

# John M. Work: Iowa Socialist

by William H. Cumberland

John M. Work passionately believed that the cure for mankind's ills was "Socialism! Brotherhood! Love!" Socialism was the next step in the evolution of humanity, he believed. Socialism would elevate man above the "sorrow, poverty, ignorance and anguish" which seemed so much a part of modern civilization. Work's faith led him to embark on a sixty-year crusade to make the Socialist dream a reality. The crusade began shortly after he read Laurence Gronlund's *The Cooperative Commonwealth*. A prime mover in establishing a Socialist group in Des Moines, Work was one of fifty delegates who gathered at the Oskaloosa courthouse in August 1902 to found the Social Democratic Party of Iowa.

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John Work was born and raised on a farm near Washington, Iowa. He graduated from Washington Academy and Monmouth College and received a law degree from Columbian (now George Washington) University. Settling in Des Moines in 1892, Work quickly became a member of the Young Republican Club and attended the club's 1893 national convention in Louisville, Kentucky. Two of the delegates were Iowans who were already on their way to state and national prominence, Jonathan P. Dolliver and Albert Baird Cummins. An ardent temperance man, Work was stunned when he witnessed Dolliver and other members of the Iowa delegation partaking of alcoholic beverages in Louisville. Work believed that all of the Iowa delegates should have

abstained since Iowa was a prohibitionist state. But Work was even more chagrined by the apparent lack of political morality in Louisville. He was particularly put off by the party chairman's suggestion that the representatives at polling places try "to close the polls a bit early in the strongly Democratic precincts and to try to hold them open a bit overtime in the strongly Republican precincts." It was not surprising that John M. Work did not remain long within such a party.

In the last years of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century many others were dissatisfied with the traditional political parties. Such dissatisfaction existed even though there was a measure of surface prosperity and progressive reform. The prosperity and reform simply did not touch enough people. As Socialist Robert Hunter pointed out in his book, *Poverty*, there were millions of people living below the subsistence level. Private ownership of farm land was giving way to an increase in tenant farming, disease was rampant in the urban slums, monopolies and trusts were the order of the day, wealth was being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, workers suffered from physical as well as economic hazards, women were denied participation in the political process, and there was no federal child labor law. Even though notions of social welfare were in their infancy, the consciousness of inequalities was rising. A number of American communities, large and small, began electing Socialist mayors and councilmen. By 1912 seventy-nine Socialist mayors had been elected in twenty-four states. In similar manner, the number of



elected Socialist officials at the county and state levels grew during this "Golden Age" of socialism.

Socialist strength in Iowa was greater in these years than many have realized. By 1904 Iowa ranked seventeenth nationally in the percentage of Socialist voters. Voters in the coal mining regions of central and southern Iowa elected Socialist mayors and councilmen in such towns as Mystic, Bussey, and Hiteman. By 1910 Iowans had elected seventeen Socialist officials. Before the Socialist surge ended in the early 1920s, Socialist candidates ran strong races in major Iowa cities. Socialists were elected to the Muscatine city council for more

than a decade. A Socialist almost became mayor of Burlington, and Socialists captured the municipal government in Davenport in 1920.

There were men of considerable stature among the Iowa Socialists. One was Reverend George Herron, the controversial Professor of Applied Christianity at Iowa (Grinnell) College, who, like Work, was a founder of the Socialist party in Iowa. Herron left Iowa in 1901 to continue agitation on behalf of Socialist causes until his break with the party during World War I. His interest in social welfare and international peace was lasting, however, and he worked as a special representative of President Woodrow Wilson during the pre-armi-



*John M. Work's socialism was moderate, evolutionary, reformist, and stressed brotherhood rather than class antagonism. A founder of the Social Democratic Party of Iowa in 1902, Work was an unsuccessful candidate for mayor of Des Moines in 1902, for governor of Iowa in 1903, and again for governor in 1910.*



stice negotiations with Germany. There was also Allen W. Ricker, an old Populist crusader from Lone Tree, who wrote for the Socialist paper, *Appeal to Reason*, and helped organize Socialist locals throughout the nation. Authors Charles Edward Russell and Floyd Dell were also early Iowa Socialists. Dell never abandoned the Socialist cause, which he first encountered at Davenport at the turn of the century. Russell, however, like Herron, left the party because of its refusal to support America's participation in World War I. Irving S. McCrillis of Des Moines, a businessman and lifelong friend and correspondent of John Work, was also an early Iowa Socialist. But the architect of the party in Iowa and the most prominent Iowan working for the Socialist cause nationally was John M. Work.

