

TO THE FINAL CONFLICT:
SOCIALISM IN NEW YORK CITY, 1900-1933

By
ELENA KAGAN

April 15, 1981

A senior thesis submitted to the
History Department of Princeton University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

TO MY PARENTS

Acknowledgments

The staff members of the Tamiment Institute greatly facilitated my research for this thesis, directing me to relevant collections and aiding me in all possible respects. Sean Wilentz painstakingly read each page of this thesis -- occasionally two or three times. His comments and suggestions were invaluable; his encouragement was both needed and appreciated. Finally, I would like to thank my brother Marc, whose involvement in radical causes led me to explore the history of American radicalism in the hope of clarifying my own political ideas.

CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
<u>Chapter I</u> GROWTH AND ETHNICITY: A PORTRAIT OF THE NEW YORK SOCIALIST PARTY, 1900-1914	12
<u>Chapter II</u> SHADES OF RED: DISSENSION WITHIN THE SP, 1901-1914	29
<u>Chapter III</u> THE PROTOCOL OF PEACE?: DISSENSION WITHIN THE ILGWU, 1909-1916	50
<u>Chapter IV</u> THE PECULIAR INTERLUDE: LOCAL NEW YORK DURING WORLD WAR I	65
<u>Chapter V</u> THE GREAT DIVIDE: 1919 AND THE SOCIALIST PARTY SPLIT	87
<u>Chapter VI</u> THE FINAL CONFLICT: CIVIL WAR IN THE ILGWU	105
CONCLUSION	127

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Werner Sombart first posed the question in 1905, countless historians have tried to explain why there is no socialism in America. For the most part, this work has focused on external factors--on features of American society rather than of American socialist movements. Socialists and non-socialists alike have discussed the importance of the frontier in providing the U. S. citizenship with a safety valve and in keeping urban unemployment to a minimum. They have pointed to the fluidity of class lines in the United States--a fluidity which, whether real or imagined, impeded the development of a radical class consciousness. They have dwelled on the American labor force's peculiarly heterogeneous character, which made concerted class action more difficult than it might otherwise have been. In short, most historians have looked everywhere but to the American socialist movement itself for explanations of U.S. socialism's failure.¹

Such external explanations are not unimportant but neither do they tell the full story. They ignore or overlook one supremely important fact: Socialism has indeed existed in the United States. It would be absurd to overestimate the strength of the early twentieth century

socialist movement; from 1900 through 1920, the U.S. Socialist Party remained an essentially minor organization, which never gained more than minimal political power. During this time, however, the SP did manage to establish itself as a visible and, even more important, an expanding political party.² Aided by a broadly-based American discontent with the nation's hardening corporate order, the Socialist Party increased its membership from a scanty 10,000 in 1902 to a respectable 109,000 in the early months of 1919.³ Throughout the latter half of this same period, the socialists could boast a party press that included over three hundred publications with an aggregate circulation of approximately two million.⁴ Each Election Day demonstrated that the SP--although still attracting a very small percentage of the nation's total vote--was slowly but surely broadening its electoral base. Each May Day showed that, while the socialists never won a majority in the American Federation of Labor, they commanded the allegiance of significant sectors of the labor movement. It can be argued, furthermore, that the specter of socialism haunted Americans to a far greater extent than the SP's numerical strength might indicate. Even a brief perusal of the newspapers of this period suggests how seriously the Socialist Party was taken: It is difficult to construe the energetic and recurrent anti-socialist polemics of the American press as simply opportunistic

attempts to bludgeon a purely marginal movement. Intellectuals throughout the country avidly debated the pros and cons of the socialist creed; as Charles Beard wrote in 1913, it would have been "a work of supererogation to attempt to prove that men and women presumptively engaged in the pursuit of knowledge should take an intelligent interest" in socialism, a subject which was, he added, "shaking the old foundations of politics...and penetrating our science, art and literature."⁵ Finally, political progressives and reformers of every ilk used the more mild of socialist ideas in their platforms and writings, and occasionally even put such ideas into practice.⁶

To be sure, the American SP differed greatly from the ideal type of socialist party conceived by Sombart. The Socialist Party of the United States could not lay claim to the kind of pure proletarianism that Sombart considered essential to any socialist movement; indeed, most of the party's members did not even consider this a worthy goal. But the American socialists' "failure" to build a movement that even resembled Sombart's idealized notion of a class-conscious party--a failure which they shared with most of their European counterparts--did not render their party any less significant. Nor did such a failure render their party any less successful. In the first two decades of the twentieth century the American socialist movement, whose very existence Sombart refused to consider, grew if not by leaps and bounds at least by inches.

The success of the socialists in establishing a viable--if minor--political party in the early twentieth century suggests that historians must examine not only external but also internal factors if they hope to explain the absence of socialism from contemporary American politics. The effects of the frontier, of class mobility, of an ethnically divided working class may explicate why the Socialist Party did not gain an immediate mass following; they cannot explain why the growing and confident American socialist movement of the Progressive Era suddenly fell apart. For that, we must turn to the internal workings and problems of the socialist movement itself.

