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Review Article

The Trade Unions and Socialism in the United States

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Werner Sombart's famous question, 'Why is there no socialism in America?', was never quite fair to American socialists even when it was first posed in 1906. Today the contrast which has so often been drawn between radical, class-conscious Europe and conservative, bourgeois America seems less and less meaningful. Nevertheless, if the notion of American 'exceptionalism' is a crude one, the suspicion lingers that it is not totally without value. Certainly it remains an historical fact that the socialist and political labour movements of the United States (and Canada, let it not be forgotten) remained relatively weak in the early part of the twentieth century, while in Europe and Australasia they were becoming, or had already become, very powerful.

Extraordinary attention has been lavished on the rather feeble socialist organizations of the United States in an attempt to explain their failures, and a similar concern has recently led two historians, of British background and North American residence, to re-examine the relationships between socialism and trade unionism in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, trade unions were primarily responsible for the creation of political labour movements which eventually adopted socialist platforms, if they were not socialist from the outset. Elsewhere in the capitalist world, trade unions played important roles in socialist movements. Yet the American Federation of Labor and most of its affiliates rejected a commitment to socialism or third party politics and for many years the AF of L was reluctant to indulge in political activity of any kind. If one can explain the political behaviour of American trade unions, it follows, one can go a long way to explaining the weakness of socialism in the United States. This is what William Dick and John Laslett have attempted to do.¹

In *Labor and Socialism in America, the Gompers Era*, Dick launches an attack on what he calls 'determinist' explanations for the triumph of 'business unionism' in the United States. By determinist explanations he means those which stress the general economic, social and political conditions within which the trade unions operated. Instead he emphasizes the critical role of socialist and trade union leaders and especially of Samuel Gompers, the President of the AF of L. Environmental

¹ William M. Dick, *Labor and Socialism in America: the Gompers Era* (Port Washington N.Y. and London: Kennikat Press, 1972, \$10.95), pp. 211; John M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924* (New York: Basic Books, 1970, \$10), pp. vi, 326.

factors, he argues, did not determine the opinions and policies of these men. They simply chose to ignore alternative courses of action.

The bulk of Dick's book is taken up with an examination of the views and policies of Gompers and the leading socialists. Nowhere does he systematically examine the arguments put forward by Selig Perlman and others who have attributed the conservative policies of the AF of L leadership to environmental factors. However, he touches on some of their points in the course of his argument and offers some criticisms.

It is wrong to assume, Dick suggests, that, because American workers appear to be 'irrevocably middleclass' in their outlook today, this was always so. In fact there is evidence that in the period he is concerned with, roughly the 1880s to the 1920s, there was considerable grassroots support for socialism within some unions, notably those of the miners, brewery workers, garment workers, and machinists. Furthermore, other sources of support for socialism or independent political action could have been tapped or developed if the AF of L leadership had encouraged this development and had promoted industrial unions among the unskilled workers more vigorously.

The fact that the American working class formed only a minority within a predominantly petty bourgeois society (a point stressed by John R. Commons and Selig Perlman), did not, Dick argues, preclude effective political action by labour, since it was not only workers who were alienated and radicalized by the economic and social disruption of the late nineteenth century. An alliance with Populists or progressive elements was entirely feasible.

Dick acknowledges that the political system of the United States created special problems for all third parties, though he does not examine them. The rise of the Republican party in the 1850s, however, is offered as proof that third parties can succeed in the United States given favourable conditions and great effort. Conditions did not rule out the possibility of a radical third party in the Gompers era, according to Dick; what was lacking was effort on the part of the trade union leadership.

