Women and American Socialism: The Reading Experience

The year 1927 marks the greatest political breakthrough in the history of the Reading Socialist Party. That year the Reading comrades captured control of city hall for the first time, electing the mayor, two city councilmen, the city controller, and two school directors. For the next eight years, the Socialists enjoyed frequent electoral success and were the leading party in municipal politics. In retrospect, the Reading experience appears to be one of American Socialism's few political success stories.1

Yet in the words of one of its most prominent spokesmen, the local movement seemed "pretty well shot" on the eve of the 1927 triumph.2 Its last election victory had been a 1916 state assembly contest, and party membership had fallen off in the post-World War I period. By 1927, local dues-paying Socialists numbered less than one hundred. At the April party caucus, where the 1927 municipal candidates were named, approximately fifty members participated and the organization actually experienced difficulty in obtaining a full slate of candidates. Though the party's weekly newspaper, the Reading Labor Advocate, was optimistic about the approaching campaign, such optimism was premised more on the extraordinarily unpopular tax assessment of the incumbent Demo-


cratic administration than upon the strength of the local Socialist movement.³

One of the major problems confronting the Reading comrades, according to their weekly, was getting out the potential Socialist vote: "In the past, thousands of male Socialist voters failed to register. And in many hundreds of Socialist homes the men of the house were the only ones to cast ballots."⁴ The alleged failure of working-class women to vote was a frequent topic for both the Labor Advocate and Socialist spokesmen throughout this campaign and those of the next several years and was the reason why a special effort was made to organize women for political activity in 1927. Years earlier, the Women's Socialist League had been established, although it was considered "a mere auxiliary organization." According to a 1933 Labor Advocate account,

The League was organized in 1903 and since then has been one of the bulwarks of Socialist activity in Berks County. In its early experiences this organization confined itself to fund-raising activities and its members worked unselfishly at the task of preparing luncheons, assisting at picnics and in any other way by which the party could be furnished with finances.⁵

While fund-raising services of this sort continued to be appreciated by male members, in 1927 they were seeking new ways to attract women voters, since the general decline in party membership had been marked by a comparable decline in women. Out of the approximately fifty participants attending the April nominating caucus, only two were women. And in 1927, unlike several previous years, no women candidates were nominated. Even before the caucus, the campaign committee had appointed a man as a "special organizer" for Socialist women.⁶

Reading was a predominately working-class city of over 100,000, in which almost 60 per cent of its families owned their own homes.⁷ That situation made the electorate particularly responsive to the Socialist attack on the recent unpopular tax assessment and

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³ Personal interview with L. Birch Wilson, Sept. 7, 1967; Reading Eagle, Nov. 21, 1927; Reading Labor Advocate, Jan. 1, 1927.
⁴ Labor Advocate, Jan. 1, 1927.
⁵ Ibid., July 28, 1933.
⁶ Eagle, Nov. 21, 1927; Labor Advocate, Mar. 19, 1927.
⁷ Stellet, The Socialist Movement, 12, 14.
their promise to revise it in favor of the working class. Apparently Socialists felt that this issue was especially persuasive with women voters, as the Labor Advocate’s editor noted in his weekly front-page column:

It is encouraging to note the large number of women who are attending Socialist street meetings this year. The wife and mother is the money spender of the family and, as such, feels the results of the new assessment much more keenly than does the man of the house. Every dollar taken by the tax collector means one dollar less to spend on good food and stylish clothing and, evidently, the women are resentful of the fact that council has decided that workers’ wives and children shall eat less, wear less and enjoy fewer movies this year than last.8

The unpopular assessment was the chief issue of the campaign and was the reason why the Socialists triumphed.9 It might also be added that the victory could best be described in terms of their opponents’ weaknesses rather than Socialist strength. However, the 1927 success provided the local movement with a momentum and confidence that would make it a formidable foe against strong opposition in the future. Party membership and activities greatly increased in the months following the election. Whereas the organization had numbered less than one hundred dues-paying members in 1927, its ranks climbed to 881 by October, 1928. New branch organizations were established in the city and in some parts of the county as well. The Labor Advocate frequently reported renewed party activities, including educational and social programs, and recorded that “[s]everal hundred party members” participated in the 1928 nominating caucus.10

The 1927 triumph encouraged women’s activity. The Women’s Socialist League began scheduling regular weekly meetings at the party-owned Labor Lyceum: “Like every other party activity,” the party paper observed, “the League has been gaining in interest and membership since the November election. The decision to meet at headquarters rather than in the homes of members, as heretofore,

8 Labor Advocate, Sept. 3, 1927.
9 For contemporary response to the Reading Socialist Party victory, see “No, Reading Has Not Gone Red!” Literary Digest, 95 (Dec. 10, 1927), 14.
was rendered necessary by the constantly growing attendance." But it was the auxiliary role of the Women's Socialist League that continued to be most apparent. During the cooler months, the women sponsored a hassanpeffer card party. Such gatherings had long served both to raise money and to provide a recreational activity for the membership. When the summer months arrived, the party conducted picnics. An examination of the summer issues of the *Labor Advocate* during the 1927–1936 period reveals the extent of financial dependence that the Socialist movement had upon its women members for these picnics.