Three historians have attempted to do just this, but each in an ultimately unsatisfactory way. In 1952, Daniel Bell argued that the failure of the U.S. socialist movement had its roots in the SP's inability to solve what Peter Gay later termed "the dilemma of democratic socialism."⁷ The Socialist Party's Achilles' heel, according to Bell, was that it was simultaneously committed to and incapable of operating within the democratic channels of the American political system. Bell writes:

The socialist movement, by its very statement of goal and its rejection of the capitalist order as a whole, could not relate itself to the specific problems of social action in the here-and-now, give-and-take political world. It was trapped by the unhappy problem of living '*in but not of the world*,' so it could only act, and then inadequately, as the moral but not political man in immoral society. (*Italics in original.*)⁸

This "unhappy problem," Bell argues, appeared most clearly during the years of World War I, when the SP leadership, in accordance with its own moral sense, took a strongly anti-war stance, and thereby discredited itself among intellectuals and trade unionists alike.⁹

Bell's thesis simply will not stand up under close scrutiny. In the first place, the Socialist Party experienced little decline during the war years; indeed, in some areas the party's anti-war position greatly increased its strength and popularity. Even more important, Bell's image of the socialist as a visionary, divorced from "real" political life, is a fallacious one. The key to comprehending the pre-1920 Socialist Party, as we shall see, is to understand that its leaders were not only in but very much of the world--in fact, too much so for many of their political supporters. Thoroughly political men, they had what Moses Rischin has called a "sure sense for the arithmetic of idealism."¹⁰ Relating only too well to the "here-and-now, give-and-take" of America, they simply will not conform to either our own image or Bell's ideal type of the American radical.

In The American Socialist Movement, Ira Kipness escapes Bell's pitfall only to blunder into one of his own making. According to Kipness, the Socialist Party collapsed in 1912, when the right- and center-wing socialist leaders expelled Big Bill Haywood from their midst. With this single stroke, Kipness writes, the right-wing of the SP

killed its own movement; the departure of Haywood's anarcho-syndicalist supporters from the party meant also the departure of the party from American life.¹¹ Kipness' thesis is highly suggestive, for it calls attention to the sectarian nature of the early twentieth century Socialist Party. His explanation is, however, also wrong. As James Weinstein has shown in copious detail, the events of 1912 had little effect on the U.S. socialist movement. After this date, the party retained its electoral and trade-union support, and socialists continued to play a visible role in the nation's political realm.¹² No explanation, then, that places the death of the Socialist Party in 1912 is credible. Something other than the withdrawal of Haywood and the syndicalists from the party must have been involved.

James Weinstein offers the alternative thesis that the dissolution of the Socialist Party resulted not from the walkout of the syndicalists in 1912 but from the infinitely more disastrous departure of the communists seven years later.

At the end of 1919, the Socialist Party was fractured in three directions and into many parts Socialist influence in the labor movement . . . was all but destroyed from the split, and the socialist press, struggling to make a comeback after wartime suppression, was permanently debilitated. In the decade that followed the split, the lines drawn in 1919 were erected into walls, and the movement became one of hostile and warring sects.¹³

In ascribing disaster to the socialist-communist split, Weinstein is correct: As we shall see, 1919 was indeed

the great divide, the year in which the future impotence of American socialism was ensured. Weinstein's interpretation, however, contains one fundamental flaw. As he sees it, "the movement for a split in the Socialist Party . . . sprang forth suddenly, and with little or no internal impetus."¹⁴ The sole cause of the American socialist civil war, Weinstein argues, was the Russian Revolution--an event that occurred thousands of miles away. To be sure, the Bolshevik seizure of power held romantic allure for many American socialists. But it seems dubious that one distant revolution--even one as momentous as the Bolshevik seizure of power--could have destroyed the Socialist Party had it not been for certain deeper, longer-standing divisions. Weinstein's explanation is a superficial one. The Russian Revolution was the precipitant of the American Socialist Party's split and subsequent decline; it was not and could not have been the sole cause.

We are, then, left with three ultimately inadequate explanations of the sudden demise of a growing socialist movement. The other-worldliness of the socialists, the expulsion of Haywood in 1912, the Russian Revolution of 1917--none will satisfactorily explain the death of socialism in America. What, then, was responsible?

In attempting to answer this question, this thesis will focus almost exclusively on the history of the New York City local of the Socialist Party, from its founding

in 1900 through its collapse in the several years after 1919. A part can never truly reflect the whole, and this is especially so when the whole is the SP and the part New York. According to the Socialist Party's constitution, every territorial organization possessed a high degree of autonomy--possessed, in fact,

the sole jurisdiction of the members residing within their respective territories, and the sole control of all matters pertaining to the propaganda, organization, and financial affairs within such state or territory.¹⁵

Such a high degree of decentralization may make the history of any SP local inherently atypical. This may seem even more the case when the subject of the study is New York--a city larger, more varied and more polyglot than any other in the United States. The difficulties and risks involved in drawing general conclusions about the socialist movement from such a locality cannot be ignored.

