

The 'Socialism' of Norman Thomas

by Ben Gitlow

During the presidential campaign Hoover represented the so-called benefits of snug American capitalism to the masses. Hundreds of thousands of American workers and farmers stood open-mouthed and awe-inspired while they were being entranced by the Hooverian monotone in praise of American capitalism, with its "rugged individualism" and "unlimited opportunities." They stood and gaped while Hoover, engineer of the modern efficiency era, the oracle of mass production, emitted, in precise language and the clock-like regularity of the belt system, assurances that prosperity was permanent, that American capitalism had solved the problem of economic crisis, that wages were high, that the American family had benefitted from mass production in the accumulation of comforts, ease, and worldly goods never before realized in any other country in the world. Millions of radios, millions of automobiles, millions of bath tubs, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, etc., etc., etc. A paradise realized in our own times based upon steady employment, at high wages, and fair profits to the captains of industry. No class hatreds dividing the people of the country. All Americans! Class conflict practically eliminated and peace reigning supreme between the workers and their employers. Such was the Hooverian appeal, simple, direct and captivating.

So the masses went to the polls voted for prosperity, mass production, pork chops, radios, washing machines, bath tubs, and all the rest of the Hooverian advantages of American capitalism. Hoover became president, the stock market boomed. Except for the gang wars, the fire from sawed-off rifles and the din of machine guns, nothing seemed to threaten the tranquility and security of the American scene.

Then Came the Crash!

Then came the crash. Millions unemployed and starving. Farmers ruined, bankrupt and penniless. Millions of the middle men wiped out, forced out of business and into the ranks of the workers.

Permanent prosperity, Hoover's little pet canary, had flown away. In its place came the black crow of economic crisis. The smugness of American capitalism disappeared. Grave doubts entered the minds of even the capitalists as to the permanency and success of their system. These doubts are gnawing at their former optimism, undermining and shattering it. There is a frantic searching for a way out of the black nightmare of the economic crisis which is destroying the security of the capitalist state and augmenting the forces in opposition to it.

A Knight Errant Appears

But the capitalists need not fear. It is precisely at this time that a knight errant riding on a gallant charger makes his appearance. It is Norman Thomas. His hook is his trusty sword. For is not the pen mightier than the sword?

"America! way out!" shouts Norman Thomas. "Read it, follow me and be saved from the damnation of the Marxian hordes and Communists."

"I may be a Socialist but my brand of Socialism is different. Really there is nothing to be afraid of." This is the clarion call of Norman Thomas in his book.

Norman Thomas is today the outstanding leader of the Socialist party. He represents the transformation that has taken place in the party of Eugene V. Debs. The book of Norman Thomas expresses the dominant position of the party today sheared of its pseudo-Socialist verbiage and phrasology. Norman Thomas is cloaking the movement in new garments. The verbiage is different, the phrase different. Norman Thomas is bold enough to recognize the substance of the change which has been wrought in the Socialist party in recent years and to proclaim its virtues openly and to champion them enthusiastically.

While the use of liberal phrases and generalities at a time when Matthew Woll and William Green typify the dominant leaders of the organized labor movement give Norman Thomas the appearance of being to the left, he nevertheless represents the extreme reactionary wing in the Socialist party, which a consideration of his views as expressed in his book, to be dealt with in later articles, will prove.

The Reviewers Speak

The character of Norman Thomas' program as something foreign, as distinct from Socialism, and as a program agreeable to the capitalists has been generally grasped by the reviewers of Thomas' book.

Lewis Gannett writing in the New York Herald Tribune on March 24, 1931 gives this estimation:

"We have a horror in the word 'Socialism' in America and Norman Thomas is the recognized leader of his party, yet there is nothing in this book which is not advocated by members in good standing of both Republican and Democratic parties. If you could get their private thoughts on paper, I suspect that Owen D. Young, and Dwight W. Morrow would approve more of what Norman Thomas here says than would an orthodox Marxian Socialist such as say, Morris Hillquit. Certainly more than William Z. Foster or Comrade Stalin."

You don't have to be a Socialist to advocate what Norman Thomas stands for. Evidently in the opinion of Gannett there is nothing in Thomas' program to disturb the gentlemen of Wall Street; in fact there is much that they approve.

