

THE RED FLAG COMES TO IOWA

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While the American socialist movement existed three decades prior to the depression and labor strife of the 1890s, it was not until the conversion of Eugene Debs to the cause that a new and brighter era loomed. The Pullman strike of 1894 had resulted in the smashing of Debs' American Railway Union and a six month sentence for contempt. When Debs emerged from prison he was a convinced Marxist who was destined to become the most stirring and appealing leader the American socialist movement had yet found.

Although Debs was never able to unite the large variety of socialist groups in the nation into one unified force, he was, with the reaction of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1898, able to construct the most powerful socialist body in the nation. By 1900, a large fraction of Daniel De Leon's militant Social Labor Party bolted and sought unity with the Social Democrats. A loose union was effected for the campaign of 1900; Debs was the presidential candidate and ex-Socialist Laborite Job Harriman was the vice presidential choice.¹

By 1900 Social Democratic clubs were springing up all over the nation. Even rural, stable Iowa spawned a socialist following that would ultimately create some alarm among the state's conventionally conservative citizens. The Socialist Labor Party had had a small but volatile following after 1896. In the election of 1898 the Social Labor Party had polled 1,081 votes,² in its Iowa convention held at Clinton, the Party endeavored to call the working class "to their miserable condition, and to the fact that in the midst of plenty millions of

¹The name Socialist Party of America was adopted at the Indianapolis Convention July 29, 1901. An outstanding work on the early socialist movement is Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912*.

²*Appeal to Reason*, January 28, 1899.

willing workers are on the verge of starvation."³ The Social Labor Party, however, was too rabid and too oriented in the direction of the industrial proletariat to have much appeal in a state dominated by agriculture and small businesses.

Yet, there were growing numbers of Iowans who were not convinced that prosperity had returned following the election of 1896; nor did they think it would as long as capitalism remained the prevailing economic system. Giving vent to the growing socialist sentiment of the farm belt states was the weekly paper, *Appeal to Reason*, ably edited by Julius A. Wayland in the little town of Girard, Kan. The *Appeal* spoke the language of the common man; its graphic portrayals of the inequities of the capitalistic system dug deep into the marrow of small town farmers, workers and professionals alike. The *Appeal* sought to spread the message of socialism and it held out its arms to ex-Populists to embrace the cause. Populism, the *Appeal* maintained, had been betrayed by the fusion with the Democratic Party in 1896. Those middle of the road Populists who had resisted the seduction could "give no better evidence of their sincerity than by joining the socialists."⁴ The *Appeal's* message made some notable converts. One Populist who moved into the *Appeal's* camp was Allen W. Ricker, a Lone Tree, Iowa farmer. Ricker became a state organizer for the socialist cause in Iowa and eventually realized a long existing dream by becoming a member of the *Appeal's* editorial staff. Ricker believed that the farmer could find the solution to his problems by embracing socialism and, that through such propaganda media as the *Appeal*, both farmer and merchant would come around. "Honest old hayseed," wrote Ricker, "I believe in him, I was nurtured under his wing and I know his worth."⁵ Another ex-Populist who moved into the socialist camp was Charles Lloyd of Muscatine. Lloyd had been the Populist's gubernatorial choice in 1899 but had received a scant 1,694 votes.⁶

³*Iowa Official Register*, 1899, p. 223.

⁴*Appeal to Reason*, December 10, 1898.

⁵*Appeal to Reason*, June 14, 1902.

⁶*Iowa Official Register*, 1900, p. 311.

The *Appeal*, especially during Wayland's editorship, printed many letters from the victims of the capitalist system. One of the early Iowa converts to socialism was Dr. C. Wirth from Van Horn, Benton County. The Spanish-American War moved Wirth to write:

Cuba libre is all well enough; but after Cuba is liberated from Spain, the Socialists will have to liberate Spain, Cuba, America, as well as all other nations, from the tyrannical dominion of a world wide competitive capitalistic system.⁷

Wirth was an inveterate correspondent who argued the socialist cause not only through the *Appeal* but through the capitalist press as well. He became an active member of the SDP and a candidate for office at the turn of the century.