Throughout its history, the organization had sponsored picnics at local picnic groves. These fund-raising affairs usually were open to the general public. Games for children and other recreational activities, entertainment, including band concerts, plenty of food, and Socialist orators of both local and national prominence were often regular features. Women volunteers, who might best be called "Jennie Higgineses" after the mythical rank and file party worker, "Jimmie Higgins," prepared lunches and desserts for these gatherings and the *Labor Advocate* usually printed appeals for assistance. In June, 1928, the chairman of the picnic arrangements committee was quoted in a front-page story: "and don’t forget to tell the ladies that we are looking for the very kind of layer cakes they know how to bake." The writer added: "So shine up the mixing bowl, girls, and prepare to get busy." Two weeks later, an advertisement for the coming picnic ended with: "And Oh Ladies, Bring Cakes."

The following year, the party rented a twenty-two acre picnic grove six miles outside the city and, later that year, purchased it for $8,500. Renamed "Socialist Park," it was one of the movement's proudest possessions. Party picnics became a more important institution than ever. Substantial improvements were made on the grove's facilities, including the enlargement of the eating stand and kitchen. All work done at Socialist Park was provided by volunteer

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11 *Labor Advocate*, Jan. 7 and 21, 1928.
labor and, while the men built or painted, the women gave them meals prepared in the kitchen. Working at the park was a regular year-round Socialist activity, but the women's responsibility was greatest during the picnic season. Large crowds numbering perhaps as high as 25,000 people attended some of the picnics in the early and mid-1930s, and a crew of women cooks was always on duty.16

The 1927 election victory was followed by considerable effort to organize Socialist women beyond the women's league. At the 1928 national convention, the party established a National Women's Committee with the assigned task of making "special propaganda work among the women of the working class." Chairing the new committee was Lilith Martin Wilson, a prominent Reading Socialist and a newly-elected member of the party's National Executive Committee. Her committee met with little success nationally, but it was able to report in 1929: "The most active women's groups are those of New York City and Reading, Pa."16

At its July, 1928, meeting, the Reading organization (officially known by its county name, Local Berks) elected a nine-women committee—the Berks County Women's Political Committee.17 During July and August of that year, this group was apparently quite busy. The Labor Advocate reported the organization of women's groups in the city branches and several of the county units as well.

The organization of the women Socialists of Reading is an activity which should challenge the fullest cooperation of the men. Every man in the movement should exhaust all honorable means to interest his wife, daughter or mother in this movement. The time has come to realize that women

16 Rhodes, "A Brief History," Labor Advocate, Nov. 18, 1932. "The Northwest Women's organization will serve a free dinner to all who help with the work of grading the Park on Sunday. Last Sunday a happy crowd of about 70 workers enjoyed a sour Krout [sic] dinner as guests of the Women's Socialist League and, in addition to accomplishing a lot of work, a good time was had by everybody." Ibid., May 29, 1931. Reading Socialists sometimes called their active women comrades "Jennie Higginses." Personal interview with Mark L. Brown, July 23, 1973. For a discussion on the Reading party's rank and file, see William C. Pratt, "Jimmie Higgins and the Reading Socialist Community: An Exploration of the Socialist Rank and File in the 1930's" (paper read at the Southwest Social Science Association meeting, San Antonio, Mar. 30, 1972).

17 Minute Book of Local Berks, July 5, 1928, 142.
are good for something more than silent partners in Socialism. They can be developed into active party workers who will give invaluable service during campaigns and on election days. Help the women to organize and double the strength of the Socialist party of Berks.\(^{18}\)

Women did come to play an important role in political campaigns. According to the 1929 National Women's Committee report, Socialist women in Reading "were engaged in active campaign work, and served on election boards and acted as pollmen on election day."\(^{19}\) Subsequent accounts also reported substantial campaign involvement on the part of Reading women.