John M. Work was not only a delegate to the Oskaloosa convention which founded the Socialist party in the state but was elected permanent secretary of the convention. He ran for mayor of Des Moines in 1902, for governor of the state in 1903 and again 1910, and campaigned for the United States Senate in 1908. The support Work received from Iowa locals enabled him to win election to the Socialist National Committee from 1903 to 1911. Ultimately, he became a member of the National Executive Committee, serving with such distinguished Socialists as Victor Berger, John Spargo, Morris Hillquit, Robert Hunter, Ernst Untermann, and Algie Simons. Throughout the first decade of the century Work was active in formulating both state and national policies of the Socialist party. In addition to writing campaign platforms for the Iowa Socialist party, he wrote the party's constitution, and wrote many resolutions adopted by the National Executive Committee.

During this period Work toured not only Iowa but the nation on behalf of the Socialist cause. He was instrumental in organizing dozens of locals, even in such unlikely places as

Orange City and Lake Park, as he toured the state depicting the utopia which would follow the collapse of capitalism. The *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, irritated by his remarks, wrote caustically that Work "gave lie to his name by advocating the three hour day." He offered to debate with any opponents from the traditional parties. Sometimes he had to deftly sidestep those who were prone to do violence to Socialist lecturers. In Denison, Iowa, while waiting at the train depot after a Sunday afternoon lecture, Work observed a man in a sulky, carrying a gun and crying out to a fellow townsman: "I'm looking for that Socialist candidate for Governor."

While Work was occasionally harassed by irate townfolk in small Iowa communities, he was not often threatened or intimidated by public officials. This was not the case on his nationwide tours. In December 1907 the mayor of Chicago ordered Socialist speakers arrested even though they had obtained speaking permits from the chief of police. Work, fully expecting to be arrested, left his watch and other valuables at the Kaiserhof Hotel in preparation for the worst. He then spoke rapidly, determined to roast the mayor and the police before he was arrested. Surprisingly, his address was not halted and he collected donations of more than \$20 from his audience. In Waterville, New York, however, police punched him with a club and on several other occasions he was nearly arrested. But these were not uncommon hazards for people who challenged the system, and Work added hundreds of converts to the Socialist cause and gathered many subscriptions to the *Appeal* and *Wilshire's* magazine.

John Work was also an author and never ceased to believe that Socialist literature would play a major role in converting people to the cause. The most effective Socialist propaganda sheet at the time was probably the *Appeal to Reason*, published at Girard, Kan-



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## Socialist State Ticket

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For Governor,  
**JOHN M. WORK,**  
 Des Moines.

For Lieutenant Governor,  
**A. K. GIFFORD,**  
 Davenport.

For Judge of Supreme Court,  
**I. S. McCRILLIS,**  
 Des Moines.

For Superintendent of Public Instruction,  
**MRS. FLORENCE A. BROWN,**  
 Delta.

For Railroad Commissioner,  
**OAKLEY WOOD,**  
 Lake City.

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*The Iowa Socialist served as one mouthpiece for the concerns of Iowa Socialists during the first decade of the twentieth century, Work included. In 1903 John M. Work conducted his first campaign for the office of governor of the state of Iowa.*

sas. There were numerous Socialist papers throughout the country, however, including the *Iowa Socialist* which was printed at Dubuque between 1902 and 1904. Work wrote a series of columns entitled "X Rays" which appeared in a variety of Socialist papers.

It was during the winter of 1904-1905 that Work turned out his most impressive literary piece. It was a terse, epigrammatic volume entitled *What's So and What Isn't*. The book was ninety-six pages in length, and in it Work hoped to explain to ordinary people what socialism was all about.