Still, if a single city's socialist movement may be unrepresentative in some respects, it may also allow for close and detailed study. The historian may delve more deeply into complex attitudes and events--and may pinpoint more accurately their causes and effects--than could otherwise be the case. Furthermore, the history of Local New York--no matter how atypical--determined to at least some extent that of the national SP. The largest of the SP's branches, Local New York served as one of the party's most critical foundation stones; indeed, the national organization

sometimes seemed to depend almost as much on its New York members as vice versa. Finally, there are good reasons to believe that the New York socialist movement was not as unrepresentative of the national one as it might at first appear. The most important of these was the presence of Morris Hillquit at the helm of the New York Socialist Party. Hillquit was not simply the leader of the New York SP; he was a leader of the national party as well. Eugene Debs might have been the SP's standardbearer, its most conspicuous and adulated figure, but it was Hillquit and his ally Victor Berger who actually molded the party in their image. Gradually, their ideology became the SP's ideology, their policies the party's.¹⁶ The presence of Hillquit in the New York socialist movement, then, ensured that the city's tactics would never be far out of line with the country's, for Hillquit had his hand in both. Likewise, the most vocal and visible leader of New York City's left-wing opposition could lay claim to being a national figure. Never as well-known as Haywood or Debs, Louis Boudin nonetheless served as the theorist of the national socialist movement's more radical wing. Just as he and Hillquit sparred in New York, so too did they spar in the nation. To a great extent, the country's disputes mirrored the city's.

With this in mind, we may ask the question which the remainder of this thesis will attempt to address: What caused the strange death of socialism in New York City? In

answering this question, we must go back to the very beginnings of the Socialist Party, for the collapse of New York socialism, although sudden, had deep roots indeed. From its first days, the New York SP was both divided within itself and estranged from many of its trade-union followers. Among the party's members, a right-left cleavage arose early-- a cleavage based not on the minutiae of dogma but on the very fundamentals of socialism itself. What was the proper class composition of a socialist party? What trade-union and electoral policies should the party follow? What attitude should the party take toward distinctly non-radical reform measures? On these questions, the socialists divided into two camps: those of "constructive" and "revolutionary" socialism. The constructivists had the upper hand in Local New York, but the revolutionaries were never quelled. From 1901 until the First World War, these two groups engaged in constant and acid debate over the widest possible range of both theoretical and tactical issues. At the same time, the constructive socialists also met with heated opposition from substantial portions of their trade-union following. The socialist-controlled unions included in their ranks many workers whose radicalism extended far beyond that of the SP/union leaders themselves. These laborers represented a kind of second front of the left opposition, prodding the constructivists to be more militant, chastising them when-- as was usually the case--they were not.

The First World War concealed for a time these deep internal rifts. Often considered by historians as socialism's downfall, the war actually granted the socialists a respite from sectarianism and allowed them to reach a pinnacle of strength. From 1914 to 1917, the war was the one issue on which everyone--right or left, union leader or union member--could agree. For three years, harmony replaced dissension, and the New York socialist movement benefited greatly. The peace, however, proved an illusory one. At the end of 1918, old disputes quickly reappeared, but this time in even fiercer form. For years, large numbers of the SP's members and large blocs of its trade-union support had expressed deep dissatisfaction with socialist leadership. Now, the Russian Revolution set the spark to their long-smoldering rebellion, and the Socialist Party burst into flames. In 1919, the SP split into two, and the New York City communist movement emerged.

Morris Hillquit believed the split would strengthen the Socialist Party; a small but unified radical organization, he reasoned, would ultimately go further than a large but divided one.¹⁷ Events soon proved him wrong. Intra-party sectarianism had previously weakened the socialist movement; inter-party sectarianism now finished the job.

By the late 1920s, the socialist movement in New York City was dead; what remained was no more than its ghost.

CHAPTER I

GROWTH AND ETHNICITY;
A PORTRAIT OF THE
NEW YORK SOCIALIST PARTY
1901-1914

On the eve of World War I, as at the turn of the century, the New York Socialist Party remained a decidedly minor political force, its strength far below that of either the Democrats or the Republicans. During its first thirteen years, Local New York neither attracted more than five percent of the city's total vote nor boasted more than 5,000 dues-paying members.¹ Nevertheless, the period between 1901 and 1914 was one of impressive growth for the New York SP. Membership rolls gradually grew longer; electoral returns showed steady progress; trade-union support rapidly mounted. Such numerical and institutional progress--which took place particularly among the 1,300,000 Jews who comprised over one-fourth of New York's population² --impressed socialists and non-socialists alike. In 1913, Morris Hillquit ventured to predict that in another twelve years the New York SP would "contend with the old parties for political supremacy."³ His forecast seemed exaggerated, but his general sentiment was widely shared. Thirteen years of rising socialist insurgency had

convinced many New Yorkers that the SP's future was a promising one.