Finally we are reminded that other socialist and labour parties were not built in a day. British labour leaders encountered tremendous obstacles when they set out to build an independent political movement. Unlike Gompers and company, however, they persevered. With similar perseverance in the United States the course of history might have been changed.²

If the economic and political environment did not rule out a radical political role for the trade unions, as Dick alleges, why did Gompers and most of the national trade union leaders set their faces against it? The mystery is only deepened by one of Dick's most valuable findings, which is that Gompers and other prominent AF of L leaders were not fully committed to an anti-socialist line till about 1900, and that Gompers never entirely abandoned the idea that it was organized labour's mission to create a new and better social order, not merely to work for immediate improvements in wages and working conditions. Why then did Gompers become so bitterly anti-socialist in the twentieth century and why was he so reluctant to involve the AF of L in any political activity?

² Dick, *Labor and Socialism*, pp. 3-7, 32-3, 68-80, 85-92, 126-30, 183-7, and *passim*.

Unfortunately Dick is less concerned with answering this question than he is to demonstrate the 'unsound logic' of Gompers's views, but he does note that Gompers was influenced by the failure of his own union to secure favourable legislative action against tenement manufacture of cigars in 1881, and by the general failure of labour's political ventures in the nineteenth century, especially Henry George's New York mayoralty campaign in 1886. In the 1890s, Dick shows, Gompers often justified his anti-political line by reference to Marx's theory of the state, but he does not attempt to establish to what extent this reflected a genuine attachment to Marxist principles or was simply a ploy Gompers found useful against socialist critics. A general American prejudice against politicians and politics, Dick seems to think, was a more influential factor.

Gompers's hostility to socialism after 1900, Dick thinks, was essentially a corollary of his opposition to political action in general. He may also have been influenced by his unfortunate experiences with the DeLeonites in the 1890s, though it was 'illogical' for him to confuse these extremists with the moderate revisionists of the Socialist Party of America. Certain psychological traits, especially a compulsion 'to find a villain in every piece' may also have played a part.³

Now when one considers Dick's explanation of why Gompers took the positions that he did, it immediately becomes apparent that the dichotomy he has drawn between social forces on the one hand and leadership on the other is largely false. Let us allow that the savagery with which Gompers attacked the socialists may have owed something to personal quirks of character. But would Gompers have risked launching these assaults unless he had been confident that he had the support of the bulk of his followers? And if the AF of L and national trade union leadership did not necessarily reflect rank and file opinion, as Dick suggests, this is itself a phenomenon which can only be explained by examining the social and political conditions which gave rise to an unrepresentative leadership.

Much the same can be said about the attitude of the AF of L leaders towards industrial unionism. Perhaps Gompers could have done more for the unskilled, though it should be noted that the AF of L provided 25 per cent of the funds used in the effort to organize the Chicago stockyards between 1917 and 1919, to mention only one example.⁴ Furthermore, since we are concerned with comparisons, the British equivalent of the AF of L, the Trades Union Congress, never played any organizing role whatsoever. The main point, however, is surely that, insofar as Gompers took a lukewarm attitude towards organizing the unskilled, this reflected quite accurately the attitudes of the constituent bodies he represented, and when we begin attempting to account for these attitudes we are back once again with a set of economic and social conditions.

On the central question, Gompers's aversion to political action of all kinds, Dick himself suggests that general American attitudes towards political life were significant. Even less can we separate the general conditions which American trade unions faced and Gompers's own personal experience with tenement house legislation, the Henry George campaign and so on. It is precisely at this point that leadership and general conditions intersect.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-48, 131-2.

⁴ David Brody, *The Butcher Workmen* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 92.

Dick's emphasis on Gompers's personal responsibility for the absence of a political labour party in the United States might make more sense if it could be shown that the presidency of the AF of L was a particularly powerful position in the trade union world and that Gompers's attitudes were untypical of trade union leaders in general. Yet both propositions are demonstrably false. One might also be tempted to lay great weight on the leadership factor if there were no other plausible explanations available for the unwillingness of the AF of L and most of its affiliates to plunge into radical politics. The problem for the historian is rather the reverse. It is true enough that the creation of the British Labour Party by trade unionists and socialists was not an easy task, but it is also true that, at the time the Labour Representation Committee was established in Britain, trade unionism was far more powerful there than in the United States; that the British workforce was not composed of a host of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups; that even partially enfranchised, the British working class had greater voting power than the American proletariat could hope for; that the LRC did not have to consider how to react to a mass movement of property-owning farmers obsessed with the idea of currency inflation; and that it did not have to cope with the peculiar difficulties associated with the American presidential-federal system of government. One can leave aside altogether the alleged middleclass aspirations of American working men and still think of a host of reasons why American trade union leaders might have had rational doubts about the wisdom of committing their rather fragile organizations to a difficult political enterprise.