The primary objective of this organizational effort was to increase the working-class woman vote and certainly it did bring large numbers of women into active participation in the movement. Women's groups, sometimes referred to as clubs, attempted to hold weekly meetings. Though not all such organizations survived the initial enthusiasm that led to their establishment, ultimately four of the city's five branches maintained separate women's groups during the early and mid-1930s. It should be noted, however, that the existence of a separate women's unit within a branch was not intended to serve as an alternative Socialist organization. A dedicated female member was expected to attend the weekly branch meeting as well as the women's gathering. Perhaps the words of one long-time Socialist woman may be helpful in regard to this matter. When asked why a separate group was established, she replied: "We wanted our night out too."\(^{20}\)

Like the regular branch meetings, these gatherings often featured an educational program. The *Labor Advocate* frequently reported on speakers and other educational activities. Soon after the establishment of women's groups, the Sixth and Fifteenth Ward Branch women conducted a discussion based on a special National Women's Committee pamphlet, "Electricity in the House." On occasion, they would hear talks entitled "Women's Place in the Socialist Movement" or "The Real Truth about George Washington," and

\(^{18}\) *Labor Advocate*, July 21, 1928.

\(^{19}\) Wilson, "Annual Report."

over the winter of 1929, the Sixth and Fifteenth Ward group discussed Shaw’s *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism.*

Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, Mary B. Nelson, a registered nurse and an associate of Margaret Sanger, gave talks on birth control. Active in the Reading Socialist movement at least as early as 1920, she had organized Pennsylvania’s first birth-control organization in the city. Frequently, however, women’s branch meetings were devoted almost entirely to social and entertainment ends. It was not unusual for the *Labor Advocate* to report the following type of activity: “Last Thursday night the women of the Central Branch gathered at the home of Mrs. Charles Hoverter and they’re still talking about the good time—especially the good eats—which they enjoyed.”

Each Socialist branch sponsored fund-raising activities such as card parties, cake sales, strawberry and ice-cream festivals, dinners and hoe-downs, and these affairs obviously required substantial volunteer labor from women members. The social calendar became quite crowded as the movement grew in the early 1930s. The following, for example, is one week’s events in February of 1934:

1. A card party at Labor Lyceum on Saturday night, sponsored by the Young People’s Socialist League with pies baked by the women of the Southern Branch.
2. A card party on Saturday night, sponsored by the women of the Northeast Branch.
3. A cake sale on Saturday, sponsored by the Laureldale Branch.
5. A “hokum and card party” on Tuesday night, sponsored by the women of the Northeast Branch.

On some occasions, the Women’s Committee (which was created to coordinate the various women’s groups and apparently replaced the Women’s Socialist League in the mid-1930s) or individual women’s organizations would conduct special fund-raising affairs


either to assist the local movement in reaching its quota for a national drive or to purchase materials for Socialist Park. The Labor Advocate greeted one such 1931 effort with typical enthusiasm: "When the men of Local Berks need cash the women of the Socialist party always come to the rescue; it's wonderful how the 'weaker' sex always comes up strong toward the finish. Let's help them do the job in a big way."25

This comment and many others found in the Labor Advocate during the 1927–1936 period suggest that the male leadership generally was inclined to relegate women to a purely auxiliary role, and this remained true even after they constituted a significant percentage of the membership. Incomplete records for mid-1934 show that women accounted for almost 33 per cent of Local Berks. The five city branches, which contained a majority of the membership, had a slightly smaller percentage of women—approximately 30 per cent. Though many women, the vast majority of them wives of Socialists, seemed willing to accept a subordinate role within the party, some apparently were not.26 A small number of them played an active part in the movement, serving on important committees and standing for public office. As early as 1915, five years before Pennsylvania women received the vote, Reading Socialists had nominated Amanda Woodward-Ringler for the school board. She apparently was the first woman candidate for any elective office in

25 Ibid., July 31, 1931. "When Local Berks sends its quota of $500 to the National Campaign Fund headquarters a goodly share of the money will have been raised by the women of Local Berks. That the Socialist women of Reading will play their part in carrying the message of Socialism to the less-strongly organized sections of the nation was assured last Thursday night when, at a meeting of the Women's Socialist League [it was] decided to hold a monster card party and luncheon on the three floors of Labor Lyceum." Ibid., May 6, 1932.