It was, however, in the quiet town of Oskaloosa that the SDP of Iowa was founded on Aug. 10, 1900. Ex-Populists, do-gooders and a hard core of convinced Marxists were the founding fathers. The leaders of the convention were Allen W. Ricker, Charles Lloyd, Dr. Wirth, Charles Breckon, a labor organizer and editor from Muscatine, and ex-Republican and Des Moines lawyer, John M. Work.⁸ Although Ricker called the convention to order, it was Breckon who was named permanent chairman and Work who was selected as the permanent secretary.⁹

Lloyd's convention task was to explain the purpose and principles of the new party. For 90 minutes he proved that the picturesque rhetoric of Populism could be applied to a socialist convention. Lloyd informed the convention delegates (who represented 16 locals¹⁰) that a new era was emerging which was "destined to cover the land as the waters cover the sea."¹¹ Capitalism, he said, could only lead to contention and bloodshed with its philosophy of "every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost."¹² The

⁷*Appeal to Reason*, April 30, 1898.

⁸*Oskaloosa Evening Herald*, August 10, 1900.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Burlington Hawk Eye*, August 11, 1900.

¹¹*Oskaloosa Evening Herald*, August 10, 1900.

¹²*Ibid.*

present order was filled with "baleful influences, lies, back bitings, adulterations, envies, jealousies and manhood destroying, contemptible little trade getting subterfuges and deceits."¹³ Under socialism the call would be for peace, fraternity and the brotherhood of man. Socialism offered "the comradeship of cooperative effort, in which there is no greed or envy, since the gain of each is the gain of all."¹⁴ The concentration of economic power and the exploitation of the common man had disenchanted Lloyd's confidence in democratic capitalism. Now, he felt, only socialism applied the most "equitable principles of equality, morality and justice."¹⁵

Job Harriman, the national party's nominee for the vice presidency, found the Iowa SDP convention important enough to attend as a featured speaker. On the way, Harriman stopped to deliver speeches in several eastern Iowa communities. Burlington, which had cast 75 socialist ballots at the municipal election in March, welcomed Harriman at Labor Hall. "His audience," reported the *Burlington Hawk Eye*, "was composed largely of men, with a little sprinkling of ladies."¹⁶ Harriman also stopped at Muscatine, where he met Breckon and delivered a speech in the Court Square. The *Muscatine Journal* noted that Harriman "set forth in a forceful manner the claims of his party to recognition as the bearer of the new light that is to make plain the way to a Utopian order of society."¹⁷

Harriman, a Los Angeles lawyer, was one of the leading socialists in the West and was generally thought a member of the more conservative wing of the party.¹⁸ In his Oskaloosa address Harriman deplored the public misconception of socialists as dangerous radicals or even worse, anarchists. "We are not anarchists," Harriman insisted. "We are for a

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Oskaloosa Evening Herald*, August 10, 1900.

¹⁶*Burlington Hawk Eye*, August 7, 1900.

¹⁷*Muscatine Journal*, August 2, 1900.

¹⁸David Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America*, See pp. 40-42.

government system which will give men the right and the wherewithall to live, even though they are unable to compete with broader intellects and surer fiduciary genius."¹⁹ While Harriman knew that he and Debs were not likely to be elected, he also knew that they were making an impression. Even in an agricultural state like Iowa, the party was gaining surprising strength. "It will be the nucleus of a vote," he said, "which will run Iowa eventually."²⁰

Once the speeches were over, the party proceeded to nominate a slate of officers for the coming state campaign. Iowa's gubernatorial elections were still held in odd-numbered years, so only the lesser state offices along with the congressional races were up for grabs. The party was able to find available candidates for each of the state offices and eventually nominated congressional candidates in districts two, three, four, five, six and seven. Dr. C. Wirth, the candidate for secretary of state, headed the ticket.

