to two. Following that, the city opened negotiation with the school board and an agreement was soon reached under the terms of which the city was to buy the building for \$510,000. The council then appointed two local architects to study the structure and submit estimates as to the cost of repairs. One of these architects submitted a report which coincided with Maurer's earlier guess as to the cost of the project, and with this encouragement the council voted to proceed.³¹

Meanwhile, the daily press reflected the opposition to the plan. It was argued that the basic structure of the building did not lend itself to use as an office building, and that a new city hall could be built for about what it would cost to restore the high school. "Stump is trying to jam the high school project through council," wrote Abe Hurwitz of the *Times*, and he went on to accuse the Mayor of suppressing cost estimates which were unfavorable and publishing only those which seemed to make the project desirable. He also broadened his criticism to suggest that the Socialists' financial policies were no better than those of their predecessors. "Stump, Maurer and Snyder have spent their lives attacking 'invisible government,'" concluded Hurwitz, "and now they are guilty of it themselves."³²

The Socialists reacted to such criticism immediately. On

³⁰ ———, "What the Socialists Have Done," a 1929 campaign leaflet found in the SPC.

³¹ Reading *Times*, January 24; February 1, 2, 1928.

³² Reading *Labor Advocate*, March 10, 1928; Reading *Times*, March 5, 6, 8, 1928.

March 18, 1928, they held a public meeting in a downtown theater which was attended by some 1,200 people. The three Socialist Councilmen appeared at this meeting to explain their financial policies and defend the city hall project. In making their presentation the Socialists carefully pointed out that they were left with very high debts by the Democrats. Not only were they obliged to honor these debts, but they would be forced to seek new sources of revenue if even the most desperately needed municipal improvement were to be made. They were quickly learning, they admitted, that a pay-as-you-go policy was easier to talk about than to implement. Nevertheless, they argued, the financial position of the city was relatively sound and the city hall project could easily be handled. Stump and Maurer were pleased by the apparent enthusiasm with which the crowd greeted their explanation.³³

Amid all the argumentation the project went forward and within a year it was completed. Not only was it accomplished within the \$750,000 authorization, but the Socialists had enough residual funds to furnish the new city hall with necessary office equipment and still retain a balance of \$1,422.21. One of the architects who submitted an estimate for the renovation commented that the project could not have been duplicated from scratch for less than three times its cost. It was indeed a remarkable achievement, and the building is still in use today more than forty years after its completion.

In spite of controversy and criticism, the public in general was satisfied with the Socialist administration as indicated by the results of the elections of 1928, 1929 and 1930. In the former the party concentrated primarily on the campaign for seats in the state legislature, largely because they desired to build up their vote in Berks County. Jesse George, who was business manager for the local plumbers' union and was later to serve on the city council, ran along with Andrew P. Bower. In their campaigning they placed the greatest emphasis on the issue of the fee or "rake off" system by means of which tax collectors were compensated in Pennsylvania. The Socialist position was that tax collectors should be paid a salary in the same manner as any other public official. The party did surprisingly well in

³³ *New Leader*, September 30, 1930; *Reading Times*, March 24, 1928.

this election even though George and Bower were defeated. They both polled about 7,200 votes, the most ever for a Socialist candidate for county office, and 2,000 more than were polled by the Socialist candidates for county office in 1927. "There is great hope for future," gloated the *Advocate*.³⁴

In the election of 1929 the party ran Jesse George and George Hoverter for city council, along with Lilith Wilson, Hazellette Hoopes and Howard McDonough for the school board; and also several candidates for minor offices.³⁵ The campaign was not particularly exciting, but it was important because the Socialists based their efforts squarely upon their record. They emphasized the changes they had made in municipal administration such as the creation of the office of purchasing agent, and the establishment of the municipal street cleaning service and machine shop. They also reminded the voters of the improved municipal services offered under their administration such as the construction of new playgrounds, the fire alarm system, the construction of new sewers, and the new sewage disposal plant. Voters were simply asked to give their support to Socialist candidates if they approved of the job the Stump Administration had done thus far.³⁶