*What's So and What Isn't* went through four editions between 1906 and 1927 and sold over 200,000 copies. Although Socialist intellectuals such as Morris Hillquit objected to Work's

"primer style," Work found an audience among small town and rural Americans when he stressed the need for a more equitable social order. Work's socialism would eliminate exploitation but not the acquisition of capital or property justly gained or utilized for socially progressive purposes. An essential portion of his social philosophy was the work ethic, a concept understood equally by the Middle Americans who felt they had been denied the just fruits of their efforts and by the radicals within the Socialist party who were appalled at Work's moderation and his effort to play down class antagonism.

Indeed, Work nearly created an uproar at the 1908 Socialist party convention in Chicago when he suggested incorporating into the party



# X R A Y S

By JOHN M. WORK

*Work regularly expressed his ideas about socialism in columns published by Socialist papers. "X Rays" appeared in the Iowa Socialist periodically.*

platform assurances to independent farmers that the Socialist party did not wish "to deprive them of their little farms." Work argued that the small farmer, like the wage earner, was being exploited and asked why land needed to be publicly owned if it was not being used for exploitation. He further roused the ire of his more radical colleagues when he insisted that the "idea that Socialist principles lead to atheism or agnosticism is false." His critics charged that he confused public with collective ownership and that he was trying to win the support of middle class voters whose philosophy was closer to the Progressive movement. The radicals within the party wished to stand more boldly for revolution.

**W**hile the left wing of the party found Work's understanding of Socialist principles a bit insulting to the laboring man, his right-wing colleagues chafed at his constant emphasis that the party was an instrument of intellectual and moral uplift. Work often condemned capitalism as being responsible for drunkenness, crime, poverty, and prostitution, and he believed that Socialist goals should include ending the use of tobacco, alcohol, patent medicines, and even overindulgence in sexual intercourse. Work's puritanical moral values caused Allen W. Ricker to write in 1912, "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." Over the decades Work remained a moderate vegetarian, a non-drinker, and a non-smoker.

His critics held that such views diverted the party from the true channels of Socialist activity. They claimed that Work had repudiated Marx and that his health fads and religious mysticism made him absurd. He tended to be castigated as a member of the right-wing extremists of the party.

Work's conservatism was seen in a chance encounter with the Socialist novelist Jack London during a party meeting in Toledo, Ohio, in 1905. They returned to Chicago on the same train and Work sensed the differences in their approach to socialism. London insisted on signing his letters "Yours for the Revolution," which the Iowan believed was an invitation to violence and, as such, it was likely to damage the cause. Work noted that "from the time I became a Socialist I was interested in preventing revolution, whereas he [London] was interested in fomenting a revolution." Perhaps Work would have been a revolutionist had there been no other way, but he could not be a revolutionist in the United States where civil liberties and wide suffrage were basically protected.

John Work attacked racial bigotry and, as early as 1900, he advocated not only woman's suffrage, but other forms of liberation for women. He once challenged Carrie Chapman Catt at a suffragist meeting in Des Moines



when she declared that the Socialists were against the suffrage amendment because "they thought it would delay Socialism for a thousand years." Work quietly arose at the end of the lecture and informed the audience that the Socialist platform had long endorsed woman's suffrage. At Marshalltown in 1906 he spoke ardently of even greater freedom for women, talking of such things as bobbed hair, short skirts, trousers, and complete economic independence. There should be, he stated, cooperative housekeeping and "those fitted by nature to cook should do the cooking." He even claimed that women should propose marriage as often as men did. Years later, Work would claim that he had been thirty years ahead of his time.

Work's demands for progressive, educational, and moral reforms detracted from the revolutionary goals of the left, however, since he sought to control the very class hatred which many of his critics hoped to sustain. Work was an evolutionary Socialist who believed in working through the processes of democracy. Socialism represented, for him, the highest state of democracy. He had no time, in later life, for the Bolshevik Revolution or the Communist party. Stalin's Russia appeared to Work as simply another form of totalitarianism.