What Gannett says further on is even more instructive, not only to the workers who may have illusions concerning the class character of Thomas' program but also to the members of the Socialist party who may resent charging Norman Thomas with being a mild progressive and not a Socialist. Here is what Gannett states—comment is unnecessary:

"The old revolutionary fervor is gone. This kind of Socialism is simply American progressivism, differing far less from that of La Follette or Norris, Republicans, or Coughlin or even Al Smith, Democrats,

than those gentlemen differ from some of their accepted and accepted party mates. One leaves the book wondering just what it is that makes so many Americans so fearful and indignant at that word which Mr. Thomas regards as a synonym for practical virtue—Socialism. In his mouth it sounds unattractively like common sense."

The reviewer of the Baltimore Sun, Gerald W. Johnson, in the issue of April 4, writing about the radicalism or Socialism of Norman Thomas, even goes so far as to suggest him as the candidate of the Democratic party in 1932! He writes:

"If this volume is really the handbook of American Socialism, as one has a clear right to believe, there seem to be few and no great reasons why Mr. Norman Thomas should not be nominated by the Democratic Party in 1932. For the radical infection which fevers him is patent—less virulent than the Bryanitis which the Jackass has survived, and less inductive of gas gangrene than the progressivism of a Steak or a Norbeck. Mr. Thomas is so polite, pacific and urbane a Socialist that it is possible to pick out a dozen Democrats in good and regular standing who are twice as sluggish and ten times as upstart."

"Indeed, the only individual contribution which he undertakes, in this book, to make to Socialist philosophy is accepted, in principle by such gentry as Henry Ford, John J. Raskob, Owen D. Young and Charles M. Schwab, who are hardly ever listed among the flaming evangelists of the Red gospel. This contribution is an urgent adjunction to Socialists to shift the interest in their philosophy more from the worker as producer to the worker as consumer. Since October, 1929, each of the business magnates listed above has saluted this idea with a fervent Amen."

Norman Thomas is no Marxist. Far from it! Norman Thomas emphatically rejects Marxism. Norman Thomas represents in the Socialist movement a complete break from absolute final divorce with Marxism. This is also recognized by the reviewers and critics of his book. Raymond B. Foadick, writing in the Herald Tribune of March 29, in an article called "The Leader of the New Socialism," puts it as follows:

"It is to Socialism, therefore, that Mr. Thomas turns for relief—not the old creed of Socialism of Marx but to a system which Mr. Thomas might well have termed, 'The new Socialism.' For Norman Thomas ventures to ask his fellow Socialists such heterodox questions as this: 'Can a generation which has had to go far beyond Newtonian physics or Darwinian biology be expected to find Marx, who was also the child of his times, infallible?' Consequently he holds that the Marxian doctrine of econ-

omic determinism is inadequate; he has the same opinion too of the dogma of class conflict: 'It takes more than a shouting class struggle effectively to organize a socialist world,' he says. This and his chapter on Communism, an excellent piece on analysis, may help to explain why Mr. Thomas's name is hoisted at Communist meetings in New York."

"In other words Mr. Thomas intellectually would find himself at home with moderates like Ramsey MacDonald, Henderson, and Briand."

Is this Socialism? Then this reviewer answers:

"If this be Socialism then there is indeed truth in the remark of the Marquis de Salisbury, speaking in the House of Lords as prime minister a long generation ago: 'We are all Socialists now.'"

Will the capitalists chime in after reading Thomas' book. "We are all Socialists now!" The mantle of Debs has fallen to Norman Thomas but to it Norman Thomas has added the respectability of a high silk hat. And the capitalists are quick to recognize that it is the ideas under the silk hat that count and are acceptable, Socialism being only a cloak that may be useful as a means of deception of the masses, or discarded entirely if Mr. Thomas thinks its expedient.

Harry Elmer Barnes writing in the Evening World-Telegram of March 30 clearly indicates that Norman Thomas' program is not Marxian, not Socialist, is anti-Communist—is just progressivism. He says:

"The Revisionism has made great headway, there has, however, been but one really important and logical type of his toric Socialism, namely Marxian Socialism. This, with certain modifications, is now being applied in action as Communism. There are many heroic efforts to differentiate Socialism from Communism but they can hardly be very logical or convincing unless one rules out the chief historic variety of Socialism."

"Norman Thomas has just completed one of the most important books of recent years 'America's Way Out'. It is a statesmanlike presentation of advanced progressivism. It is precise, concrete, unvarnished and anti-Communist."

The reviewers and critics have spoken. Norman Thomas can not cover his nakedness with the fig-leaf of Socialism. His "America's Way Out" is no way out for the workers. It is a program for the continuation of capitalism. This the following articles will prove from the consideration of Norman Thomas' views as expressed in the book itself.