Local New York's expanding membership alone tended to back up such widespread expectations. Voting for a socialist party entailed neither great time nor great effort. Joining a radical party, on the other hand, required commitment--the commitment to pay dues, the commitment to propagandize one's fellow union members or tenement dwellers, the commitment, as Michael Walzer has noted, to cede one's Saturday nights to the cause. As the years passed, increasing numbers of New Yorkers proved willing to make such sacrifices. Early in 1904, Local New York considered 922 men and women to be members in good standing.⁴ By 1912, the number of enrolled members had reached approximately 5,000⁵--an increase of over four hundred percent at a time when New York City's population grew by less than one-fourth.⁶ To be sure, Local New York's leadership sometimes expressed concern over the party's rather steep drop-out rates. The Central Committee, in an attempt to overcome this problem, sent out a series of letters that requested old members to welcome and show interest in new ones. Yet the party's net growth tended to overshadow its occasional losses. In general, SP leaders regarded the party's membership statistics as quite encouraging.⁷

The extent of socialist expansion became all the more clear in Local New York's electoral campaigns. The New York

party's leadership recognized that votes cast for an SP candidate did not necessarily imply deep and unswervable commitment to the socialist cause. Electoral results, however, did provide one measure of the party's progress among New York's citizenry. In addition, such results determined the degree of serious consideration the public would henceforth accord the SP. Local New York's leaders thus placed a great deal of emphasis on campaign activities, and as the party enlarged, this emphasis only grew more marked. In the summer of 1904, Local New York held only three or four open-air campaign meetings each night.⁸ By 1912 the number had jumped to fifty per week,⁹ and by 1914 it had reached eighty, with crowds--at least according to the New York Call--averaging between 150 and 300 persons.¹⁰ In addition, each campaign culminated in a so-called "monster mass meeting," held two weeks before Election Day, and a "monster parade" in which upwards of 10,000 people participated.¹¹ Such activities brought ever-increasing dividends. In 1900, the New York Socialist Party's first slate of candidates received approximately 11,580 votes or a little less than two percent of the total number cast.¹² Three presidential elections later, the same SP candidate--Eugene V. Debs--polled about 29,880 votes, almost three times the original count and slightly over four percent of the city's total.¹³ The intervening years did not always bring steady SP electoral growth. In 1905 and 1906, for example, the two

municipal ownership campaigns conducted by William Randolph Hearst on the Independent Party line sent the socialist vote plunging to one-third of its 1904 tally.¹⁴ In general, however, Socialist Party strength increased throughout these years despite the presence of various reform parties. This trend culminated in 1914, when New York's Lower East Side residents elected Meyer London, one of the city's leading socialists, to the U.S. Congress. The New York SP hardly threatened the major parties' political dominance, but it had come a long way.

Responsibility for this impressive Socialist Party growth rested primarily with New York's Jews, who formed the backbone of the SP's membership and its electoral base. Local New York's records do not reveal exactly how many members of each of the city's immigrant communities joined the SP, but intimations of strong Jewish participation--indeed, of a Jewish majority--everywhere appear.¹⁵ Julius Gerber, Local New York's secretary, noted in a letter:

As you know, next Wednesday is the 1st of May . . . The demonstration is to take place at 2:30 p.m. The Jewish contingent will get a large crowd out; they have a large number of members and organizations to take part, but the Goieshe bunch . . . I am afraid will make a poor showing.¹⁶

Gerber wrote this letter in 1912, but he could have said much the same in virtually any year: Jewish names dominate the minutes and correspondence of the SP from its birth through its demise.

Jews prevailed not only among the SP's inner circle but among its larger constituency. In 1900, for example, the ten assembly districts in which large numbers of Jews resided--those in the working-class districts of the East Side--contributed fifty-eight percent of the socialist vote; on a basis of the proportional population in these districts relative to the city's population as a whole, they should have provided only twenty-eight percent of the total.¹⁷ The situation changed little with each successive election. In 1902, these districts again gave the Socialist Party fifty-eight percent of its vote, and in 1904 they furnished a full three-fifths of the socialists' tally.¹⁸ The Jewish socialist vote only grew more marked in later years. In 1912, when only four percent of the city voted socialist,¹⁹ thirty-one percent of all Lower East Side residents gave at least one SP candidate their votes.²⁰ By 1914, the year London won his Congressional seat, forty-nine percent of these immigrant Jews pulled the Socialist Party lever.²¹ Abraham Cahan wrote in the Forward that the Democratic and Republican parties were "pitiful souls, bought souls but not true parties . . . Is this a party that changes its program, its very soul every Monday and Thursday!"²² Jewish political activity echoed Cahan's feelings. To a far greater extent than other New Yorkers, the Jews believed that only in the SP could they find a political party worthy of the name.

The Jewish attraction to the Socialist Party stemmed first from the horrendous conditions under which these immigrants lived and worked. Like many other foreigners, Jews arrived at Ellis Island expecting to find "the promised land." They found instead the Lower East Side, the most filthy, congested, and unhealthy section of New York City. In this area, which composed only one eighty-second of the city's total acreage, lived over one-tenth of New York's inhabitants, often in tenements that housed some thirty families.²³ Street-cleaners rarely ventured into the neighborhood, leaving pavements hidden beneath mounds of trash. Disease stalked everywhere, leaving one out of every seventeen residents infected by tuberculosis.²⁴

Features of work life combined with those of neighborhood existence to disillusion Jews about the New World. Although Jews did participate in other trades, most spent few days in America before they held needle and thread in hand. Such work was familiar to these men and women; almost sixty-five percent of all Jewish immigrants had, some time before arriving in the United States, participated in the manufacture of garments.²⁵ Even Jews who had no such experience often entered the clothing trade. There, they found Jewish employers--members of an earlier immigrant generation who held the new Jewish throngs in great contempt but did understand their religious customs and needs. Eventually, Jewish entry into the garment trades became a self-perpetuating phenomenon. Jews sought garment industry jobs

because they wished to work with other Jews, who provided some point of reference in an unfamiliar world.