The *Times* opposed the Socialists, but with relatively little effect. Stump was accused of overspending and the editorial page carried the general theme that the Socialists had deceived the people and that their record did not invite further support. "To elect two more Socialists" wrote Hurwitz "would be simply to place two more of Maurer's 'yes' men in City Hall." At the same time he advised the voters that Councilmen Smith and McConnell were "good men" who deserved to be re-elected.³⁷

The Socialists won the election with a record high vote, carrying eleven of the eighteen wards. Their only major candidate to lose was Mrs. Wilson. With Hoverter and George on the City Council, the party now had complete control of city government, while the addition of Mrs. Hoopes and McDonough to the school board gave them four of the nine seats on that body. Socialist power and popularity in Reading were at their

³⁴ Reading *Labor Advocate*, May 5; September 22; November 10, 1928.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, May 4, 1929.

³⁶ —, "What the Socialists Have Done," and "The Socialists Have Made Good," campaign leaflets, SPC.

³⁷ Reading *Times*, October 26; November 2, 5, 1929.

height as the desperate days of economic calamity approached.³⁸

In 1930 the Socialist candidates for the State Assembly were Darlington Hoopes and Lilith Wilson. Hoopes was a young lawyer who migrated from Norristown to Reading after the triumph of 1927. He had been a member of the party since his college days at the University of Wisconsin, and would soon make himself one of the leaders of the Reading party. Mrs. Wilson was the wife of local party leader, L. Birch Wilson, Jr., but was nationally known in party circles in her own right. She was a former member of the N.E.C. and had helped to lead the amnesty campaign for Debs in the early Twenties.

The platform for this campaign emphasized the inequities of the capitalist system and the candidates promised to fight in Harrisburg for the passage of laws "beneficial to the common man," and labor in particular. Specifically, they called for unemployment insurance, a revised pension system, and a better workman's compensation program. The campaign was hard-fought and the election was close, but both Hoopes and Mrs. Wilson were victorious.³⁹ In the years which followed they were true to their campaign pledges and fought hard in the legislature for needed social reform. Their activities, more than any other factor, sustained the party in defeat during the period from 1932 to 1935.

Ironically, the first Socialist administration in Reading coincided with the beginning of the Great Depression and despite the fact that American Socialists had predicted the collapse of capitalism for years, they were caught unprepared and the Reading Administration found it difficult and embarrassing to make policy. Nevertheless, action was vitally necessary. By the end of 1930, there were at least 3,000 able bodied workers unemployed in the city and many of these were family men. Moreover, the number continued to increase at an alarming rate. Relief was entirely in the hands of the county and woefully inadequate private groups, and financial resources were becoming rapidly depleted. Nevertheless, the Socialists made it clear that in their view the depression was a direct result of the capitalist system, and that the industrialists and employers who

³⁸ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 9, 1929; Reading *Times*, November.

³⁹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, September 12; October 3, 10, 31; November 7, 1930; Reading *Times*, November 5, 1930.

had exploited the workers for so long would have to bear the burden of any massive relief program. The Socialists would not consider any relief measures which required tax increases because it would place the heaviest burden on the wage earning class while the rich would escape their full measure of responsibility.⁴⁰

By 1930 the daily press began to criticize Mayor Stump and his associates for their allegedly inhuman views. In reaction to the pressure which was thus created, and also because he recognized that the need for action could not be ignored completely, Mayor Stump finally agreed to call a conference of community leaders to discuss the relief problem. The group which assembled, on December 6, 1930, included city, county, school, union, and industrial leaders and the major result of their deliberations was a proposal by County Poor Board Director J. C. Bach that the city, county and school board cooperate at once in the appropriation of \$75,000 for the establishment of a municipal public works program.⁴¹ The Socialists, for the most part, opposed this plan although not unanimously. Mrs. Hoopes and Howard McDonough favored it on grounds that all possible aid should be rendered to the needy at once. The two Socialist School Directors voted with the majority members of the board in approving the Bach Plan. The Mayor and Council, while continuing to oppose the plan in principle, nevertheless, agreed to make a small contribution in the amount of \$10,000. In addition, Stump appointed an official City Unemployment Relief Committee to seek private sources of funding. He gave a great deal of emphasis to the latter in his discussions of the relief problem, and was obviously counting upon heavy contributions from the wealthy. In the long run, however, these were not forthcoming.⁴²

