

JEWISH LABOR IN THE NINETIES

By Morris U. Schappes

TO this day it is not known who blew up the battleship "Maine" in the harbor of Havana that February 15, 1898. But the families of the 260 enlisted men and officers who died in that explosion were making a dreadful sacrifice on the altar of the American imperialists who had sent the "Maine" to Cuba to "protect" the \$50,000,000 investment of American big business and the \$100,000,000 trade that went with it. Fifteen of these families were Jewish.

The trusts and monopolies needed a war and their press howled for it. They wanted to grab some territory (they came out of the Spanish-American War with outright possession of Puerto Rico, a clutch on the Philippines and a strangle-hold on Cuba) and to expand their capital investments for the sake of super-profits. But the imperialists wanted more: to quell and divert the discontent and unrest seething at home.

Not that the American capitalists came out frankly and told the American people that it was their patriotic duty to attack a foreign power so that socialism in America could be knocked on the head and so that the young and still unfledged American imperialism could get off to a good start. No, the American masses have always been too democratic to fight a reactionary, aggressive war unless they were fooled into believing that it was a just war, a progressive and democratic one. So the imperialists had to put on the false-face of anti-imperialism. Cuba was then prostrate under Spanish oppression, and "*Cuba Libre*" (Free Cuba) was the slogan of the insurgents. The American capitalist press snatched the slogan, abused it and fed it to the masses like the intoxicating drink that a "cuba libre" soon became.

Jewish Bourgeoisie Clamors for War

The top Jewish bourgeoisie joined the general bourgeois clamor for war, seeking particularly to rally the Jewish population, then almost a million, for the attack. But about one-half of this million had only within the last 25 years fled from tsarist imperialism and Austro-Hungarian imperialism to what they hoped would be a democratic America. How could you arouse such Jews to enthusiasm for an imperialist war? "Remember the 'Maine'!" was not enough of a slogan. To it was added a Jewish wrinkle: remember the Spanish Inquisition! Remember the expulsion of the Jews in 1492! Free Cuba? Yes, but remember that in freeing Cuba you will be settling a 400-year-old score with Spain. So the organ of B'nai B'rith, *The Menorah*, published an editorial in May 1898, entitled, "*Cuba Libre*," declaring that "The United States . . . desire no territorial aggrandizement, they propose to sacrifice blood and treas-

ure at the altar of humanity. . . . Spain suffers for the iniquities born and committed centuries ago . . . but there is an eternal justice which cannot be disregarded with impunity." Thus it went in the Jewish bourgeois press: eternal justice, and remember 1492. Few indeed were the Jewish bourgeois liberals like Solomon Solis-Cohen in Philadelphia and Felix Adler in New York who joined the valiant band of middle class anti-imperialists that denounced the war.

But what of the Jewish workers, the militant strikers and trade unionists, the fighters for socialism? Did they fall for the demagogy of imperialism, with its "*Cuba Libre*," the "Maine," and 1492? To understand the division in the ranks of even the most advanced workers, and how a section of them was misled into supporting the imperialist war, is to get an insight into an opportunist trend that has been plaguing Jewish workers ever since then.

Jewish Workers Divided

It will be remembered that the United Hebrew Trades had been founded in 1888 on the initiative of a Yiddish-speaking branch of the Socialist Labor Party on the East Side of New York. In 1892, there were more than 40 unions affiliated with the United Hebrew Trades in New York City alone, and organizations of the U. H. T. had been established in other cities too. But by 1897, there were only five or six New York unions left in the United Hebrew Trades!¹ This decline is only partly due to the economic crisis of 1893, which produced mass misery and led to the march of Coxe's army of unemployed on Washington. A decisive factor in the disintegration of the United Hebrew Trades lay in its pursuit of the sectarian trade union policy of Daniel De Leon, the leader of the Socialist Labor Party. For a time De Leon had tried to win over first the American Federation of Labor and then the Knights of Labor to the program of socialism. Defeated in this aim, De Leon took the disastrous step of persuading the small minority of socialist-minded unions to secede from these movements. On December 10, 1895, with the United Hebrew Trades participating, De Leon established the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance.

William Z. Foster, in *Bankruptcy of the American Labor Movement*, has correctly noted that "The Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance was still-born. It never amounted to more than a handful of militants, the masses refusing to rally to its standard." In its still-birth, however, the S.T.L.A.

