
Lines of Division in American Socialism.

by A.M. Simons †

Editorial published in *The International Socialist Review*, v. 3, no. 2 (August 1902), pp. 109-114.

We have often pointed out, in these columns and elsewhere, the presence of two divergent tendencies now in process of amalgamation into a real American Socialist movement. Just at the present moment the process of union seems to be arousing a little more friction than is actually necessary.

This friction arises largely from the fact of mutual misunderstandings and hence should yield to intelligent study and discussion. This misunderstanding is the more easily possible because the two phases have such different origins, are so widely separated geographically, and are made up of such wholly different individuals. One is located in the West, is quite largely agrarian in its origin, comes almost wholly from economic development, and is peculiarly American in its makeup.

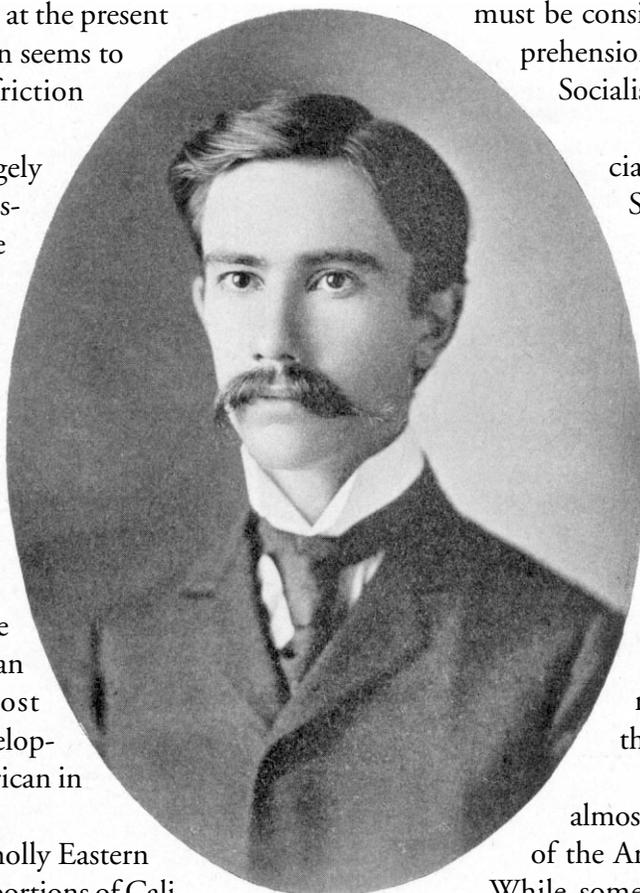
The other is almost wholly Eastern (with the exception of some portions of California), is urban, arrived at its conclusions quite largely through direct ideological propaganda, and is still (though rapidly losing this phase) formed mainly from

those born in other countries. None of these characteristics carry either credit or blame to the parties or persons concerned, but are nevertheless facts which must be considered in any adequate comprehension of the problem before the Socialists of this country.

Until very recently the Socialist movement in the United States was almost wholly made up of men who had either gained their knowledge of Socialism in another country, or of those who had been converted to an understanding of an ideological system which these European Socialists had brought with them. Little attention was paid by either of these classes to American economic conditions, but much to Marxian economic theories.

These facts account for the almost complete literary barrenness of the American Socialist movement.

While some of the ablest thinkers and writers of the German Socialists were among the founders of the movement in this country, there was not a single book or pamphlet produced during the



†- Algie Simons (1870-1950) was a grandson of American farmers, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin in 1895. After college he worked briefly in Chicago as a social worker. Simons was an important and prolific early 20th Century Socialist writer, specializing on the relationship of the American farmer to the Socialist movement. From 1897 he edited a number of Socialist publications, such as the *International Socialist Review*, *Chicago Socialist*, and *The Coming Nation*, and worked on the *Milwaukee Leader*. A social-patriot, Simons left the SPA in 1917 to help found the Social Democratic League. He worked for the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion and the Wisconsin Defense League during the war. In the 1920s and 1930s he moved steadily rightward, ending as a Republican.

period in which this element reigned that is today mentioned in counting up the permanent and valuable literature of the Socialist movement of the world.