Soon after the modified version of the Bach Plan went into effect there followed a vicious battle of words between the *Times* and the *Advocate* over the whole issue of relief. In a damning editorial published on December 10, 1930, the *Times*

⁴⁰ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 28, 1930; Reading *Times*, November 22, 26; December 1, 1930.

⁴¹ Reading *Labor Advocate*, December 5, 1930; Reading *Times*, December 3, 6, 1930.

⁴² Reading *Labor Advocate*, December 12, 1930; Reading *Times*, December 6, 12, 1930.

proclaimed, "It is something to see the lead taken by the Republicans and Democrats while the Socialist leaders contribute nothing but their 'august presence.'" ⁴³ The *Times* devoted much of its fire to Socialist School Directors Hofses and Snyder for their refusal to vote with Mrs. Hoopes and McDonough in support of the Bach Plan. Their views were held up to evidence of the true feelings of Socialists regarding the plight of the workers, and during the weeks immediately following the conference the *Times* maintained pressure on the Socialists with persistent demands that a more adequate work relief program be established. ⁴⁴

The Socialists responded with a campaign of their own designed to explain and defend their policy. They argued that the *Times* leaders cared little for the common man, but merely sought to take advantage of trying conditions in order to discredit the administration. Further, they charged that the *Times* deliberately misrepresented the Socialist position on the relief question by ignoring the repeated statements of Stump, Hofses and others that a relief program based on taxation would place an unfair burden on those wage-earners who still had jobs. However, concluded the *Advocate*, such a position was to be expected from a newspaper controlled by a "New York millionaire." ⁴⁵

Meanwhile, efforts to provide for relief through private and charitable activity failed. The Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee was able to raise only about \$20,000, and a separate fund drive sponsored by the Reading *Eagle* fell short of its announced goal of \$100,000. The Mayor was soon forced to announce that the city would have to abandon entirely its efforts to provide relief. The total monies available, some \$79,000, were exhausted, having been expended in a matter of weeks. Henceforth, said Stump, the poor would have to rely on the county for aid. County Poor Commissioner Walter A. Ringler denounced the city for its failure, but said the county would meet the burden as best it could. ⁴⁶

⁴³ Reading *Times*, December 10, 1930.

⁴⁴ Files of the Reading *Times*, December, 1930-January, 1931; January 30, 1931.

⁴⁵ Reading *Labor Advocate*, January 23, 30, 1931. John H. Perry of New York City owned the Reading *Times*.

⁴⁶ Reading *Labor Advocate*, March 13, 20, 1931.

Immediately after the abandonment of the city's efforts, the *Advocate* launched a campaign of criticism alleging corruption in the administration of relief. A headline of March 27 kicked off the campaign proclaiming: "POOR BOARD PLAYING POLITICS." The Socialists charged that the poor received curt treatment at the courthouse and that many were denied aid altogether. Some were even told to contact the Unemployment Relief Council, a Communist front organization. "This," said the *Advocate*, "is an obvious attempt to embarrass the Socialist administration."⁴⁷

But in spite of their effort to fault the county, the Socialists were in trouble and they knew it. The *Times* continued its barrage of criticism with emphasis on the ideas that the Socialists were insensitive to the needs of the people,⁴⁸ and the Socialists continued to respond with the same old argument: capitalists must pay the bill for relief. They also sought to keep foremost in the minds of the people their accomplishments and the municipal improvement which had come during the Stump Administration. Clearly, the intent was to convince everyone that the overall record of the Stump régime proved the solicitude of the party for the people.⁴⁹ There was some evidence, however, that the people were unimpressed. On February 11, 1931, an angry crowd of approximately 300 unemployed workers marched to the Mayor's office and demanded help in the form of protection from eviction; and free light and heat. The Mayor responded that, "all the power of the state and nation would be brought to bear on the officials of the city if such things were attempted." "He argued ably and well," reported the *Advocate*, "against demands which were unreasonable even though quite understandable."⁵⁰

Now the stage was set for the climactic local election of 1931. An incredible set of circumstances prevailed in Reading. The depression was growing worse. A Socialist administration committed to the welfare of the working class and led by men who had spent their lives predicting economic calamity, could not cope with the emergency. Their opponents accused them of

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, March 27, 1931.