The socialists did not enter the campaign of 1900 with any illusions; they did not expect to win any of the offices for which they contended. They did expect to launch a propaganda campaign which would bring the principles of socialism before the voters. A political campaign was a good time to educate the public through the voluminous publications put out by the socialists. As the *Appeal* asserted:

Socialist literature must be put in every home in the nation. It is a great work, and will require self-sacrificing effort on the part of the socialists, but in no other way can the nation be redeemed. Socialism is something that has to be learned like mathematics. There are no socialists who have not thoroughly studied the subject.²¹

The number of delegates at Oskaloosa had been small but they did represent 16 locals and a total socialist membership of 500.²² Most of the delegates had been from the mining districts and from the river towns of eastern Iowa.

¹⁹*Oskaloosa Evening Herald*, August 10, 1900.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Appeal to Reason*, December 1, 1900.

²²*Burlington Hawk Eye*, August 11, 1900.

Convention leaders expected to give the eastern end of the state a good working over during the campaign and to organize the western half of the state the coming year.²³

The beginning of the SDP in Iowa, while small, was by no means inauspicious. Public relations, however, would always be a problem. Except for the *Iowa Socialist* edited by A. A. Triller, no socialist paper in Iowa took hold.²⁴ The capitalist press on the whole ignored or was mildly curious about the activities of the early Iowa socialists. However, the *Des Moines Leader* adopted a moderate tone in discussing the advent of the state's newest political party. The *Leader* asserted that the socialists had "fixed and matured principles, a definite program. . . and a respectable and growing literature."²⁵ It also noted that many of those who would vote the socialist ticket would do so with the dream that "brotherhood is the ultimate destiny of society."²⁶ Indeed, the state's leading newspaper adopted a surprisingly tolerant attitude towards Iowa's socialists in the decade following 1900. News from socialist meetings and conventions was printed and with apparently little editorial prejudice. The *Leader* seemed satisfied that the Iowa socialists were not blood thirsty revolutionaries, but a party well within the framework of democratic political practice.

While socialist adherents in Des Moines represented only a fraction of the total voters, the capital city produced some of the most articulate leaders in the party. Among Des Moines socialists were John M. Work, Albert D. Pugh, I. S. McCrillis, and L.B. Patterson. These were men who held positions of leadership in the party and who waged indefatigable campaigns year after year.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴The paper was edited by Triller and Carrie Johnson (later Mrs. Triller). I have not had access to any of these papers if they still exist.

²⁵*Des Moines Leader*, August 12, 1900.

²⁶*Ibid.*



From this group John M. Work attracted state wide and national attention as a socialist spokesman. Work was born near West Chester, Iowa in 1869. From his father's farm he attended the Washington, Iowa, Academy. Then he read law under the preceptorship of J. F. H e n d e r s o n in Washington, Iowa.²⁷ He also attended Monmouth College and obtained his A.B. degree in 1891. Eventually he acquired the LL.B. from Columbian (now George Washington) University.²⁸ By the mid-1890's

Work had arrived in Des Moines and established his law practice. One day in 1896 he began to prepare a lecture dealing with the growing tide of socialism. Feeling antagonistic but knowing little about the subject, young Work went to the Des Moines Public Library and checked out a number of books. Among them was *The Cooperative Commonwealth* by Laurence Gronlund. Later, Work recounted the experience of reading Gronlund:

When I began reading it I could not stop. I forgot that I wanted to prepare a lecture against socialism. The book spread out before my astonished gaze a social panorama of unexampled soul-refreshing beauty. It revealed the remedy for the social ills which had been burdening my mind. It made a new man of me. Before that time I had been a cynical pessimist. Since then I have been a joyful optimist.²⁹

Prior to this experience Work had been active in the Young Men's Republican Club of Des Moines. In 1893 he had been a delegate to the "national convention of the League of Republican Clubs in Louisville."³⁰ But by 1900

²⁷*National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, "Work, John M.," p. 576.

²⁸*Who's Who in America*, 1950-51.

²⁹John M. Work, *What's So and What Isn't*, p. 1.

³⁰*National Cyclopaedia*, op. cit., p. 576.

young Work was a convinced socialist, and in that year organized a Social Democratic local in Des Moines. Later, of course, he helped found the SDP of Iowa; ultimately giving up his office and declaring "it his purpose to devote the remaining years of his life to socialism."³¹ Work was destined to be a persistent candidate for public office. He was the party's mayoralty candidate in 1902, elector at large in 1900 and 1904, gubernatorial nominee in 1903 and 1910, and a candidate for the United States Senate in 1908.³² Work left Iowa for Chicago in 1911 and a two year stint as the party's national secretary.