The reason for this was that few of these Socialists thought it worthwhile to learn anything of American conditions, or to in any way identify themselves with the real forces of social revolt. Placing themselves upon a theoretical and largely dogmatic philosophical Olympus, they looked with disdain upon those who were engaged in the real social struggles. But in thus cutting loose from all reality they were dooming themselves to sterility.

When they wrote of American conditions, as they often did in European periodicals, they quite frequently only showed how little they really knew of the life in which they found themselves. They wrote of America as a sort of transplanted England after the Industrial Revolution, or a Germany in the midst of capitalism. Not one of them ever saw any of the great dynamic facts that were building and creating the economic structures of this nation. None of these many Socialist theoreticians have ever noted what was really the most distinctive and important fact in American history, at least from the Socialist point of view. They never comprehended in the slightest degree the tremendous influence upon our whole social life exercised by the continual presence of a frontier within our geographical and governmental boundaries.

Now and then a Socialist writer has seen far enough in this direction to consider the frontier as a "safety valve" and to predict terrible things that would happen when that "safety valve" was closed. Indeed, the "safety valve" idea has been decidedly overworked, for the fact is that with irrigation and a host of other new movements, there is not the slightest sign of its disappearance. In this respect we have also sinned in the past by talking this same nonsense, for which we now humbly ask the reader's pardon. What has happened now, however, is that the frontier, as a geographical expression for a great extent of contiguous territory, has disappeared, and this fact is having some important consequences.

But while some Socialists have seen this one phase of the frontier in exaggerated form, none of them have seemed to think that this fact helped in any way to determine where the forces of social discontent would naturally be located. This was because they had

not realized that in this country the element which in other lands was in continuous revolt against social injustice had here simply moved on to the frontier, and that therefore it would be where that frontier was last located that social discontent would find its first strong united native expression.

The consequence of this blindness to actual facts is that while the theoretical Socialist is prepared for the present increase of Socialist sentiment among the Eastern trade unionists, and will make almost any sort of concession to secure their allegiance, he cannot see any reason why there should be any Socialist sentiment in the locality where the last great frontier stage was located, and where even the slightest knowledge of economic conditions would have taught him was really the most prolific ground for Socialist propaganda. This position is accentuated by the facts pointed out above that the Eastern Socialist is himself generally an urban factory worker, while the dwellers on the frontier, whatever may have been their previous occupation, are now mainly small farmers.

So it is that there arises a sharp misunderstanding between these two wings of the movement, between the old and the new, the ideological and the materialistic Socialist; for, strange as it may seem, the fellow with the "clearest cut" materialistic philosophy is very apt to have come to Socialism ideologically, while the Western outcast of capitalism who comes in strict obedience to the working of that philosophy is very apt to give a sentimental and ideological reason for "the faith that is in him." This fact adds another to the already large number of misunderstandings and contradictions that threaten to multiply and grow until they menace the solidarity of the American Socialist movement.

The frontiersman has always had the utmost contempt for forms and conventionalities of all kinds. He has been sufficiently class-conscious to recognize that in our present society these forms were not created in the interest of his class. He has also had but little use for the wisdom of books, and in this, too, it is easy to see a blind class-consciousness of the fact that the literature of today is not written from the point of view of the producing class. It is easy to push this idea too far and credit the frontiersman with a clearer comprehension of social conditions than he ever dreamed of possessing, and, indeed, it is certain that

he seldom saw more than negatively that the institutions and conventions from which he fled were hurtful, and hence declared war on all conventionality and all forms, social, legal, or economic. Hence it is today (while most of this spirit has passed away) he does not take kindly to the efforts which are being made to run his very revolt against established institutions into fixed forms, especially when his common sense teaches him that many of those forms were created to meet conditions which will never arise in his experience. This position was brought out with startling vividness when on a recent trip through the Dakotas we saw some of the Socialists there trying to fit their organizations to forms whose only reason for existence was the threatening proximity of the city labor fakir and ward heeler.