⁴⁸ Files of the *Reading Times*, January-February, 1931.

⁴⁹ *Reading Labor Advocate*, January 2, 16, 23, 30; February 6, 20, 1931.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, February 13, 1931.

hypocrisy and incompetence. They countered with time-worn perorations about the inherent defects of the capitalist system. The people suffered and their suffering grew more intense; and in the midst of it all the politicians came forth to do battle for office.

As early as the spring of 1930, the Socialists openly predicted that the Republicans and Democrats would join forces to defeat them in 1931. This possibility began to materialize as a reality in January, 1931, when Republican chairman Charles J. Esterly spoke of it in an open political meeting, but many weeks of indecisiveness followed because party leaders found it difficult to agree upon an equitable split-up of the offices.⁵¹ The Socialists followed the efforts of their opponents with great interest and emphasized each problem encountered by the fusionists in an effort to kill the movement with ridicule. From the time serious negotiations began between the two old parties, the Socialists predicted they would never be able to agree, and when, in fact, an apparently insoluble dispute arose over the distribution of offices, the Socialists were overjoyed. "Flop of fusion is the laugh of Reading," proclaimed the *Advocate*.⁵²

As late as August of 1931, the Socialists were still working hard to convince themselves and everyone else that fusion was a failure. "The opposition is divided and goes into the campaign with no issues," wrote the editor of the *Advocate*. "They will emphasize the need to defeat the Socialists. They will appeal to fear and prejudice, but they are divided. There will be many primary contests among them. . . . The Socialist party has little doubt that all its candidates will be elected."⁵³

To some extent the Socialists were correct. The effort to bring a fusion slate into existence before the primary election in September did not go smoothly and there was some indication that the movement might break down altogether. The difficulty was that the two old party committees could not agree. The fusion committee named as its candidate for Mayor Heber Ermentrout, a Democrat. In addition, they chose George M. Yocum (R) and John Seasholtz (R) for Council, Andrew J. Fink (R) for City Treasurer, and Charles F. Copley (R) for Controller. The

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, January 2, 1931.

⁵² *Ibid.*, June 26, July 10, 17, 24, 31, 1931.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, August 14, 1931.

Democratic City Committee accepted this slate even though it was heavily laden with Republicans, but the Republican City Committee rejected Fink and Seasholtz. Fink was replaced by Conrad High, but Seasholtz remained a candidate.⁵⁴

In the primary itself, Ermentrout won without much trouble on both the Democratic and Republican tickets as did Yocum, High and the four fusionist candidates for the school board. There was trouble, however, in the selection of the other candidate for council and for municipal controller, and the result was chaos. Seasholtz won on the Democratic ballot for council, but lost to former councilman McConnell on the Republican side. Meanwhile, Charles Copley won the Republican nomination for controller, but lost the Democratic nomination to Harry Menges. There followed weeks of bickering over the division of offices, but finally an agreement was reached according to which Seasholtz withdrew in favor of Menges and former councilman William F. Smith.⁵⁵ The Socialists, of course, had a field day ridiculing the fusionists, and the *Advocate* lost no opportunity to impress the public with the perfidy of the old party politicians.⁵⁶

The fusionists finally got around to setting up a campaign headquarters in mid-October, and they announced their intention to do most of their campaigning during the last few days before the election.⁵⁷ There was no doubt in anyone's mind that they intended to stop at nothing in their efforts to defeat the Socialists, and the latter, therefore, were already hard at work. No longer did they try to ridicule the fusionists, but now pictured them as desperate men who would stoop to any level to "destroy good government." "Fusion represents the big financial interests of the city," announced the *Advocate*. "If they get into power we shall have government by the dictation of a self-appointed group of politicians who are serving the big employers and no others."⁵⁸

As announced, the fusionists waited until near the end of October to launch their attack. In a lightning campaign they

⁵⁴ Pratt, "The Socialist Party of Reading . . ." 141-143.