Work's moderate socialism identified him with the right wing element of the party whose emphasis on the intellectual side of socialism made them somewhat skeptical of the virtues of the working class. Work's socialism also involved clean living. A brief article on Work by A. W. Ricker is revealing:

I don't suppose Work ever tasted tobacco or liquor in his life, and if there is a conventional moral flaw in his make up the world has so far failed to discover it. Nature never brought forth a more methodical man.³³

"Work and work are synonymous" commented Ricker. And in time the ex-Des Moines lawyer became one of socialism's most prolific writers. Between 1917 and 1942 he served as one of the editors of the *Milwaukee Leader*.³⁴

Albert D. Pugh was an 1897 graduate of the Drake University Law College.³⁵ He was forever involved in the struggle against the special interests. Pugh's distrust of the plutocracy and his sometimes rather extreme expression of the democratic faith may have stemmed from his having reached adulthood on an Iowa farm during the climax of the Granger and Alliance era. Furthermore, Pugh had worked for nearly a decade in the railway service before entering the Law College.³⁶ It is certainly clear that Pugh was never

³¹*Appeal to Reason*, January 20, 1912.

³²*National Cyclopaedia*, op. cit., p. 576.

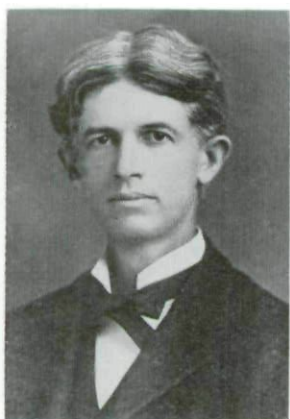
³³*Appeal to Reason*, January 20, 1912.

³⁴*National Cyclopaedia*, op. cit., p. 576.

³⁵*Des Moines Register*, October 30, 1912.

³⁶*Ibid.*

the servant of the corporations. He battled consistently for honest government, for municipal ownership of public utilities, and the right of all citizens to be heard in a democratic community. But in 1912 Pugh's socialism succumbed to Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism. When he accepted the nomination of the Progressive Party for District Judge, the socialists expelled him from their ranks.³⁷ Throughout his career, Pugh demonstrated a strong moral sense, humanitarian ideals, and an adamant belief in a just democracy.³⁸



Irving S. McCrillis maintained his faith in socialism even during the difficult years of World War I and after. McCrillis was a New Hampton, Iowa, boy who received his LL.B. degree from Drake University in 1900.³⁹ Described as a "mild, pleasant, and attentive"⁴⁰ man, McCrillis was another perennial candidate for political office. In 1908 and again in 1912 McCrillis was the party's gubernatorial candidate. His 14,896 votes in 1912 were the most a socialist candidate for governor ever received in

Iowa.⁴¹ McCrillis was a highly regarded speaker and organizer. He served as the state secretary of the socialist party between 1914 and 1919.

L. B. Patterson was another Des Moines socialist leader and organizer. Patterson maintained that he had been a socialist since 1893 and that from his conversion he had

³⁷*Ibid.*, July 10, 1919. Letter of Pugh to editor.

³⁸*Ibid.*, June 18, 1919. Letter of Pugh to editor.

³⁹Information provided by L. S. Forrest, Professor Emeritus Drake University Law School to author.

⁴⁰Letter Fred Waitz to author, March 4, 1968. Mr. Waitz partial to the SLP knew Mr. McCrillis during the 1930's.