His conservatism did not lessen his admiration for Eugene Debs, however, in spite of the Socialist leader's more radical ideological stance and his proclivity for profanity and booze. Work found Debs a "diamond in the rough," and described him as one whose qualities would mark him as one of the great men in history. Work assisted in the scheduling of the Red Special, the train which carried Debs across the nation during the presidential campaign of 1908. Both Work and Herron periodically traveled with Debs on that train. The 1908 campaign was one in which the Socialists doubled their vote nationally. In Iowa the Socialist vote reached new highs and the enthusiasm of the party remained great. Work tramped across Iowa in the early months of 1908, organizing several dozen locals, and recruiting hundreds to the Socialist cause.

Work also contributed to the efforts to free Bill Haywood, Charles Moyer, and George Pettibone, leaders of the Western Federation of Miners, who were charged with the murder of Idaho Governor Frank Steunenberg. Work assisted in organizing protest meetings, and attended conferences with Clarence Darrow, the chief attorney for the men. Although Work believed the men to be innocent, he resisted a move to nominate Haywood as the Socialist candidate for president following his acquittal. He also opposed a nationwide tour for Haywood to visit Socialist locals lest the tour spark a

**Hear**  
**JOHN M. WORK,**  
 Socialist Candidate for  
**GOVERNOR of IOWA,**  
 — AT —  
**TEMPLE HALL,**  
 Ninth and Locust Sts,  
 (First Floor)  
**DUBUQUE, IOWA,**  
**Wednesday Eve., Oct. 28**

*A campaign advertisement for Work's 1903 gubernatorial campaign.*



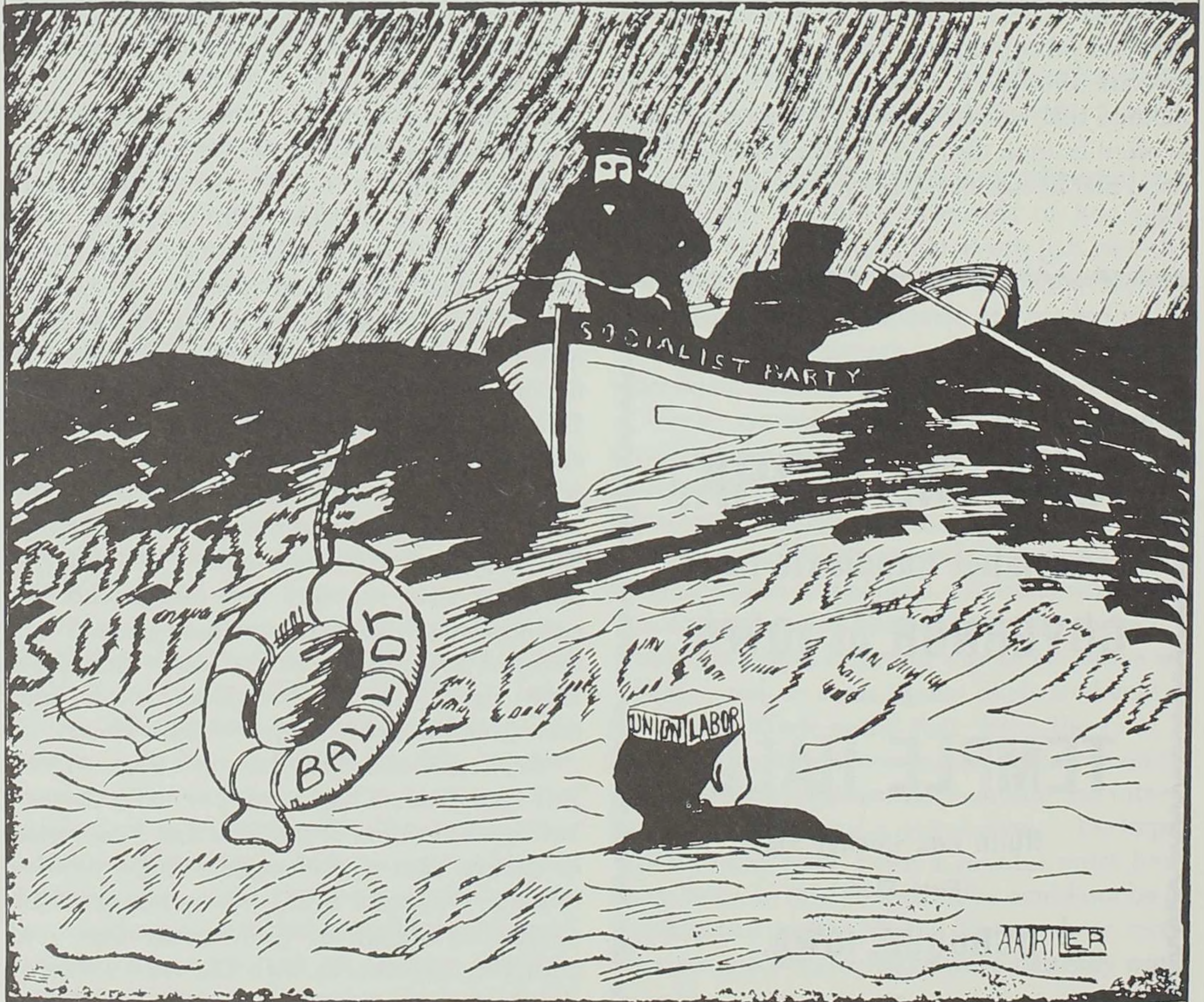
nominating movement.