⁵⁵ Reading *Times*, September 16, 17, 18, 23; October 8, 1931.

⁵⁶ Reading *Labor Advocate*, September 18, 25; October 2, 9, 1931.

⁵⁷ Reading *Times*, October 13, 1931; *The Pioneer*, October 18, 1931.

Most extant copies of *The Pioneer* are located in the Darlington Hoopes Collection now held by the library of The Pennsylvania State University.

⁵⁸ Reading *Labor Advocate*, October 16, 1931.

set about to discredit the Socialists entirely by means of emphasizing two themes: financial incompetence; and lack of morality. Voters were reminded that the Socialist party had spent many years calling for pay-as-you-go municipal finance, but had increased the municipal debt during their four years in office. In addition, the fusionists accused the Socialists of incompetence in their efforts to deal with unemployment; of holding secret council meetings from which the minority members were excluded; of nepotism; of "flagrant abuse of the public interest" in their efforts concerning the scientific assessment; and finally, of driving industry out of town.⁵⁹ The last charge received a great deal of emphasis. According to the story which circulated, Western Electric decided not to locate a new plant in Reading because of the Socialist administration and its alleged attitudes toward taxation and labor. On November 1, the *Eagle* ran a full-page story showing a picture of the Western Electric plant in Baltimore and claiming that between 2,000 and 3,000 jobs were lost to Reading on account of "Stump and his friends." The election was November 3, and it was not until afterward that the Socialists were able to refute this story. Stump asked the company for a statement and on November 4 he received a telegram stating that Reading had never been seriously considered for the new plant because the company wanted a seaport location.⁶⁰

The same issue of the Reading *Eagle* which carried the Western Electric story also carried a full-page fusionist advertisement in which the Socialists were charged with "Godlessness." "They teach the idea that God must be destroyed," proclaimed the statement. "This is what Karl Marx said and Maurer and all the Socialists accept Marx as an infallible authority."⁶¹ Some of the leading clergymen of the city echoed these views. The Rev. Mr. R. M. Blackburn, long time Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church and long time foe of the Socialists warned his parishioners from the Pulpit, "the Socialists have marked our political and social institutions for destruction." He concluded his diatribe by charging the Socialists with hypocrisy,

⁵⁹ Reading *Eagle*, October 20, 22, 27; November 1, 1931.

⁶⁰ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 6, 1931; Reading *Eagle*, October 24, 29, 31; November 1, 1931; *The Pioneer*, November 1, 1931; March, 1932.

⁶¹ Reading *Eagle*, November 1, 1931.

saying that even though they were outwardly law-abiding citizens, they could not honestly support the institutions they wished to destroy.⁶²

The *Times* had long since dropped its pretence of non-partisanship by the autumn of 1931 and its editorials openly called for the defeat of the Socialist administration. Agreeing with most of the charges made by the fusionists, the *Times* went so far as to call upon Socialist voters to support the fusionist ticket because their leaders had "sacrificed the principles of the party merely to hold office." Maurer was singled out, as usual, as the scape-goat for all the alleged Socialist shortcomings; and also as the "real power" behind the Stump Administration.⁶³