The older Socialist of the cities lays great stress on certain phrases and forms of organization and manners of transacting business, and he uses the knowledge of these phrases and compliance with these forms and mannerisms as tests of the orthodoxy of his Western comrade of the prairies. If the latter does not know these phrases and does not conduct his Socialist propaganda and form his party organization on the lines laid down in the catechism and ritual of the city organization, he is a heretic and must be "reorganized." What has made this situation still more aggravating is that these tests have been quite generally applied by those who were not particular conspicuous for their knowledge of Socialist philosophy. Some comrade, who because of his ability as an organizer or agitator had been clothed with a little brief authority, has not hesitated to settle offhand questions of policy and tactics on which the ablest minds of the International Socialist movement have as yet failed to agree.

When the Western farmer, who is in revolt against capitalism, is met with a catechism especially prepared for the factory wage-worker, his confidence in his examiner and would-be teacher is not increased by the discovery that the aforesaid teacher is most ridiculously ignorant of the economic conditions surrounding the man whom he is so willing to teach economic philosophy.

What would the Socialists of Chicago, New York, St. Louis, or San Francisco think if some farmer should be sent among them to give instruction on economic subjects and lecture them on their general relation to economic evolution, and it should happen to appear

in the course of his lecture that he did not know the purpose of a trade union, had never seen a factory in operation, and was of the opinion that the chief exploiter of the wage-worker was the pawnbroker and the local landlord? Yet he would be wisdom personified beside some of those who are setting themselves up as judges of the Socialist movement on the Great Plains of America.

Within the last few weeks some of the Socialist papers that are most willing to assist in the "reorganization" process have published articles assuming that the great farm was absorbing the smaller, and that exploitation in the case of farmer was through mortgages and the growth of a system of tenantry. One such paper declared that the forthcoming census would show a most "startling" tendency towards the disappearance of farm ownership through the growth of mortgages and landlordism, whereas, if the editor had taken the trouble to look at the advance bulletins of that census (which may be had for the asking) he would have discovered that the number of farm owners has actually increased considerably during the last 10 years, while the relative increase of mortgaged and tenant farms is so slow that, save in a few exceptional localities, the farmers are in about equal danger from the coming of the next ice age and from conversion into a race of tenant and mortgaged farmers.

Had such writers even understood Marxian economics this would have shown them that under capitalism exploitation takes place primarily in the process of production, and not through usury and tenantry, both of which forms of exploitation belong essentially to the pre-capitalist stages of society.

But such ignorance of both economic philosophy and facts in no way deters such Socialists from pouring out the vials of their wrath on the "muddled" farmers, while they prate in an almost meaningless manner of classes and class struggles. Not that these words do not have a very clear and proper meaning in reference to Socialist doctrines and tactics. We have no desire to join those who are seeking for a little cheap notoriety by pretending to reform the Socialist vocabulary and who are going through lexicographical contortions to demonstrate that such words as "revolutionary" and "scientific" do not belong in the Socialist dictionary. But we do wish to insist that when these words are used they should, like all other words, be

used intelligently and in their proper place.

The fact is that there is really much less tendency towards compromise among the farmers who are just now entering the Socialist movement than there is among the trade unionists who are just beginning to see the truth of the Socialist philosophy. The latter have long been accustomed to cringing and crawling before capitalist politicians to beg for legislative favors, and the Socialist platforms formulated by some of those most anxious to “reform” the farmer Socialist reflect this tendency in strings of “immediate demands” made of capitalist governments, all of which demands, by the way, are aimed to improve the condition of the working class by perpetuating wage-slavery. Nothing more could have been said of the most foolish planks in the Populist platform. In our opinion no concessions to capitalism are necessary in either case. But this is “another story” on which it is unnecessary to enter at the present time.

It chanced to be our good fortune during the past month to be present at the State Convention of the Socialist Party of North Dakota, one of the states, by the way, in which the clearness of the Socialism had been objected to by the “reorganizers.” Yet during that whole convention there was not even a suggestion of a proposal that involved any compromise with capitalism or the capitalist system. This is something, by the way, whether it be good or bad, that we have never yet seen in any of the many other Socialist conventions that we have attended.

These farmers have learned long ago that they have nothing to expect from capitalist governments. They are now determined on independent political action, with the object of securing collective ownership of the means of production and distribution, and, this may arouse a smile in some of our readers, one of the things of which many of them expressed a fear was that the city wage-working Socialists would sell out or “fuse” with some other party. And it must be said in their defense that their previous experience with the Knights of Labor and similar organizations has not been of a character to insure confidence in this direction.