The Jewish immigrants had little trouble finding employment in New York's clothing industry, which was undergoing a period of rapid expansion at the same time that Jews were pouring into New York. In 1880, New York City claimed 1,081 clothing factories, employing a total of 65,000 men and women, or close to thirty percent of the city's industrial work force.²⁶ Thirty years later, sewing machines ran in 11,172 factories--over ten times the 1880 figure--and the number of workers in the industry had jumped to 214,428, almost half of New York's total number of manufacturing workers.²⁷ Even these statistics underestimate the extent of New York's garment industry; official data collectors simply did not have the means to compute accurately the number of men and women who toiled in back-alley sweatshops or their own homes. It is safe to say that by the first decade of the twentieth century, the sewing of garments had come to thoroughly dominate metropolitan manufacturing. The clothing industry, furthermore, was still experiencing rapid growth in the early 1900s. No matter how many Jewish artisans made the long trek to Ellis Island each year, the garment industry stood ready to absorb them.

Employment in the needle trades created the potential for the rise of a Jewish socialist movement. Within garment factories at the turn of the century, Jews toiled remarkably long hours for remarkably low wages. An average working week

stretched from fifty-six to fifty-nine hours exclusive of overtime, but during the garment trades' busy season, Jews in clothing factories often worked as many as seventy hours per week.²⁸ Despite such a wearisome schedule, the Jewish factory workers -- who comprised the best paid sector of the industry's work force -- earned far below the minimal annual budget that the state had judged necessary to sustain a New York family.²⁹ Skilled male workers in the industry's shirtwaist factories, for example, earned from fifteen to twenty-three dollars per week. Females had even more cause to complain: In the same workplaces, even the most experienced women earned a weekly paycheck of no more than nine dollars.³⁰

Other Jews labored not in factories but in tenement homes or sweatshops, completing pre-cut garments for the contractors who virtually mobbed the industry. "Take the Second Avenue Elevated Railroad at Chatham Square," urged Jacob Riis,

and ride up half a mile through the sweaters' district. Every open window of the big tenements...gives you a glimpse of one of these shops as the train speeds by.... The road is like a big gangway through an endless workroom where vast multitudes are forever laboring. Morning, noon, or night, it makes no difference; the scene is always the same.³¹

Wages in these sweatshops descended to miserably low levels.

Manufacturers played contractors off against each other, giving the cut cloths to the ones who would stomach the lowest fees. In turn, these contractors cut their own costs by depressing wages to such an extent that an entire family often earned a mere five dollars a week.³² Sweatshop conditions

matched sweatshop wages. Laborers toiled to the limits of physical endurance in cramped, filthy, unventilated rooms,

which often lacked running water or toilet facilities.

Long hours, low wages and abysmal conditions made the Jews a potential socialist constituency, but not an actual one. The Jews would not have participated so actively in the New York City Socialist Party had they not also possessed a strong and coherent radical tradition. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, each successive wave of Jewish immigrants to American shores contained a progressively larger number of men and women who had taken part in the East European socialist movement. In Poland, some of these had joined the Socialist Circle of Aaron Liberman, the so-called father of Jewish socialism. In Russia, a very few had enrolled in the People's Will, a terrorist group that could claim responsibility for Czar Alexander I's assassination. Most radical Jews, however, received their training in the Bund, a Jewish socialist organization with its heart in Russia's Pale. The Bund, which functioned as both a political party and a labor union, attracted mass support in Russia from Jewish intellectuals and workers alike. A large portion of the movement, however, removed to American soil following a series of government-sponsored pogroms, capped by the Kishinev massacre of 1903. In New York Bundists formed a substantial minority of the immigrant Jewish population. An even greater number of New York's Jews, although not former members themselves, held the Bundists in high esteem. It was these socialists, after all, who in Russia had organized Jewish unions and fought to improve Jewish status.³³

Not surprisingly, then, the Jews of the New York City sweatshops turned almost instinctively to socialism. Discontented with the realities of American life -- with the sweatshops and the tenements and the endless exploitation -- the Jews seized on their East European heritage for use in the New World. So strong did the socialist-Jewish nexus become that it even sucked in Jews who had had no previous contact with radical movements. On the streets of the Lower East Side, a radical past had combined with a poverty-stricken present to create a powerful attraction to socialism and the New York SP.

Local New York fared less well among other ethnic groups. Italians suffered much the same economic conditions as did Jews in the early years of the twentieth century: They, too, worked backbreaking hours, received scanty wages and resided in miserable quarters. Yet the SP could not interest Italian workers in party life. In 1914, Julius Gerber wrote that "of the nationalities to be found in this city, the Italians are relatively and proportionately the weakest in organization."³⁴ Two years prior, an SP organizer had reported to his branch that the Italians of New York's West Side felt so great an indifference to socialism as to make future party work in the area absurd.³⁵ New York's socialists tended to blame such apathy on the Italians' religious affiliations; in 1913, for example, organizers told the Local's Executive Committee that Italians would not join the Socialist Party "owing to the strong anti-socialist attitude of the Catholic clergy."³⁶ More likely, however, Italians did not participate in party

life because their Old World traditions and experiences had not prepared them to do so. Unlike the Jewish artisans, the Italians came to the U.S. from backward agrarian areas. Their education was scanty, their organizational experience limited, their social traditions land- and village-oriented. These former peasants found stability in the New World not through political organizations or trade unions or workmen's circles -- all of which seemed alien institutions -- but through family and village ties. The Southern Italians, then, were less than likely Socialists.³⁷