Problems of the Marine Workers

WHAT ABOUT THE MARINE UNION?

by "Lookout"

(Concluded from last issue)

In the early part of last summer about 200 river workers in New Orleans objected to a wage-cut and came out more or less unanimously for a strike. This strike had been in existence two days before the local leadership woke up to the fact that something was happening. What did they do? They then went down to the place of strike and called upon the workers to quit work. Nothing wrong, in that, is it? No, but the slogans employed to get these workers out was wrong. They used the slogan: "Come out on strike and the union will feed you!" "Come up to the union hall and we will feed you!" The "we" at that time as well as now, did not have enough to feed a cat much less themselves or the 200 striking Negro workers. Union cards were dished out by the hundreds. All a worker had to do was to say: "I am a striking longshoreman!" and at once he was given a union card and he was a full-fledged member of the union. Beyond that no steps were taken to organize and lead this strike.

In the meantime a telegram was dispatched to the National Office in New York telling of the "great strike." A great rally was made out of this. The National Organizer, Harvey, was immediately put on a Pullman and went off to New Orleans to "lead" this great strike. How well he led it is history by now. He had been there about three days when the striking Negroes began to refer to him as the "boss man." Any one who has spent any time organizing the workers in the South knows exactly just how complimentary such a remark is. The strike went on. The workers, having been called out under the wrong slogans in the first place, found that things did not come out as expected and that the promises of Harvey and other "leaders" were so much bologna and began to drift back to the job. To their consternation, however, they found that a crane had been put up on the dock displacing 50% of the workers and that others had taken their place.

What was the result? Only 20% of the strikers went back on the job taking the wage-cut and one striker was sent to the hospital with a bullet in his leg. Many others were in jail as were some of the seamen taking part in the organization work. After this fiasco, of course, any little confidence the workers might have had in the leadership of the union before, disappeared. Wage-cuts, however, continued on the Gulf. No contacts were made among the longshoremen. The I. L. A. from the president down to the last man to join was left severely alone in so far as organization was concerned. On the other hand, they were frequently attacked by the leadership in leaflet and publication as "social-fascists." This term was used to cover the I. L. A. membership in its entirety. Everyone that did not carry a card of the Industrial Union was a "social-fascist" or worse.

The Fruits of Isolation

Is it then any wonder that the union was so far out of contact with the workers that when the rank and file revolt of the I. L. A. occurred in October and resulted in a strike in Galveston, Houston

and Corpus Christi, the union never knew a thing about it until the day following the walkout? As usual, they got in on the tail-end but due to lack of previous contact, due to the wrong policy of keeping aloof from the I. L. A. instead of forming a left group within that organization and due to the labelling of its members in general as "social-fascist", the influence of the Industrial Union in this strike was worse than nothing. We shall come back to the question of this later in the article. Sufficient is to say that a couple of months after this, the hall in Galveston was closed up. A couple of weeks later the local leadership in Houston followed example and closed down the hall and piled themselves into an automobile belonging to the organization and started the old motor up. It probably got stuck some place for to date they have not been heard from. Incidentally they forgot a little matter of about \$4,000.00 each bail money supplied by sympathetic individuals when these worthies were arrested—for smashing up a bootleg joint and the heating up of a couple of prostitutes over an argument of dollars and cents and value received. About this time Boston and Providence closed down due to lack of support by the seamen who could not understand the necessity of consulting a uptown office clerk on how to organize. But more of this later.

The Story of the Philadelphia Strike

Philadelphia. What a glorious opportunity here! What possibilities! The organizers here, with one exception, were men that had had some previous experience in organizing and leading strikes just in this particular industry—MacGrath having taken part in the organization of the Wobblies in Australia, Johansen having taken a prominent part in the organization and strike in this country in 1921, Soderberg being one of seven who built the union in Buenos Ayres, Argentine, in 1919, and took a prominent part in the general strike there in 1920, who also organized the strike in London, England, in 1925. All of these workers have had more or less experience in strikes in the past as well as in organization. There was just one crime these men had committed in the eyes of the Party—they had previously been members of the I. W. W. for years. This was an unforgivable crime and they could therefore not

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THE conclusion of the International Chamber of Commerce Convention finds not even the faintest flicker of a favorable turn in industry. Few have any hope that the New York Federal Reserve Bank's reduction of the discount rate to 3 1/2%, the lowest on record, will prove of any value at all in checking the increasing flow of gold to Wall Street, already suffering from a plethora of this commodity. Nor will the low discount rate stimulate bond sales and thus boost construction and general activity. On