The Socialists tried desperately to fend off the fusionist onslaught. They answered personal attacks upon their leaders in kind with attacks upon the fusionist leaders and their motives. They characterized the entire fusion movement as a "front" for the great manufacturing concerns of Reading, particularly the Wyomissing Textile Interests, and they belittled the leaders of the movement unmercifully. Charles J. Esterly and Wellington Bertolet, two of the three members of the fusion committee were dismissed as "hirelings of Wyomissing; politically and financially bankrupt; and controlled by their autocratic masters." William C. Bitting, President of Rosedale Mills, and the third member of the committee, was characterized as "the Czar of Rosedale." Each was said to be utterly unmoved by the plight of the working class.⁶⁴ Heber Ermentrout, the fusionist candidate for Mayor was charged with gross callousness. He was president of a finance company, and the Socialists published a list which they claimed contained the names of all the residents of Reading who had lost property as a result of foreclosures undertaken by Ermentrout's firm, the Liberty Finance Co.⁶⁵

The Socialists also defended themselves against specific charges. On the question of municipal finance they admitted spending more than had originally been intended, but they quickly pointed out there had been no waste. Not only was the city the bene-

⁶² Reading *Times*, November 2, 1931.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, November 2, 5, 1931.

⁶⁴ *The Pioneer*, October 25, 1931.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, November 1, 1931.

fiary of numerous improvements during the preceding four years, they argued; but in addition the city was able to pay off a significant portion of the debt which had been encumbered. Mayor Stump himself devoted most of his campaign time to this issue presenting his case repeatedly at street corner meetings and mass meetings throughout the city.⁶⁶ Most of the other charges against them were denounced by the Socialists as fake issues. The matter of "industry driven away" fell into this category. Obviously, argued the Socialists, those industries which closed down in Reading during the period between 1929 and 1931 had done so as a result of the Depression, not Socialist policy. Nepotism was another fake issue. Of nearly 875 office holders appointed during the Stump régime, only thirteen were related to party members and they were fully qualified for their positions. Certainly it strained credulity to say that this was nepotism. On the issue of the assessment the Socialists argued that a majority of the people had supported their program even if the courts had not; and on the emotional and moral issues they simply accused the fusionist politicians and the newspapers of lying.⁶⁷

Despite their efforts, the Socialists were defeated. The campaigning on both sides changed relatively few votes and the Republican-Democratic combination was simply too powerful to overcome. Even though Mayor Stump and most of his colleagues polled more votes than they received in 1927, they could not prevail against fusion. In the six wards inhabited predominately by workers, the party vote remained strong; even increased, and carried the day. In the other wards, however, fusion proved unbeatable although the Socialists ran a strong race in four of these and actually lost ground in only eight.⁶⁸ Control of the city was thus wrested from the party. They retained only two seats on the City Council in addition to their four on the school board, but their minority status made them ineffective. In 1933, even these seats would be taken from them.

An evaluation of the evidence reveals that the Reading Socialists were defeated in 1931 largely as a result of fusion. While

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, October 25, 1931.

⁶⁷ Reading *Labor Advocate*, October 16, 23, 30; November 6, 1931; Reading *Eagle*, October 24, 27, 1931; Reading *Times*, October 20, 1931.

⁶⁸ Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 6, 1931; Reading *Eagle*, November 4, 5, 1931; Reading *Times*, November 5, 1931.

some authorities have suggested that a major cause was the disenchantment of the people due to Socialist spending policies, this assertion would be difficult to prove. Much nearer the truth is the simple fact that despite their campaign efforts, and despite the fact that their support throughout the city remained constant, the Socialists could not overcome the combined forces of the two old parties.⁶⁹

The Socialist organization remained intact and strong after the defeat and almost immediately went on the offensive against the Ermentrout Administration. They chastened the fusionists for their "immoral" tactics in the campaign and were actually able to prove that some of the charges made against them were false. In other cases they simply turned the charges around and aimed them at the enemy. This was done with "nepotism" and also with "driving industry away." During the entire four-year period which followed 1931, the Socialists worked diligently to prepare the ground for the election of 1935 and when it came they were successful. But once re-established in power, the party had once again to face the Depression. In addition, the organization soon began to crumble as a result of internal disputes, and it soon collapsed as a major political force in the city.

⁶⁹ Pratt, "The Socialist Party of Reading . . .," 155-164, in which the author presents a detailed discussion of the election of 1931 and his views as to the reasons for the defeat of the Socialists.