The Irish, too, generally steered clear of the New York Socialist Party. According to one historian, the Irish formed only one percent of the New York party during the years before World War I.³⁸ This low level of participation might at first seem somewhat surprising; in the 1870s and 1880s, after all, involvement in Irish nationalist groups -- such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Republican Army -- helped lead the Irish immigrants to form a fairly militant trade-union movement. But the Irish's relative acclimation to American political and economic life by the turn of the century prevented this labor movement from turning to socialism. Unlike other immigrant groups, the Irish believed themselves to be well-represented in municipal politics; their link, after all, to Tammany had been long established. In addition, the Irish, by 1900, had already moved several rungs up the economic ladder. As their tenure in the United States lengthened and their material status improved, the Irish felt less and less

inclined to involve themselves in radical movements. They instead relied upon active non-socialist trade unions and Tammany Hall to safeguard their economic and political interests.³⁹

Germans comprised a far larger portion of Local New York's total membership than the Italians or Irish did, but the number of German socialists grew only slightly between 1900 and 1914. This lack of progress reflected in part the precipitous plunge in German immigration that began around 1900. It also, however, mirrored the changing political orientation of those Germans who came to the United States. In the 1870s and 1880s, many German immigrants were committed socialists, who fled their homes after Bismarck declared their party illegal. When the German government restored the SPD's legality in 1890, however, this flood of socialist immigration abruptly halted. German socialists stayed in Germany; those Germans who did come to the United States had little interest in radical causes.

Despite their lack of success among these immigrant groups, however, the New York socialists expressed great satisfaction with their party's development. The socialists regarded their failure to expand the SP's ethnic working-class base beyond the city's Jewish population as a minor problem, which would in time correct itself. In a mere fourteen years, the socialists boasted, the party's membership rolls had quintupled and the party's vote -- although still a tiny percentage of the total -- had increased some two hundred percent. Most important, an SP leader had marched triumphantly into

the U. S. Capitol to take his seat. New York's SP leaders regularly pointed to such achievements in the party's press, its written propaganda, its internal records. At the same time, they pointed to the phenomenal growth of a set of institutions outside the party itself: the New York socialist trade unions.

Not surprisingly, the socialist trade-union movement was synonymous with the Jewish one. Leaders of unions that were not predominantly Jewish shared their members' distaste for the Socialist Party, and the political sympathies of their unions reflected this fact. But among one set of unions -- those in the garment trades -- the Socialist Party reigned supreme. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, almost eighty percent of the city's garment workers were Jewish men and women, whose political attitudes carried over into their labor organizations.⁴⁰ The Jewish unions formed the organizational mainstay of New York City socialism -- they were large; they were important; and they were closely tied to Local New York.

The garment unions' growth paralleled in time the New York SP's. In the 1880s, labor organization in the industry had existed only sporadically. Workers responded actively to their exploitation during these years, but in spontaneous and haphazard ways. When dissatisfaction mounted, garment laborers would form a union and call a strike; when the walkout ended, the union would disband. Such patterns of labor activity continued until 1888, when New York's Jewish socialists founded the United Hebrew Trades -- an organization which

set out to build the Jewish union movement from above. Even with the efforts of this organization, the development of stable unions in the fragmented and seasonal garment industry took time. In the first few years of the twentieth century, however, the UHT finally managed to create permanent unions in the clothing trades, and by 1913 these unions could claim considerable success. In March of that year, the garment industry's labor organizations boasted 200,000 members in New York, most of whom belonged to the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, the United Cloth, Hat and Capmakers Union of North America or the International Fur Workers' Union.⁴¹ These 200,000 men and women represented almost two-thirds of the New York industry's total number of employees, making the garment workers, along with the longshoremen, the most heavily unionized sector of the city's labor force.⁴² During the next few years, the prosperity of the needle-trades unions only increased further. In 1914, men's garment workers founded the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, soon to become one of the nation's most influential labor organizations. At the same time, the three older unions in the industry enrolled ever more members and gained ever greater strength. By 1916, the ILGWU alone had 80,000 workers in its ranks and had become the third largest union in the AFL.⁴³

These exceptionally strong unions maintained close ties to the New York SP. The socialists had helped found the Jewish trade-union movement, and they continued to play an important role in setting its direction. Meyer London, for example,

acted as the garment unions' attorney from 1900 to 1913; Morris Hillquit took over the job for the next two decades. In this capacity, the two men not only represented the unions in their legal battles but also formulated union demands, negotiated with manufacturers, and served as intimate advisors to the unions' leaders. According to the official historian of the ILGWU, Hillquit was "the sage behind the scenes" of that union: "No amount of research can trace the extent of his influence on the International.... He was as important as any figure in its destinies."⁴⁴ Likewise, the trade union leaders, by virtue of their organized power base, automatically gained access to the top echelon of Local New York's hierarchy. The leadership of the party and of the garment unions intertwined themselves so thoroughly that sometimes it was difficult to tell which was which.

