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NORMAN THOMAS

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NORMAN THOMAS

One of the most-nominated men in American history is nominated once again. And when he campaigns he really means it.

BY EDWARD LEVINSON

NORMAN THOMAS is the only anti-capitalist candidate for the Presidency. At one time, the Communists also declared themselves in favor of a radical reorganization of society on a basis of socialized industry, but today they emphasize more a "people's front" embracing laborites, radicals, liberals, Townsendites, and what-not in a campaign against reaction, even to the extent of indicating a preference for Mr. Roosevelt as against Governor Landon. But Norman Thomas sticks to his Socialist guns, crying a plague on both the Democratic and Republican Parties and urging votes for Socialism both as an expedient and as a long-range policy.

This sturdy avowal of his Socialist faith, disregarding the temporary winds of political popularity — or hysteria—is a key to Norman Thomas' character. Even his critics will admit that there might be more in immediate popularity and personal political fortune for him if he threw in his lot with the labor supporters of the New Deal and President Roosevelt. But for a man who has run for office every year since he assumed the responsibility of Socialist leadership, there is in Norman Thomas an amazing lack of desire for personal success. Eugene V. Debs' famous affirmation, "When I rise, it will be with the working class, not from it," might be the text for the life-story of Norman Thomas, if he finally over-

comes his modesty and permits such a story to be written.

The character and activity of Norman Thomas have been misrepresented almost as much by friends as by his critics. His early years as a Presbyterian minister, his studies at Princeton, his acceptance of an unwanted honorary degree from his alma mater, his long directorship of the middle-class League for Industrial Democracy, his authorship of several books—almost the only American contributions to Socialist literature in the last decade—have been emphasized until he has been stamped with the blighting label of an "intellectual", somewhat removed from the cause and class he has championed.

Trade Unionism's Friend

There is more of fundamental significance concerning Norman Thomas in his other lines of endeavor. Since the death of Debs, there has been no Socialist or radical leader so completely immersed in the problems of trade unionism as Mr. Thomas. His New York office for years has been the haven of workingmen and trade unionists seeking advice and aid in their campaigns for better working conditions. The racketeers of labor have as little love for Mr. Thomas as have the predatory politicians of Tammany Hall, who gained a healthy respect for his opposition a decade ago. Through his Emergency Committee for Strikers' Relief, the Socialist

Presidential candidate has given vital aid to more than a million trade unionists and strikers. And in his two decades of Socialist activity, Norman Thomas has addressed more trade unionists, in times of strikes and in times of economic peace, than any other member of his, or any other, labor party.

Pointing to Sore Spots

With an almost unerring instinct for the right kind of publicity to advance his cause, Mr. Thomas has succeeded in making local sore spots in our democracy the concern of the entire nation. He taught the nation the meaning of the word sharecropper and has brought into existence the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Single-handed, he directed the nation's attention to the murder last year in Tampa, Florida, of Joseph Shoemaker, the local leader of the unemployed. The unsuccessful defense of Shoemaker's brutal attackers itself paid tribute, in its bitter assaults, to the potency of the protest aroused by the Socialist leader. Martial law in Terre Haute, Indiana, last year brought Mr. Thomas to the spot to defy the arbitrary military rule. And Terre Haute, Tampa, and the medieval farm lands of Arkansas are but the most recent of American communities to come within the scope of his activities. Scores of cities and towns have felt his influence. Picket lines, free-speech test cases, and the defense of racial and political minorities have all known Norman Thomas, not only as a partisan in their behalf, but as an active participant in their struggles.

In politics, too, Norman Thomas has more than matched his theoretical interest with practical application. He has run for member of the Board of Aldermen in New York City, for the State Senate and the United States

Senate, for Mayor of New York City, and now, for the third time, for the Presidency of the United States. Always, his campaign has been one of aggressive education in fundamental Socialist principles, closely and harmoniously knitted with the immediate needs of the situation. In New York City he instituted the assault on the corruption and degradation of the magistrates, justices of the "poor man's court." Several judges now in involuntary retirement have Mr. Thomas to curse for their fate. In 1929, he ran for Mayor for the second time and laid the breastworks which blew up a few years later, sending the city's most popular Mayor, Jimmie Walker, into political oblivion. The movement for public, low-priced housing to replace the great stretches of slum area has reached its present stage of public consciousness, if not yet of completion, because of Mr. Thomas' constant hammering away at the issue.