26 The only membership list I have found for this period is contained in the party-dues reports of June-September, 1934, and this information is not complete. The dues-reports for eight of the nineteen county branches are missing. Of the 1,285 members listed by name in sixteen branches, 413 of them (or 30.7 per cent) were women. "Dues-Reports for Local Berks, June-September, 1934," Hoopes Papers. By examining the names in the twelve branches in which it is relatively easy to ascertain married couples, I have found that approximately 90 per cent (285 out of 312) of the women members were spouses of Socialist men. This percentage was even higher among the rural branches, where 122 out of 131 women members were in this category. For purposes of these calculations, I have treated the membership at large as a separate branch. According to a local report prepared in late 1935, 541 members out of a total membership of 2,025 were wives of Socialist men. "Fourth Quarterly Report Showing the Standing of all Members at the Close of 1935," SPC.
the city. Not until 1929 was a Reading Socialist woman actually elected to a public post. 27

The most prominent woman in the movement was Lilith Martin Wilson. Born in Indiana, she had become well known in the Socialist Party before settling in Reading in the early 1920s. She was a 1918 graduate of the party's Rand School of Social Science and, after serving as a Socialist lecturer and organizer, was elected to the National Executive Committee of the party in 1921. That fall, she came to Reading to help in the campaign and then married L. Birch Wilson, a prominent figure in the local movement. The following year, the Pennsylvania Socialists nominated her as their gubernatorial candidate, the Reading Eagle asserting:

This is a unique distinction, not only for Mrs. Wilson, but also for this city and Pennsylvania. She is the first woman candidate for governor in the annals of the Keystone State. She is the first Reading woman to aspire for an office of greater importance than City Council. 28

Mrs. Wilson attracted more than 20,000 votes in that contest, and subsequently was a candidate for the Reading school board in 1923 and state treasurer in 1928. 29

The 1928 national party convention elected Lilith Wilson to the Executive Committee a second time and she continued to serve on it for the next six years. Soon after that, she was elected chairwoman of the newly-created National Women's Committee. Ironically, the same year that the national organization entrusted her with these responsibilities, she was denied a place on the local Advisory Committee. After another unsuccessful bid for the Reading school board, she was elected to the state assembly in 1930. This time, she had the distinction of being "the first Socialist woman to be named to any legislative body in the United States." 30

Mrs. Wilson was re-elected to the state assembly in 1932 and again in 1934, and it was in this forum that she probably made her

27 Eagle, Sept. 1, 1915. She was a former school teacher and the wife of Robert B. Ringler, state secretary of the Socialist Party. In 1917, she was elected to the party's state executive committee. Labor Advocate, May 29, 1915; Jan. 27, 1917.


30 Labor Advocate, Apr. 21, 1928; May 26, 1928; Minute Book of Local Berks, Dec. 6, 1928, 156; clipping [August, 1934], Fryer Scrap Books.
greatest contribution to the Socialist movement. The record that she and her Reading teammate, Darlington Hoopes, compiled in Harrisburg is beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth noting that it drew strong support from spokesmen for organized labor and was one of the local movement's greatest assets during the early and mid-1930s.footnote{31}

Probably the second most prominent Socialist woman in Reading was Hazelette Hoopes. Like Lilith Wilson, she was not a native of Reading, but had moved there in adulthood. A 1924 graduate of Boston University, she had been a YWCA secretary in Norristown before she married Darlington Hoopes in 1925, when he was state secretary of the party and one of the few Socialist attorneys in Pennsylvania. When the Socialists captured Reading in 1927, the Hoopeses moved there and in 1929 Mrs. Hoopes was elected to the school board, becoming the second woman in the city's history to serve in that capacity.footnote{32} Six years later, she was re-elected in a 1935 Socialist landslide.

Neither Hazelette Hoopes nor Lilith Wilson was especially active in the local women's groups. As one Socialist woman recently said: "We were more a social group; they had more important things to do."footnote{33} However, both of them had helped in the organization of the women's units in 1928, and Mrs. Hoopes occasionally participated in their programs and also worked in the kitchen at Socialist Park. Intellectually inclined and not of the local Pennsylvania Dutch culture, the two appeared to have little in common with the average Reading Socialist woman who, more likely than not, was of a working-class background. That they were nominated for public office was probably a tribute to their speaking abilities and education. Hazelette Hoopes relates that several Socialist men told her that they "were glad that they had a college graduate for the ticket."footnote{34} The fact that both women were wives of prominent Socialist figures also played a role in their nominations.

footnote{32} Hazelette Hoopes to author, August, 1973; Eagle> Nov. 6, 1929.
footnote{33} Tomlinson interview.
footnote{34} Hoopes to author. The 1933-34 local Women's Committee report testified to the strong Pennsylvania Dutch (German) makeup of the Reading movement: "Local Berks is made up of mostly the Pennsylvania German element. . . ."
Other women were nominated at Local Berks caucuses in the 1930s and some of them, as the pages of the Labor Advocate indicate, were actively involved with the women's groups. Bertha Tyson Weidner and Annie Pike Zechman fit this category. Bertha Weidner was a candidate for school director in 1931, while Annie Zechman received the party nod for county poor board two years later. Both were defeated in fusion campaigns in which the Democrats and Republicans ran a common ticket. Annie Zechman helped reorganize a defunct women's group in mid-1931, and both she and Bertha Weidner frequently served on important party committees.35