Whereas Dick justifies his study of trade union and socialist leadership by claiming historians have ignored its importance, and concentrated on general 'determinist' explanations of socialist weakness, John Laslett asserts almost exactly the reverse in his book, *Labor and the Left*. Historians, he says, have concentrated on the 'opinions, tactics, and general labor policies adopted by the national leadership of the AF of L and of the various socialist and Farmer-Labor parties', at the expense of 'the particular characteristics of American social and industrial development'.⁵ The truth is that a great deal has been written on both subjects, but if Laslett's concern with general conditions is less novel than he claims, his particular strategy of research is an original one. What he has attempted is a description of and an explanation for the rise and decline of socialist sentiment in six important trade unions where socialists were dominant or at least influential at some time between 1881 and 1924.

The rise of socialist influence in British trade unions, it should be noted, was only one of the factors which led to the creation of the Labour Representation Committee and the rise of the Labour Party. At least as important was the desire of non-socialist trade unionists to establish independent political representation in parliament and secure specific non-socialist legislative goals. In its early years, the Labour Party's policy planks were barely distinguishable from those of the Liberals, and the party did not adopt a socialist platform until 1918.⁶ The early

⁵ Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, pp. 287–8.

⁶ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party, 1880–1900* (Oxford, 1954, 1965), pp. 192–215; H. A. Clegg, Alan Fox, A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889*, Volume 1: 1889–1910 (Oxford, 1964), pp. 269–304, 364–422.

labour parties in Australia were similarly uncommitted to socialism.⁷ If we are to understand the absence of a labour party in the United States, we will need to know not only why socialists gained or failed to gain support within the trade unions, but also why non-socialist trade unionists in America were less favourably inclined towards third party political activity than their counterparts elsewhere. Laslett is perfectly entitled to write about just one of these questions and to ignore the other, but it is important to realize that there are limits to what can be learned from his research.

Laslett has further limited the value of his study by choosing to examine only trade unions where socialists were influential and ignoring those where they were not. The socialism of the brewery workers, he concludes, derived chiefly from the socialist heritage of Germany.⁸ Yet we are also told that there were other German trade unions that did not endorse socialist goals.⁹ Surely we would need a comparative study of German trade unions, socialist and non-socialist, in order to assess the significance of the ethnic factor rather than a study of German and non-German radical unions? Similarly Laslett's view that the erosion of the skilled workman's position in the machinists' trade was an important influence on the rise of socialism among machinists would be more convincing if it could be shown that this trend was significantly more marked here than elsewhere. Laslett thinks that it was, and perhaps he is right, but since no other craft union is dealt with, we are entitled to remain sceptical.

Of course one cannot always find suitable comparative models and in some cases there may be no other way of getting at the sources of political radicalism in a trade union than by an intensive study of that union. Laslett's study is, however, not especially intensive. He has spread himself over twenty years and six trade unions, including some of the largest in the United States. In some cases the mere construction of a narrative history of a union has required a great deal of work. Consequently the depth of the research on any one of these unions has been necessarily limited, and the explanations offered for why they became and later ceased to be radical seem plausible rather than compelling.