John Work's western tours also brought him into contact with Tom Mooney, who was later convicted of bombing a San Francisco Preparedness Day parade in 1916 and sentenced to life imprisonment. Work met Mooney in western Washington in 1908, where Mooney was

selling subscriptions to *Wilshire's* magazine, hoping to win his way to a Socialist congress at Copenhagen. Work later wrote that he had sensed Mooney's essential radicalism. He added, "I did not admire him, but I believed him to be innocent of that charge."

When Work left Iowa in 1910 the future of

### A Labor Day Suggestion for Election Day



### A Hint to the Wise is Sufficient

An editorial cartoon published during the 1903 campaign suggested the limited options available to the working man.



# The Tide at the Flood



Written for  
THE IOWA  
SOCIALIST  
By  
JOHN M. WORK  
of Des Moines

the party seemed promising. There were now 908 dues-paying members of the Socialist party in the state. The size of the party had nearly doubled in five years. In the extremely successful election of 1912, Eugene Debs received 17,000 Iowa votes for president. Although Work had never won an elective office in Iowa, he was convinced that socialism was the political and economic system of the future. He described the years that he had spent "Touring for Socialism" in Iowa as an "enlightening and broadening experience." The effort the Socialists had put forth in Iowa, he claimed, was of immense educational value and that "we Socialists had educated millions of the people in the right direction."

John M. Work's Socialist career was just beginning when he left Iowa for Chicago. He served two frustrating years as National Party Secretary, 1911 to 1913. He always believed that the "impossibilists" or radicals had railroaded him out of that position. Nevertheless, Work remained loyal to the party and his crusading spirit was not dampened. He ran for elective office in Illinois as he had in Iowa, with similar results. For several years he instructed at La Salle Extension College in Chicago, while continuing to lecture and write. Then, in May 1917, he was invited by Victor

Berger to become the editor of the *Milwaukee Leader's* editorial page. He accepted and held the post for the next twenty-five years.

Work was an editorial writer when the *Leader* and its publisher, Victor Berger, were charged by the government with violating the Espionage and Sedition Act. The accusations stemmed from war hysteria and were part of the government's often misguided efforts to crack down on dissenters. Berger was convicted, although the conviction was later overturned in a higher court. Work actually claimed that he had written four of the five editorials attributed to Berger by the prosecution. He waited daily for an indictment but it never came. He continued to protest against the war while trying to stay within the law, a process which he described as a "difficult but thrilling episode in his life." It should be noted, however, that his opposition to World War I did not extend to American participation in either World War II or the Korean conflict which he felt were justified responses to obvious tyrannies.

In May 1942 his newspaper career came to an end. He was seventy-three years of age. During the twilight of his life, he continued attending Socialist meetings, tried his hand at writing novels, and served on the boards of the Commonwealth Mutual Savings Bank and the Mil-