¹ *Di Tseit Shrift* (Yiddish), published by the United Hebrew Trades, November 1907, p. 5.

helped to wreck existing unions, among them scores of locals of the United Hebrew Trades.

Of course a struggle against this sectarianism began in the ranks of the Socialist Labor Party, and also in its Jewish section. In April 1897, a split took place, when the Jewish daily *Forward* was correctly issued as a challenge to *Die Arbeiter Zeitung* and *Die Abend Blatt*, the official organs of the S.L.P. and De Leon. Simultaneously, in the west, another movement was born, the Social Democracy of America, which at a Chicago convention on June 18 elected Debs as chairman. In New York, Jewish socialists promptly established Local No. 1 of the Social Democracy. Then came, from July 31 to August 2, 1897, the convention of New York Jewish socialists, with 58 delegates representing 1200 members of the Socialist Labor Party, and some trade unionists. I. A. Hourwich and Meyer London, in behalf of Local No. 1 of the Social Democracy, persuaded the convention, by a vote of 40 to 10, to pass a resolution condemning sectarianism and favoring Debs' movement. The Yiddish spokesman for this movement was the *Forward*, and some of its most prominent Jewish leaders, in addition to Hourwich and London, were Louis Miller, Abraham Cahan and Morris Winchevsky.

The "Forward" Supports Imperialists

Thus the *Forward* was born partially out of a struggle against left-sectarianism, a policy that weakens the working class by isolating its vanguard from the masses, thus helping the ruling class. This policy is also known to Marxists as left-opportunism. But before the *Forward* was one year old, it demonstrated that, not being a Marxist newspaper, its struggle against left-opportunism was to lead it into the no less disastrous course of right-opportunism. This brand of opportunism has two intertwined characteristics: first, it does organize masses of workers, presumably for purposes of struggle against the ruling class. But, secondly, in a pinch, when there is a showdown, this opportunism diverts the organized mass from the struggle, or even leads it into support of the ruling class. Thus the *Forward*, for instance, undoubtedly helped organize masses of workers under the vision of some kind of socialism (by 1907, the United Hebrew Trades had been rebuilt to include 74 unions with more than 50,000 members), but in a showdown it tied the workers it influenced to the program of the ruling class.

When the "Maine" sank on February 15, it sucked down with it into the Caribbean the socialist principles of the *Forward*. William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, who had been whooping it up for war, became shriller extra by extra, and the Jewish bourgeois press in English and Yiddish added their hosannas and memories of 1492 to the war cry. All this was to be expected, and certainly the class conscious workers were not to be taken in by such propaganda from such hated sources. Therefore the *Forward*, as it began gradually to beat the war-drum in a mounting rhythm, had to persuade its readers that it was



קידה זיך און אנקען טעגן
זיך ווען איר טרעפן אן יודן וועגן

Anti-war cartoon in *Die Arbeiter Zeitung*, February 27, 1898.

neither big business interests nor the capitalist press that wanted war. Then who did want it?

Flying in the face of Debs and other national leaders of the Social Democracy of America who opposed the war, the *Forward* gave its answer in an editorial so important that it was published in two instalments, February 23 and March 1, 1898. The title was "War." The writer was probably the editor, Louis Miller. First he assures the readers that "the interests of Wall Street do not require a war." Then he goes on to explain "the role which the great mass of the working classes plays in this" unprecedentedly "tangled situation." The press? "Is it really true," he asks, "that the newspapers 'incite' the people to war?" Beating his "socialist" breast, he replies: "with all the contempt that we have for the capitalist press, we must say that it is *not true*."

What about Hearst and the *Journal*? The *Forward* admits that the *Journal* was crying for war, but then, "this newspaper is much more *incited* than *inciting*. The masses, the people, arouse the sensationalism of that newspaper much more than the newspaper arouses the people with its sensationalism." Emboldened by this lie, the editor tries a bigger one: "It is stupid and *dishonest* to hide the fact that, with reference to Cuba, the people, the *real people*, want a war with Spain much more than do the capitalists and the politicians." In the second section, on March 1, the editorial proceeds to argue that it is "the nation, as nation" that wants war, and not "the capitalist class as a class," although he concedes that some individual capitalists may profit from it. And is not the nation, is not the people, sovereign? "Ask yourself the question," the editor coyly suggests, "does not the people have a right to want war?"