In the case of Massachusetts boot and shoe workers, for example, Laslett lays great stress on the rise of mechanized factory production, which deprived many workmen of their skilled status and their independence. As subsidiary factors he mentions a radical tradition transmitted through the Knights of St Crispin and the Knights of Labor, and declining wage levels. Perhaps the answer lies in this combination of factors, but low wages and the traditions of reform unionism affected many other groups of workers; factory production of shoes had become the norm in Massachusetts before the Civil War, and the revolution brought about by the introduction of the McKay and Goodyear sewing machines was virtually complete by 1880.¹⁰ The upsurge of socialism among the boot and shoe workers occurred in

⁷ Robin Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics : a Study of Eastern Australia, 1850-1910* (Melbourne, 1960), pp. 128-50; D. W. Rawson, 'Labour, Socialism and the Working Class', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 7 (May 1961).

⁸ Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, p. 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-62; Blanche E. Hazard, *The Organisation of the Boot and Shoe Industry in Massachusetts Before 1875* (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), p. 98; E. M. Hoover, Jr., *Location Theory and the Shoe and Leather Industries* (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), pp. 162-7.

the 1890s, and one cannot help wondering if Laslett's explanations are sufficient. We would like to know more about the shoeworkers and their towns, Brockton, Haverhill, and Lynn, which were among the oldest centres of manufacturing in America. Perhaps there are particular features of these communities, such as a relatively homogeneous workforce, which might give us further clues. But Laslett, not surprisingly, since he has six industries to deal with, gives us neither the kind of statistical analysis of the social structure which the current generation of social historians is beginning to produce nor the sort of word picture of life in the shoe towns which typified the older social history. After reading Laslett on any of his six unions one is left with the feeling that some false leads have been eliminated and some useful hypotheses developed, but never that the last word has been said. Of course it never has been but some historians at least leave us with that illusion for a time.

Both Dick and Laslett have contributed something to our understanding of the subject. Dick has given us a far clearer picture than we have had hitherto of the evolution and nature of Samuel Gompers's ideology. Laslett has been able to demonstrate the falsity of some views of American socialism, such as that only foreigners and intellectuals supported it in significant numbers; and he has at least given us some idea as to what might explain the strength of radicalism in six major industries.

The question of why the AF of L and most American trade unions refused to commit themselves to socialism or third party activity, however, remains wide open. It is usually assumed that the triumph of business unionism reflected the positive identification of America's labour aristocracy with the existing social order. Alternatively it can be convincingly argued that the American trade unions refrained from independent political action because they were acutely conscious of their own weakness in the prevailing economic and political conditions.

Much the same questions apply to the relative weakness of American trade unions in the industrial sphere before the 1930s. On the one hand it is commonly argued, and more commonly assumed, that the absence of traditional class barriers, high wage levels and considerable social mobility, combined with ethno-cultural diversity, created a working class that was uniquely bourgeois in its orientation and inherently resistant to radicalism and collective action of any sort. On the other hand we know that it was generally the best-paid workers who succeeded in forming unions, that organizations like the Knights of Labor and the American Railway Union attracted the unskilled in large numbers, that many American workers were socialists, and that industrial disputes in the United States were fought with extraordinary bitterness and violence. Perhaps American working men were as often cowed as they were cajoled into quiescence.

It is conventional, at this point in a review article, to say that we need more research on this and that, and of course we do. At the same time it will be useful to keep the broad international perspective in mind since we are concerned here with comparative questions. Before we assume a link between high wages and business unionism, for example, let us note that the world's first labour government came to power in Australia, another high wage country. The case of Canada, and especially Ontario, should be instructive, since here we find trade unions strongly influenced by and affiliated to those of the United States, and yet operating

in a setting which was in some ways distinctly different. Finally the historian of American labour must avoid the temptation of dealing with European labour history as though it were all of a kind. The TUC after all exchanged fraternal delegates with the AF of L from 1894 onwards but shunned close contacts with its continental counterparts. French and German labour each has its 'peculiar' traditions. No historian can be expected to carry out extensive research in all these countries, but an acquaintance at least with the history of labour in other countries can help him define his questions more carefully and avoid some elementary errors.