Doubts About the World

Seeking biographical data from Norman Thomas, one receives an injunction to eliminate all cant and window-dressing. "Don't try to make a sentimental 'Log Cabin to White House' picture of your story," he writes. "I wasn't born in a log cabin and I'm not likely to live in the White House. I worked at a lot of jobs when I was a kid because most of the boys I knew did. My folks had to count the pennies pretty carefully, but I was never hungry."

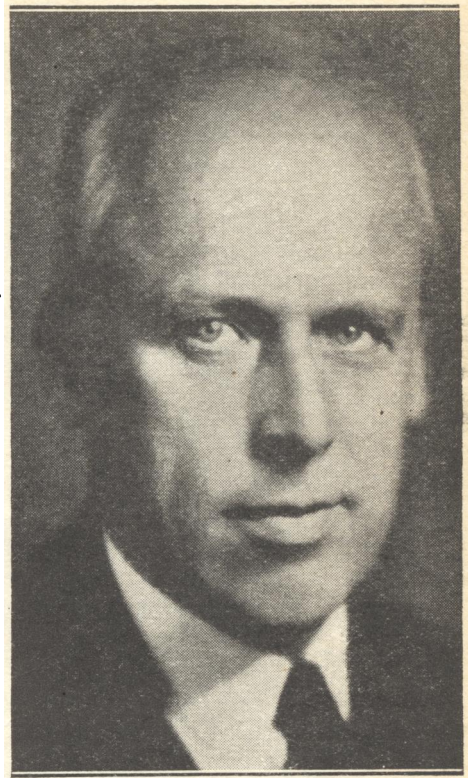
The Socialist leader was born on November 20, 1884, in a two-story parsonage next to his father's Presbyterian Church on Prospect Street, in Marion, Ohio. Young Norman Thomas studied at Bucknell, and later, at Princeton's theological seminary, he prepared for the ministry. While at Princeton, he took every available

course in sociology. By commencement in 1904, he had developed some doubts as to whether the world was at its best.

Norman Thomas' years in the church also provided an outlet for his rapidly forming social beliefs. He took a job, on leaving Princeton, at the East Side Settlement in New York, at a salary of \$500 a year. After a trip through Asia, he returned to take up his work as assistant pastor of Christ Church in the metropolis. After a brief interlude as assistant to the Rev. Henry Van Dyke at the Brick Presbyterian Church on Fifth Avenue, Mr. Thomas went for seven years to the American Parish in the heart of Italian working-class Harlem. Here he found full play for his community interests, and his social work formed an inevitable counterpart to his preaching. The World War found him still in the American Parish. In the meantime, he had been reading H. G. Wells and other Socialists.

Fight for Pacifism

To Norman Thomas, the World War and the United States' participation in it was a test of Christianity and social intelligence. He rejected the notion of slaughter and force on the part of Russia, Japan, and Great Britain as a means of bringing democracy to the world. With Rabbi Judah L. Magnes, the elder Senator La Follette, and Eugene Debs, he opposed the War and urged an immediate and constructive peace. When Morris Hillquit, the Socialist, ran for Mayor of New York City in a notable protest against the War, Norman Thomas gave his support to him. Now the elders of the church, who had been financing their minister's all-important social work, drew back in resentment. It was bad enough, they felt, for Thomas to be a pacifist; for him to support a Socialist



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was too much. The budget for the social services was not forthcoming. Thomas understood and resigned his pastorate.

Norman Thomas, Journalist

Thomas joined the Socialist Party when many of its erstwhile leaders, tried in the crucible of unpopularity and war fever, were deserting it. With other advocates of peace, he joined in the work of the People's Council and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He became editor of *The World Tomorrow*, organ of the F.O.R., and as such won a compliment he has ever prized. Postmaster General Burleson had been busily barring pacifist and Socialist publications from the mails. Turning his attention to *The World*

Tomorrow and its editor, Burleson declared, "Thomas is more insidious than Debs." Thomas' answer was to help organize the Civil Liberties Union, which gave Burleson and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who tried to ride to the Presidency in 1920 by persecution of real and imaginary "reds", more to worry about. Thomas espoused in particular the cause of the "C.O.'s", the conscientious objectors to war service, who preferred military prison to fighting a war they did not believe in.