Another Socialist woman who ran for public office was Gertrude Hiller. She lived outside the city and was active in what became the Muhlenberg Branch. In 1935, after first being passed over as a candidate for county poor board, she was nominated for one of the prison inspector slots. That year, the party elected three county officials and Gertrude Hiller became the first and only Socialist woman officeholder in the county court house.36

SOCIALIST WOMEN CANDIDATES IN READING AND BERKS COUNTY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Hazelette Hoopes</td>
<td>elected school director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lilith Wilson</td>
<td>defeated for school director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Lilith Wilson</td>
<td>elected state assemblywoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Bertha Weidner</td>
<td>defeated for school director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mary Nelson</td>
<td>defeated for poor director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Lilith Wilson</td>
<td>re-elected state assemblywoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Annie Zechman</td>
<td>defeated for poor director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Lilith Wilson</td>
<td>re-elected state assemblywoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Hazelette Hoopes</td>
<td>re-elected school director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gertrude Hiller</td>
<td>elected prison inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annie Zechmann</td>
<td>defeated for poor director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Mabel Lausch</td>
<td>defeated for school director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Bernice Hoverter</td>
<td>appointed city treasurer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Bernice Hoverter</td>
<td>defeated for city treasurer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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37 Eagle, Nov. 6, 1929; Nov. 5, 1930; Nov. 4, 1931; Nov. 19, 1932; Nov. 18, 1933; Nov. 7, 1934; Nov. 5, 1935; Nov. 3, 1937; Dec. 21, 1938; Nov. 8, 1939; Labor Advocate, Dec. 13, 1935.
The Reading Socialists also elected a considerable number of women candidates to minor posts on the ward and precinct level, as well as to a few offices in nearby boroughs. For example, although their entire city ticket was defeated by fusion in 1931, some Socialists were elected to ward and precinct offices, including several women who won contests for precinct inspector of elections in the Sixth Ward. Obviously, successful candidates for these offices were not prominent figures in the movement and, sometimes, were not even active members. Though we do not have any readily available list of names, when it was reported to the national office in early 1936 that the party then held 225 offices, we can be certain that many of them were held by women.38

What influence did Socialist women exert in the direction of the local movement? Although this topic does not lend itself entirely to empirical analysis, an examination of formal positions held by women in the county party organization does not dent the widely-held assumption that women played a clearly subordinate role. Certainly, the available evidence strongly suggests that their influence was in no way proportionate to their percentage of the total membership.

Women’s participation on the party’s standing committees provides an index to help determine the extent of their influence. Although the party held monthly membership meetings, many responsibilities were delegated to committees. Following the 1927 victory a county executive committee was organized which was “to have full authority to represent and to act for the Local between meetings of the Local, including authority to act in an advisory capacity to elected Socialist public officials. . . .” Two years later, the responsibilities of this unit apparently were divided between the County Committee, which was elected from the various branches, and the Advisory Committee, which continued to be elected at the December Local meeting. Other standing committees included the Picnic Committee, the Educational Committee, and the Lecture Committee. During the 1928–1936 period, the number of standing committees increased and, for that reason, the number of committee

38 Ibid., Nov. 13, 1931; Ralph O. Bigony, "Socialist Elected Officials, Berks County, 1935/36" [1936], SPC.
assignments also increased. In the following table the figures in parentheses represent those holding seats on the Executive/Advisory Committee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Service</th>
<th>Men Committee Members</th>
<th>Women Committee Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>9 (9)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>13 (10)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>21 (12)</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>45 (16)</td>
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<td>15 (3)</td>
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<td>45 (8)</td>
<td>16 (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>52 (12)</td>
<td>17 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>58 (9)</td>
<td>12 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>63 (15)</td>
<td>12 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>350 (101)</td>
<td>80 (16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, throughout the entire period men filled more than four-fifths of the committee positions. It might seem at first that 1932 represented a major breakthrough for women’s participation as their committee positions increased from three to fifteen. Yet the explanation for this increase is simply that the party began electing an eleven-person Women’s Committee, later reduced to five members. Aside from those eleven women their committee assignments continued to be few in number.

The December 12, 1933, meeting resulted in the high point in women’s representation. Constituting approximately 31 per cent of the membership, they held almost 25 per cent of the committee posts. Over the entire period 1928–1936, however, women received less than 19 per cent of these assignments. And an examination of the composition of the Executive/Advisory Committee, the most important body elected at the December meeting, reveals that here the representation of women was even smaller. A total of 95 individuals served on this committee between 1928 and 1936 and out of that figure less than 14 per cent were women.