⁴¹*Iowa Official Register*, 1925-26, p. 561.

preached the party's gospel "with all the energy I possess."⁴² Patterson believed that the socialists represented the trade unions and the "progressive element of the industrial world."⁴³

The Iowa socialists plunged eagerly into the campaign of 1900. The socialists worked especially hard in the second district where Charles L. Breckon of Muscatine was the party's candidate for congress. Second district socialists were particularly bitter towards democratic congressman Henry Vollmer of Davenport who had denounced them as anarchists.⁴⁴ In a speech at Des Moines, Breckon told his audience that in recent years the normal socialist vote in Davenport had run around 280 ballots. This year, however, the socialists were confident that they could expect 1000 votes. Throughout the entire district, the socialists anticipated 1,800 to 2,500 votes.⁴⁵

During the campaign, John M. Work was all over the state spreading the message of socialism. Nor did he neglect his home territory. One night Work attended the First Baptist Church where Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National Women's Suffrage Association, was giving an address. Work, during the question period, arose from his pew and reminded Mrs. Catt and the audience that the SDP was the only political party in the state that strongly endorsed women's suffrage.⁴⁶

Just as vigorous were the efforts put forth by L. B. Patterson. In his speeches Patterson asserted that by now the socialists had become such a threat to the vested interests that the SDP was having a difficult time getting on the ballot in some of the states. Also, Patterson proclaimed, the working man was too intelligent to fall for the trite campaign slogans of the traditional parties. He was sure that republican orators who were trying to soothe the workingman with the worn out slogan of the "full dinner pail" would be

⁴²*Des Moines Leader*, November 4, 1900.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Des Moines Leader*, October 21, 1900.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

disillusioned by the result. This was, said Patterson, just a brutal appeal to his animal tastes.⁴⁷ Indeed:

a vote for Debs would be a vote for a system that would do away with the dinner pail filled with cold biscuits and cold potatoes and substitute therefore a dining room where would be served a good warm meal cooked from pure and wholesome food.⁴⁸

Patterson's cold presentations found some willing listeners. Early in 1900 the Chicago and Northwestern had cut wages and reduced its employees 35 per cent at the Boone shops. As Jose Rose of Boone bitterly commented in the *Appeal's* columns—these same men had in 1896 looked to McKinley "with flying banners, torches and yelling for good times and protection."⁴⁹

Undoubtedly, the socialists expected to find a source of strength in the coal mining regions of south central Iowa. At this time Iowa coal production was increasing rapidly. Some believed that coal might soon outrank corn as the state's chief source of income.⁵⁰ In any case Iowa's coal production was over five million short tons and the state ranked among the top ten coal producing states in the nation. Monroe County was the center of the mining region. The camps at Haydock, Hiteman, Hocking and Buxton seemed destined to become permanent fixtures on the state map. But rowdiness and poverty were endemic to the camps, and so was friction with the company. Most of all the miners hated the exactions of the company store which apparently saw to it that the miners had little more than tobacco money left on pay day after "their debts had been balanced against their earnings."⁵¹ Such conditions were conducive not only to the growth of unionism, but to the discontent that moved some of the miners into the arms of the socialist

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Appeal to Reason*, January 6, 1900.

⁵⁰Robert Rutland, "The Mining Camps of Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History*, Vol. 54, Jan.-Oct. 1956, p. 35.

⁵¹Rutland, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

party.⁵²

One such miner was Frank L. Rice of Avery who became the party's nominee as the congressional candidate from the sixth district. Rice had worked the Monroe County coal fields near Avery since 1896. Now thirty years old, Rice had been affiliated with labor unions almost from boyhood, and for three years had served as president of the United Mine Workers Local 242.⁵³ He had been the state organizer for the U.M.W.A. in Illinois during the years 1894 and 1895.⁵⁴

Actually, the party represented a class cross section in the state. Among the founders and candidates there were lawyers, editors, physicians, farmers and miners. Even though some friction may have been natural among such diverse groups, and friction was no stranger to socialist gatherings; the bourgeois and working class segments of the party managed to unite on a slate of candidates in the campaign of 1900.

A broom factory at the east approach to the Locust Street bridge served as the headquarters of the Des Moines Local. Here thousands of socialist leaflets and pamphlets were available for both the dedicated and the interested. The local also had on hand the party's national organ, *The Social Democratic Herald*, and the printed addresses of George D. Herron, former Grinnell College Professor of Applied Christianity,⁵⁵ now an active lecturer in the ranks of the SDP.