With a leadership so closely connected to that of Local New York and a rank and file so enamored of the socialist cause, the garment unions predictably did all in their power to aid the SP. This meant, first of all, enunciating clearly and often the unions' approval of socialist goals and policies. The garment unions wrote clauses into their constitutions asserting the primacy of class struggle.⁴⁵ They argued vociferously within AFL conventions for a general labor endorsement of socialist tenets. They regularly passed resolutions lauding the SP.⁴⁶ Even more important, these labor organizations gave considerable financial aid to Local New York -- purchasing, for example, fifty percent of the

stock that financed the New York Call.⁴⁷ Finally, the Jewish trade-union movement formed the core of the party's electoral machine. Union members, organized into special political action committees, supplied the bulk of the manpower needed to collect funds, canvass potential voters and watch the polls. Recognizing such financial and electoral assistance, New York Call editor Algernon Lee situated the party's strength "in the mass of men and women of the Amalgamated, the ILGWU and other unions."⁴⁸ Expressing much the same belief, one successful SP candidate -- himself a former ILGWU official -- remarked, "I consider myself a tailor-made assemblyman."⁴⁹ By dint of their strength, treasury and numbers, the Jewish trade unions were able to give New York's Socialist Party an extraordinary amount of support.

The existence of this trade-union base fused with the growth of the SP itself to give New York socialists an outlook on the future as cheerful as it was distorted. Local New York might have increased both its membership rolls and its electoral tallies. It might have gained the support of the influential and expanding Jewish trade union movement. It might have appeared a vibrant and vital -- if still decidedly minor -- political force. But beneath the rosy picture of New York SP growth lay a darker one of conflict and dissension. When not mounting Election Day rallies and May Day parades, Local New York's membership spent much of its time embroiled in vicious and bitter debates over the very fundamentals of socialism. It was this constant sectarianism,

more than any other factor that caused the eventual collapse of a party whose program and ideology were winning over increasing numbers of New Yorkers. The socialists' failure to maintain their momentum grew from their failure ever to achieve internal harmony.

CHAPTER II

SHADES OF RED:

DISSENSION WITHIN THE SP, 1901-1914

The radicals who founded local New York in 1901 were well acquainted with the troublesome effects of sectarianism. Before the turn of the century, almost all belonged to the Socialist Labor Party, an organization marked as much by its internal conflicts as by its Marxian doctrines. Throughout the SLP's heyday in the 1890s, members disputed every conceivable subject: political activity, trade-union policy, propaganda techniques, educational work. Heated debates and occasional fistfights arose over seemingly insignificant issues. Personal invective and political intrigue dominated the most mundane of party meetings. Secessions occurred at a disquieting rate.¹

Conflicts within the SLP had their roots in the party's German-socialist orientation. The Germans, who constituted a majority of the SLP's membership, also held a virtual monopoly on its leadership positions.² In 1885, the party's secretary admitted, "Let us not conceal the truth: The Socialist Labor Party is only a German colony, an adjunct of the German-speaking Social Democracy."³ The German socialists in the United States, however, retained a far greater allegiance to the

tenets of Karl Marx than did their brethren across the seas. Taking great pride in their Marxist heritage, the German SLPers regarded themselves as the sole protectors of revolutionary socialism in America. Largely because of this, they refused to share control over the SLP with others and often did not even welcome non-Germans into the Party. In particular, the leadership believed that the many Jews in the SLP were not properly committed to Marxian theory; they could, then, only corrupt the party's purity.⁴

Members of the SLP who did not hail from Germany -- most of whom were Jews -- could hardly find haven in such a party. These members felt slighted by the SLP's leadership, which did not hesitate to show its disdain for the non-Germans within the party by simply ignoring their existence. The Germans conducted all SLP meetings and recorded all SLP minutes in their native language; those who had no knowledge of German simply could not partake actively in party life. In addition, the German leadership often went out of its way to heap abuse on the Jewish elements of the party. Within the SLP, a veritable caste structure existed -- a caste structure which could not but excite rebellion on the part of the Jewish untouchables.

In addition to the second-class treatment accorded them, another more substantive factor prompted some of the SLP's Jews to challenge the party's leadership. Whereas the Germans insisted on maintaining at all costs the purity of Marxian principles, many -- although not all -- of the SLP's other members emphasized the need to "Americanize" the party in order to

create a mass socialist movement. The Jews, after all, generally had far less attachment to the tenets of scientific socialism than did those who came from Marx's fatherland. It was not that Jewish socialists lacked familiarity with Marxian principles; indeed, Russian Jews had provided George Plekhanov, the originator of Russian Marxism, with much of his initial support in the 1880s. As time wore on, however, increasing numbers of these Russian Jews began to create a socialist movement of their own, distinct from that formed by Plekhanov and his followers. Instead of merely concerning themselves with the goal of universal socialism, Russia's Jews -- as organized in the Bund -- actively worked to rid the Czarist regime of its virulent anti-semitism and to promote a kind of non-Zionist Jewish nationalism.⁵ Conditions in the United States did not necessitate such a fight, but many Jewish immigrants continued to bring to socialism a somewhat improvisational style. In Russia, they had adapted and modified Marxian socialism in order to create a mass movement; in the U.S. they wished to do the same. Hence, many of the Jews -- although, again, by no means all of them -- believed that the Germans' rigid adherence to revolutionary socialism served only to limit the party's growth. Morris Hillquit, for example, complained that the Germans "were but little in touch with the American population, and moved almost exclusively within their own limited circle."⁶ He advocated that the SLP abjure its "dogmatic adherence to all canons of scientific socialism" and adapt Marxian ideas to meet the peculiar conditions of American society.⁷