39 Minute Book of Local Berks, Dec. 1, 1927, 119–120; Constitution of Local Berks County (Reading, 1935), in author’s possession.

The tabulation of women committee assignments is a crude index at best to measure their influence in local party affairs, but the above investigation at least suggests that women were afforded some opportunity to participate in a directive capacity. Though they held nowhere near as many committee posts as their numbers might justify, it seems that their representation in later years went beyond that of tokenism.

The end of the Reading Socialist success story began in 1936, when a fratricidal split gravely disrupted the party's political operations and its social structure. Though the Socialist administration still had three more years to direct city affairs, only one of its candidates was ever again elected to public office after the split.41 Reading Socialism's civil war was related to the controversy which tore apart the national party organization that year, but also had important local causes as well. Whereas on the national level the party had been divided into the Old Guard and the Militants for several years, such labels did not appear in Reading until late 1935.42

The internal upheavals which wracked the local Socialist community were not "men only" affairs. Certain women took an active part in these developments. While the Old Guard ultimately retained the loyalty of almost all Reading's Socialist officeholders and a majority of the activist rank and file, the Militant faction in Reading was almost entirely composed of the latter group. One Socialist woman who came to assume a leadership role among the dissidents was Clara Mosteller. She was the daughter of Socialist parents and her father had just been elected to city council in 1935. Long a critic of the inner leadership of the local movement, he served as a rallying point for the Militants and was often referred to as that faction's leader. In the long run, however, his daughter may have proved more important than he in that capacity. She was joined by Bertha Weidner and Annie Zechman. These three women were sometimes referred to as the "ABC Sisters" by some Old Guard people. Aside from Mrs. Mosteller's father, only one other Socialist public official sided with the Militants and that was

41 J. Henry Stump was elected mayor for a third term in 1943. Eagle, Nov. 3, 1943.
Gertrude Hiller, who had been elected a prison inspector in 1935.\(^{43}\) Even before the 1935 Socialist landslide, the Militants had caucused to determine strategy and to decide which members should receive city jobs. Of the sixteen persons identified by name at that meeting, five were women: Mosteller, Weidner, Zechman, Hiller and Minnie Pike Hurley, Annie Zechman’s younger sister.\(^ {44}\) Among other women found within the Militant camp were some articulate members of the Young People’s Socialist League (“Yipsels”).\(^ {45}\)

The Old Guard, on the other hand, continued to be led entirely by Socialist men, many of whom had helped direct the movement for decades.\(^ {46}\) Though it is apparent that the Old Guard retained the loyalty of most of the “Jennie Higgines” of the Reading movement, it did not elevate any women to posts of responsibility during the 1936 troubles. A clear example of this fact is its slate of delegates to the 1936 national convention which did not include one woman, not even as an alternate. The Militant slate, however, listed several. Bertha Weidner, Clara Mosteller, and Gertrude Hiller were chosen as three of its seventeen delegates, and four more, including Annie Zechman and Minnie Hurley, were among the seventeen alternates. A Militant pamphlet, *Rule or Ruin*, lists both slates. Following the Militant names, it states: “Look this list over. It contains the names of seven women comrades (not a single woman is named on the ‘Old Guard’ slate). . . .”\(^ {47}\) The Old Guard slate was more successful, however, as the membership elected fourteen from its list and only three Militant men were chosen.\(^ {48}\)

\(^ {43}\) Personal interview with Mark L. Brown, Dec. 23, 1967; July 28, 1973. Both Catherine Tomlinson and Brown remember that these three women were sometimes called the “ABC Sisters.”


\(^ {47}\) *Rule or Ruin—An Appeal to Rank and File Socialists* [April, 1936], SPC.

\(^ {48}\) Eugene Haag to “Milt,” May 8, 1936, SPC. For a discussion of the causes of the local split by a participant, see Brown, “Flood Tide to Suicide: An account of the 1936 split in the Socialist party of Berks County” (manuscript in Brown’s possession in Reading, Pa.).
Throughout the winter and spring of 1936, the Reading Socialists were pre-occupied with the Old Guard-Militant controversy. Party meetings and other activities were marred with charges and denunciations, and both groups schemed with their counterparts on the national level to defeat their local opponents. Finally, in August, the state party disaffiliated with the national party and two separate local party organizations emerged.\textsuperscript{49} Now, instead of a united Socialist effort against the old parties, Reading comrades fought each other for control of the membership and its property holdings. Ultimately the Old Guard prevailed, but the Militants (now referred to as “Leftists”) continued to fight a well-publicized guerrilla campaign against their Socialist enemies for the next several years. The immediate consequence of the split was to damage severely the Socialist political machine at the very time F.D.R.’s appeal was greatest. In the 1936 election, every Socialist candidate was decisively defeated.\textsuperscript{50}