In spite of the outpouring of socialist literature, of tireless campaigning, and the usual enthusiasm that envelopes a new party, the results of the election of 1900 were mildly disappointing. The combined total of the socialist candidates in

⁵²The socialists continued to make great efforts among the miners. In 1903 state secretary W. A. Jacobs reported: "We have in Iowa a great body of coal miners, and this class of workers is the victim of exploitation as much as any in the country . . . They are ready for socialism and if we had the means we could soon organize their districts so that we would more than hold the balance of power." *Appeal to Reason*, September 5, 1903.

⁵³*Oskaloosa Evening Herald*, August 10, 1900.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Des Moines Leader*, November 4, 1900.

the congressional districts was only 1800 votes. Of these Charles Breckon received 746. Frank L. Rice received only 291 votes. No other socialist candidate for congressional office received over 200 votes.⁵⁶ The party's candidates for the state offices averaged slightly over 2500 votes. Still, however, there were bright notes. The socialists polled 261 votes in the mining community of Hiteman and elected the full township ticket.⁵⁷ The socialist vote in Davenport jumped from 207 in 1899 to 520 and in Burlington from 98 to 225.⁵⁸ Furthermore they had completely outdistanced Daniel DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party. The Socialist Labor presidential nominee, Joseph F. Malloney of Massachusetts, received only 257 votes in the entire state. And no Social Labor Party candidate on the state ticket received more than 272 votes. Nor was there any doubt but what the once proud Populist party was now a corpse, as Barker, the Populist candidate, received only 614 votes. Indeed, the Iowa Social Democrats felt that they would soon challenge the Prohibitionists for third place on the state's official ballot.

During the next decade the Iowa Socialist Party would become increasingly active in municipal as well as in state and national campaigns. Indeed, before the tranquillizing advent of Coolidge prosperity in the mid-20s, the red flag would become a familiar scene in several Iowa communities. For nearly two decades the socialists would wage energetic campaigns in the major Iowa cities of Des Moines, Davenport, Burlington, Clinton, Dubuque and Muscatine. Socialists became a regular feature on the Muscatine city council between 1910 and 1922. In 1920 the socialists won a stunning municipal victory in Davenport. At other times they elected city officials or council members in Davenport, Burlington, Bloomfield; and ran strong races in Marshalltown and Boone.

The socialists also captured a number of smaller communities. Hiteman was the first to succumb when the socialists elected the township ticket in 1900; and the socialists were

⁵⁶*Iowa Official Register*, 1925-26, pp. 561-576.

⁵⁷*Appeal to Reason*, November 17, 1900.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

a powerful element in the mining communities until World War I. Mystic elected a socialist mayor in 1904 and repeated the victory in 1906. Madrid elected a socialist mayor in 1911 and Hopkinton in 1912. Colfax and Belle Plaine elected socialists to their town councils in 1911.⁵⁹

In the long run, of course, socialism's triumphs were few and ephemeral. In Iowa as elsewhere they never learned the art of compromise and internal dissension would tear their ranks asunder in those rare places where victory became a surprising reality. They were humanitarians but their vision of Utopia was too complete; they were too rigid to accept the fruits of victory. Wherever they won they began to prey on one another.

But in 1900 the evils in the industrial order that these humanitarians rallied against were real enough. They were good men, able, intelligent, humane, who believed that socialism might have the answer.

⁵⁹Most of the election victories were culled from the *Appeal to Reason*.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF THE OLD FEDERAL BUILDING

The Summer issue of the *Annals of Iowa* (Vol. 39, No. 5) contained a brief history of the Old Federal Building, Des Moines, entitled "The Death of Old Fed." Since the publication of that article, a number of excellent photographs have been donated to the State Department of History & Archives which depict the beauty of this now demolished building. As the Old Federal was of great historical interest and was one of the few remaining examples of its style of architecture a variation of the General Grant style used in most public buildings erected during the first ten years following the Civil War), we feel it worthwhile to here publish selected photographs of this building.

The photographs by Mark A. Knudsen were taken for the National Parks Historic-American Building Survey; they were donated by William J. "Bill" Wagner. The photographs by Joan Muyskens were taken specifically for this Department's files.

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