With the end of the War came the famous expulsion of the ten Socialists from the New York State Legislature. Thomas, a "star" witness for the defense in the trial which followed, tried to shatter the hoary falsehoods about Socialism, the home, and religion which the Socialists' prosecutors had injected into the case. A few years later began his association with Dr. Harry W. Laidler in the directorship of the League for Industrial Democracy, which Jack London and Upton Sinclair had helped to found in 1905 as the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. An editorship of *The Nation* and a brief period as editor of the labor daily, *The New York Leader*, followed.

Leader of the Socialists

From 1924, when he was nominated for Governor of New York State, dates Thomas' political leadership of the Socialist Party. He was an innovator as a Socialist politician; no Socialist has ever succeeded so well in winning public attention for his cause. He combined his Socialist principles with their practical application to current issues. He brought young research men and publicity men to his aid. His copy became sought after by the newspapers, not one of which, at the outset, supported him. After the 1924 campaign, the liberals with whom

the Socialists had joined in supporting La Follette for the Presidency fell by the wayside, but Thomas carried on. He ran for Mayor of New York in 1924 and again in 1929 in the most important Socialist municipal campaign the party has ever staged. Against the dogged La Guardia and the flighty but colorful Jimmie Walker, he sent broadsides of substantial municipal Socialism. The Citizens' Union, most respectable of good government groups, was forced to announce its preference for the Socialist candidate. A few days later, the Scripps-Howard *World-Telegram* also urged votes for Thomas, and Pulitzer's New York *World* counselled its readers to vote for Thomas or go fishing on election day. Liberal Republicans and Democrats deserted their parties and joined with Socialists to give Thomas 175,000 votes, a new high for the party since the memorable campaign of 1917.

Thomas was the Socialist candidate for the Presidency in 1928. He took a party more dead than alive, cursed by a spirit of defeatism, and re-established it as a political entity, although it polled only a quarter of a million votes. He returned to the battle on a national scale in 1932 and raised the party's total to 900,000. The 1932 campaign was followed by a distasteful job. The elder Socialists, rooted half in a spirit of defeatism and half in a dogma that called for the mere mechanical iteration of their belief in the accuracy of Marxian theory, had begun to resent the aggressiveness of Thomas. He told them he had not left the church in 1918 to join a new one. He told them the class struggle theory was something to be taught as an ideal of solidarity and to be fought for in the day-by-day political and economic struggles. He would not share their feeling that it was to be regarded as a fatalistic

scripture of inevitable, unfought-for Socialist victory. With all the bitterness of old men hating to surrender the prerogatives of age, the Socialist "old guard" called Thomas at once a "reformer" and a "communist." With tolerance and hopes of peaceful persuasion, Thomas tried to convince them. This failed for several years, and early this year he performed a surgical operation which has now removed from the party the dead hand of a sterile Marxism. Having taken control of the party, Thomas was not one to dodge his responsibilities. So, in this year, Thomas has again accepted the job of carrying his Socialist message to the voters and workers.

Towards a Farmer-Labor Party

He regards the New Deal as another illustration of liberal patch-work, already shown—by the presence of more

than ten million unemployed—to be a failure; he regards the Democratic Party as a combination of liberal rainbow-chasers, Southern industrialists and bigots, and corrupt or reactionary city political machines in the North. He points out ceaselessly that his three most recent battles for labor have been in Democratic States and cities: in Arkansas in behalf of the sharecroppers; in Indiana against martial law; and in Tampa, Florida, against mob rule and vigilantism. He does not say the Socialist Party will stand aloof and superior from the formation of a labor party, but insists that no such party is in the arena in this election. Today Norman Thomas and his supporters regard votes for the Socialist ticket as the best and only ballots for the formation of a large and inclusive American Farmer-Labor party.

Thomas on Negatives

[Democrats and Republicans] pander to the popular habit of voting against something rather than for something.

For this I do not blame the politician so much as the voters. If they like to turn over blank checks to incoming officials why should candidates offer them anything else? Nevertheless, the habit of which I speak tends to give us campaigns full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

The outstanding illustration of the evil of which I speak was furnished by Father Coughlin at the Townsend Plan convention at Cleveland. The priest whipped his great audience into frenzied enthusiasm by the unrestrained vehemence of his denunciation of President Roosevelt and others whom he does not like, and by such further appeals to the intelligence as tearing off his coat and collar. Never once did he refer specifically to the Townsend plan or retract his earlier criticism of it as "economic insanity."

—From a speech by Norman Thomas at Chautauqua, N. Y.