Social activities were greatly disrupted by these events. Several branches in the county dissolved and the Socialist choral groups broke up. Conversations with former party workers more than thirty-five years later often reveal that the split had been traumatic for them. Said one Socialist woman who dropped out of the movement about that time: “The split destroyed all the good that had been done.”\textsuperscript{51} The Old Guard organization was able to reorganize six city branches and several county units after the split, though with a considerably smaller membership. Some of the branches also continued their women’s groups and the Labor Advocate’s activity section featured numerous announcements as before for branch activities. In fact, an examination of this feature of the paper by itself might lead the observer to the conclusion that the split did not have far-ranging effects on the social aspect of the Socialist community.\textsuperscript{52} Though they had lost a sizable number of hard-

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Eagle}, Nov. 4, 1936. See also Stetler vote tables, \textit{The Socialist Movement in Reading}, 174, 177.

\textsuperscript{51} Personal interview with Alice Hoffman, Aug. 19, 1972.

\textsuperscript{52} The \textit{Labor Advocate} referred to three women’s groups in late 1939. At that time, the local party still had six city branches and seven in the county. However, its membership had dropped to 670. \textit{Labor Advocate}, Nov. 17 and 24, 1939; Dec. 29, 1939; “State Executive Committee Minutes,” Feb. 16, 1940.
working comrades, the Reading Socialist women continued to be quite active and, in 1941, amidst much fanfare actually reorganized the former Women's Socialist League. But the movement had lost its momentum during the 1936 troubles and never was able to regain the initiative. In retrospect, the Socialist women who remained active in the late 1930s and 1940s may have been among the strongest components of the declining Socialist community.

And what of the women who went with the smaller Leftist group? Their fate as Socialists proved to be sadder than that of their former Old Guard comrades. Many who initially supported the Leftists became quickly disillusioned after the split and dropped out of radical politics altogether. Though the Leftists were able to organize several city and county branches, apparently their numbers did not justify separate women's groups and none was ever formed. They did sponsor some branch social activities, but their membership dwindled rapidly. For most of the active Leftists, their chief goal seemed to be the destruction of the dominant Reading Socialist faction, against which they conducted bitter attacks. Now known in some circles as the “Mostellerites” (after Clara Mosteller), they began to endorse Democratic candidates rather than their former colleagues and most of them ended up in the Democratic Party by 1940. Gertrude Hiller sought re-election as prison inspector in 1939 as a Democrat, but lost in the primary. Other Leftists who attempted that route also were defeated at the primary level. Twenty years later, however, a former Leftist would make it. Minnie Hurley was elected to the lucrative post of county treasurer as a Democrat. No longer Socialists, the “Mostellerites” apparently

53 Labor Advocate, Apr. 25, 1941.
54 Personal interviews with Alice, Ruth, and Frank Hoffman, Aug. 19, 1972. According to national party records, there were only 116 “Leftists” in the entire state by February, 1937. Shannon, The Socialist Party, 250.
56 Brown interview, Dec. 23, 1967. “Since their secession from the local party, the Mostellerites have functioned chiefly as a ‘hate’ unit.” Labor Advocate, Dec. 30, 1938. The Old Guard sometimes referred to the Leftists as “Mostellerites,” apparently because she was the treasurer of the Leftist organization and, due to that role, was prominently mentioned in a long, drawn out court battle for control of the old party’s treasury of $3,000. Eagle, Aug. 21, 1936; June 6, 1939. The Eagle referred to “Mrs. Mosteller and her group.”
were consumed with bitterness and rage against their old comrades and slowly faded out of the Reading Socialist picture.\textsuperscript{57}

Socialist women in Reading had enjoyed their greatest days when the local party was at its peak. But even after the split, they had some bright spots. Their social activities continued and Socialist Park remained a viable institution long after the party machine was broken down beyond repair. Perhaps one of the most significant events concerning Socialist women occurred after the split. In late 1938, the Socialist administration appointed Bernice Hoverter city treasurer to fill a vacancy left by her father's death. William "Shorty" Hoverter had been one of the inner circle of leaders since the beginning of the century, had served as a city councilman in the first Socialist administration, and had been elected city treasurer in 1935. His wife, Emma Hoverter, also was active and was one of the founders of the Women's Socialist League. So, when their daughter was appointed to this post, part of the motivation was to help "Shorty" Hoverter's family.\textsuperscript{58}