It must not be thought, however, that all the wrong and ignorance in this dispute is to be found on any one side. If our criticisms appear to be somewhat more severe on the older, city dwelling Socialist, it is

partly because he has such a multitude of capable pleaders ready to defend him, while the farmer, on the other hand, has been somewhat unfortunate in those who have taken up his case. Indeed, there has been a tendency in some quarters to exploit this division to secure other factional ends. Those who have found themselves in any way at variance with the policy and tactics of the official powers of the Socialist Party have sometimes sought rather to add to this antagonism, hoping thereby to fish out of the troubled waters something in which they were personally interested. Our only purpose in entering into this controversy at all is that some of the mutual misunderstanding and mistrust may be removed, and thus the possibility be created for a stronger and more thoroughly united Socialist movement.

Again, just at the present time, the “reorganizers” chance to be in a position where their real importance is greatly magnified by the official pedestals upon which they stand, which enables them to make much more trouble than the farmers, who, as yet, have little power for good or evil. But the latter are rapidly growing in our numbers and influence, and unless something is done to stop the criminally foolish and ignorant attacks that are being made upon them, we may possibly be confronted with a large and energetic split in the Socialist Party. Not that this would be fatal to Socialism. Economic progress would continue and social evolution would not stand still. We would be the last to seek to prevent such a split if there really existed any defection from the principles of Socialism by any body of persons within the Socialist Party. But, as we have endeavored to show, no such defection from those principles exists among those who are being driven to separate political action, and we can today ill afford the costly delay that such a useless division would entail.

Far be it from us to object to criticism or controversy. Such things are to be invited and are but signs of healthy growth. But hostile criticism, or even personal abuse, is something wholly different from ignorance clothed with official power to correct and discipline.

Indeed, there are many points on which the socialist of the prairie states needs severe criticism. He is by no means wholly free from that very American characteristic — self-conceit. He is apt to look down upon

technical economics as of no use. He feels himself capable of settling the most intricate problems of economics from the limited knowledge gained through his own personal experience. He has yet to learn that in the wide field of sociology no one man's experience is of sufficient breadth to enable him to draw any valuable conclusions. He has a very pressing need of familiarity with the great classics of Socialism. He generally knows little or nothing of the works of Marx, Engels, Liebknecht, and the great body of writers and thinkers who have made Socialism a philosophy worthy of the study of the best minds of the world. Did he know these things he would be the better able to show the shallowness of many of the phrase-mongers who are now hurling their paper darts in his direction.

There is an intense need of good, "clear-cut, scientific" Socialist literature in the West, but if it is to be read at all it must be written by someone who knows something of the application of the philosophy of Socialism to American economic conditions, and not consist simply of intellectual gymnastics with Socialist phrases.

Again, the frontiersman is apt to fail to appreciate the importance of national and international organization, or, indeed, of any organization whatsoever. Accustomed to rely upon his own resources he does not at first see the need of widespread cooperation, although the history of the last 50 years in America has shown that when once the need of organization is impressed upon him he joins with his fellows with far greater readiness than even the trade unionism of the city.

There are at the present moment two great fields in which Socialistic propaganda can reap rich harvests. One of these is the trade union field. Here we have plenty of trained workers. Here the propaganda is in the hands of men who understand every phase of the work, and the results which are being attained are a splendid tribute to the excellent work that is being done in this field.

Another, and equally rich, if not richer, field is to be found in the locality where the frontier has just passed away. Here the producing class — the proletariat — is largely a farming class. These men are ripe for social revolt at the present moment. Indeed, since their individual initiative is much greater than that of the wage-workers, they are going to revolt politically whether the Socialists have the sagacity to work with them or not. But if the Socialist Party will see to it that men are sent among them as organizers who will not look upon themselves in the light of divinely appointed censors to correct the errors of those who often are far wiser than their teachers, then there is no reason why we should not lay the ground of a powerful united American Socialist movement.

When once the Western Socialists learn to know something more of the great classics of Socialism and the need of organization, while the Eastern comrades learn something of the facts upon which the philosophy which they so glibly repeat is based, the ground will have been laid for a common understanding, and all necessity of a bitter internal fight will have passed away.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

Photo of Algie Simons from The Comrade, August 1902.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.