In the news columns of the same issue, there are reports that in St. Louis, at a mass meeting, 465 Jews volunteered for the army, and in Yonkers, New York, the B'nai B'rith pledged support of a war with Spain. Thus, two months before Congress was to declare war, the Jewish bourgeoisie

and petty-bourgeoisie were "proving" their "Americanism" to the ruling class for its first imperialist war. Although the war was short, more than 4,000 Jews enlisted for it. In Chicago, a company of Zionists began to drill, "eager to be represented in their country's cause by a distinctly Zionist group" but "the company was never called for service..."²

Left Workers Oppose the War

Although the *Forward* had betrayed them, the Jewish workers were not without an anti-imperialist voice to express their true interests, even though that voice, because of its sectarian policy, did not reach as large an audience as it should have. The two Yiddish organs of the Socialist Labor Party, the weekly, *Die Arbeiter Zeitung*, and the daily *Die Abend Blatt*, continually exposed the character of the war and opposed it. As if in response, for instance, to the *Forward* editorial on "War," *Die Arbeiter Zeitung* on February 27 had a large half-page cartoon on the front page (reproduced on page 15), with the sub-heading, "Cool Off, Uncle Sam!" Below the cartoon were Yiddish verses by N. Lempert, to be sung to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," lampooning the jingoism of the American imperialists. So vigorous was the opposition to the war on the part of De Leon, the Socialist Labor Party and all its organs,

² Hyman L. Meites, *History of the Jews of Chicago*, Chicago, 1924, p. 198.

including the Yiddish, that, after war was declared on April 25, the authorities banned the May Day anti-war parade called by the Socialist Labor Party.

But the pro-war May Day parade called by the *Forward* was blessed by the war-makers. The chauvinism of the *Forward* became more and more blatant. De Leon was denounced in its columns virtually as a "Spanish agent," since his name suggested Spanish descent (he was a Jew born in Curaçao, off the coast of Venezuela). At the pro-war parade, a circular was distributed, printed in red-white-and-blue, calling for attendance at a patriotic rally that same evening, where the speakers were to be Abraham Cahan, Louis Miller, Michael Zametkin, Meyer London, Morris Winchevsky, and others. Here the workers were to hear their own "leaders" urge them to support the war.

On May 2, however, the *Forward* had a front-page announcement of a meeting at the Hebrew Institute at which Jews were to be encouraged to enlist in the army. The chief speaker was to be Judge Henry Goldfogle. The *Forward* promoted a "united front"—with the bourgeoisie in favor of the war.

Thus the right-opportunism of the *Forward* revealed itself in the first year of its life, and repeatedly ever since. In every showdown, the *Forward* has supported American imperialism instead of the American working class.

For a consistent fight against both left-opportunism and right-opportunism, the American working class, including the Jewish workers, had to develop the tool of Marxism.

FOUR YIDDISH PROLETARIAN POETS:

II: POEMS OF MORRIS ROSENFELD

Translated by Aaron Kramer

OF all Yiddish poets Morris Rosenfeld alone—and while yet a young man—was acknowledged by the non-Jewish literary world as a notable singer. Yet fame did not save him from a life even more tragic than that of his brother workers.

He was born on the 28th of December, 1862, in Souwalk Province, Poland. His grandfather had been a fishery worker—and this was the trade of his father and uncles as well. A promising and serious-minded lad, he was sent to study the Talmud instead of finding a job. He had a special love for poetry. As a child he had memorized countless songs by the nineteenth century Yiddish bard Elyakum Zunzer as well as others. At the age of 15 he wrote his first Yiddish poem.

By 1882 he had married his childhood sweetheart and started a family. Whether to avoid the Polish Army, as

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Hutchins Hapgood once claimed, or to follow the poet's wanderlust, as Alexander Harkavy more graciously suggested, Rosenfeld left his family behind in 1882, a cheerful, ruddy-faced youth, to "try his fortune" in the West. He spent three months in Amsterdam trying to become an apprentice diamond cutter. Then he sailed for America but soon returned home. In 1883 he endured London for six months, and again came back to Poland. Later in the same year he left Poland permanently and settled in London, where he became a sweatshop worker. By the time he had earned enough to send for his wife and child, his appearance had changed so completely that it was difficult for her to recognize him. Gone were the ruddiness and cheer. Sixteen hours a day at the machine had drained the blood from him; the "slack" seasons had left him gaunt; while the viciousness of the employers and his contact with propaganda had made a socialist of him.

At the machine he found an outlet in angry song and his