Yet the officeholders had another reason for appointing her. And that was that Bernice Hoverter was probably more qualified for the position than her father had been. During "Shorty" Hoverter's term on city council, he had directed the Department of Accounts and Finance, and his daughter had served as his secretary. She also had studied accounting at a business school and, at the time of his death, was a clerk in his office. Two months following her appointment, Socialist Mayor J. Henry Stump commented: "I want to point out that this is the first time the women of Reading have been recognized by an appointment to a high and important municipal office." At the 1939 party caucus, all of the current Socialist officeholders were renominated, including Bernice Hoverter. The \textit{Labor Advocate} reported the county chairman's claim that her nomination "will win the confidence and votes of a large number of women citizens..." He also stated: "In deciding to keep her on the job

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., Nov. 4, 1959; Feb. 21, 1969; \textit{Labor Advocate}, May 2, 1941. In September of 1939, the \textit{Eagle} reported: "The Left Wingers, a majority of whom were reported by their officers to be registered as Democrats and active in behalf of that party, held a reunion at Lesher's Hotel..." The story also stated that a committee, which included Bertha Weidner, had been appointed "to arrange for the 1940 annual reunion." \textit{Ibid.}, Sept. 25, 1939.

for a full term the Socialist rank and file demonstrated their belief that women should have an equal chance with men to fill positions for which they are qualified." But the voters rejected the entire Socialist ticket that year and Bernice Hoverter's tenure as city treasurer ended after slightly more than one year's service.\

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the Reading Socialist men really felt "that women should have an equal chance with men to fill positions for which they are qualified." Realistically, in their eyes, women were expected to support their husbands by voting the Socialist ticket and working in their auxiliaries. Special appeals to women voters usually were limited to their roles as working-class mothers and homemakers and, then, often in condescending tones. In 1941, when the Women's Socialist League was revived, the male-edited Labor Advocate announced that the League "will again act as an auxiliary to the party organization in activities for which women are especially fitted."\

While Socialists in Reading denounced "wage slavery" when the opportunity arose, they were not inclined to question male domination of either their movement or their homes. It also seems likely that the majority of women comrades accepted such male direction as part of the natural order. Nevertheless, Reading Socialists did make a breakthrough of sorts in local politics by using as many women candidates as they did. Certainly, the Socialist record in this regard is superior to that of the old parties. Between 1921 and 1939, the Democrats and Republicans elected a total of four women—two school directors and two county prison inspectors. As late as 1968, the Reading Eagle could still report: "Curiously, each woman who won or held a top elective office in Reading and Berks County was associated with the Socialist Party." But it is easier to run a few more women candidates for public office than it is to change age-old assumptions about the general inferiority of women. At least on the "Women's Question," the Reading Socialists seemed to have had much in common with their opponents.

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60 Labor Advocate, Apr. 25, 1941. Italics added.
61 Clipping [November, 1921], Fryer Scrap Books, Vol. 32, 75; Eagle, Nov. 8, 1933; Jan. 28, 1968 (Supplement, part 1).
Yet it would be a mistake to pass over the Reading Socialist experience because their membership was pretty much like everyone else on the “Women’s Question.” Similar studies on other local Socialist movements will probably yield results not entirely different from these findings. Social Democracy in the United States and elsewhere apparently has not had an exceptional record on women.62 Aside from supporting woman suffrage and paying lip-service to equality in general terms, we should not expect to find many Socialists of the past really treating their women comrades as equals. Rather, the vast majority of women performed a subordinate and supportive role, with only a relatively few women achieving a more prominent position. Considering the prevailing assumptions of male supremacy, the deeply-held related notion that a majority of women maintained that their place was in the home, and the limited time that married women with children had to devote to nonemployment activities outside the home, is it realistic to expect the situation to be different?63

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62 “[T]he social democratic parties, especially in Germany, tended to exclude women from the main political roles, consigning them to the women’s movement, an essentially auxiliary wing of the party.” Robert H. McNeal, “Women in the Russian Radical Movement,” Journal of Social History, 5 (Winter, 1971-72), 143.

63 That Lilith Wilson and at least two of the “ABC Sisters” were childless enabled them to have far more time to participate in Socialist activities than the average Reading Socialist woman. It may also be of significance that two of the “ABC Sisters” were no longer married by the mid-1930s. Brown interview, July 28, 1973. Hazelette Hoopes, on the other hand, had three children and, because her husband frequently was away from home on party or legislative business, was often left alone with them. Running the household and fulfilling her school board responsibilities left her with little time to participate in many party activities. Hoopes to author. For a recent study on this topic in the United States before World War I, see Mari Jo Buhle, “Women and the Socialist Party,” Radical America, IV (1970), 36-55.