This difference between the SLP's German and Jewish members manifested itself most clearly in the debate over the party's trade-union policies, a debate that ultimately led to the formation of the Socialist Party's New York branch. Regarding the leaders of the American Federation of Labor as "essentially hired men of the capitalist class"⁸ and the organization itself as "a cross between a windbag and a rope of sand,"⁹ Daniel DeLeon and his German supporters proposed in 1896 the creation of a new and revolutionary labor federation. The Jewish socialist leaders argued vehemently against this plan, asserting that a declaration of war upon the AFL "would only serve to antagonize existing trade unions, while accomplishing little itself."¹⁰ DeLeon, however, decided to brave internal opposition; at its convention of 1896, the SLP founded the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance.

The move led almost immediately to a split within party ranks. In 1897, the New York SLP's Jewish branches quit the party, spewing abuse at DeLeon and the STLA.¹¹ After a few weeks in political limbo -- Abraham Cahan, the leader of the rebellion, called it like being "without a synagog"¹² -- the Jews met in convention to decide upon a future course of action. Here, three Jewish socialists, who two months earlier had organized the first New York unit of Eugene Debs' New Social Democratic Party, urged Cahan's group to join them. The former SLP members, after much debate, agreed to give Debs' organization a try. With their decision, the first section of the New York Socialist Party was formed.

Three years later, another largely Jewish group, dubbed the "Kangaroo Faction," departed from the SLP for much the same reasons as had the Cahanites. This secession assumed a different and more violent form since the Kangaroos, based in New York and led by Morris Hillquit, had intended not to leave the party but to capture it. Claiming the support of a majority of the SLP, the Kangaroos stormed the party's headquarters on July 10, 1899, only to be met in full force by the German membership. One contemporary wrote of the incident that followed,

The delegates pummelled each other until blood was seen flowing from many wounds. Men were sprawling on the floor, others were fighting in the corners, upon the tables, chairs and upon the piano, Hugo Vogt having climbed upon the latter, yelling and fairly foaming from the mouth...¹³

The battle failed to resolve the conflict. Two Socialist Labor Parties soon appeared, each with its own newspaper (both named People), its own headquarters, its own National Executive Committee. The capitalist courts finally decided the dispute, awarding both the name of the organization and the title of the newspaper to the Germans. Hillquit's supporters, like Cahan's earlier, found themselves on the outside of the SLP.

In 1901, the Kangaroos and the Social Democratic Party joined in a marriage that seemed to have been made in heaven. Morris Hillquit wrote some years later,

Dissensions and antagonism, so characteristic of the Socialist movement in every country in their formative years, were the principle features of the American Socialist organizations until the middle of 1901 when all organizations, with one exception [the SLP]... united.¹⁴

At that point, Hillquit wrote, conflict within the socialist ranks disappeared forever, making way for universal harmony and general bliss. Indeed, so it must have appeared to contemporary New York residents, who watched the SP's growth with much surprise and not a little alarm. Nevertheless, sectarianism and dissension continued to wrack the city's socialist movement. Hillquit and Cahan had left the SLP because they disagreed with its stress on revolutionary socialism. Some of the socialists who defected with these two men, however, did so not because they disputed the SLP's militant policies but because they could no longer tolerate its supercilious leadership. These men and women remained firmly committed to Marxian principles despite having deserted the SLP. Hence, the disputes that had previously tormented the Socialist Labor Party arose again in the new SP. Despite its relative success, Local New York spent much of its time in the years before World War I engaged in vicious and ultimately self-destructive debates over the relative merits of evolutionary and revolutionary socialism.

The forces of evolutionary or "constructive" socialism controlled New York's SP, as they did the national party. Led by Morris Hillquit -- "Socialism's political boss"¹⁵ -- the evolutionists emphasized the gradual nature of the socialist political program. Previously, these men had felt alienated by the harsh rhetoric and unabashed revolutionism of Daniel DeLeon; they were not about to repeat in their own party what they had so detested in his. The Hillquitians thus made no pretense of including abrupt social change on their political

agenda. Right-thinking socialists, Hillquit said in a 1908 address,

do not expect socialism to be ushered in by one sudden and great political cataclysm, nor do they expect it to be established by a rabble made desperate by misery and starvation.¹⁶

If they did not expect such a cataclysm, neither did they desire it. Socialists, Hillquit declared just one month later "do not seek to destroy modern civilization or to abolish the modern industrial and political system -- they merely strive to perfect them."¹⁷

This perfection of American society, the constructive socialists believed, would result from a long series of economic and political reforms, each of which would add a bit of socialism to the nation. Indeed, the constructivists maintained, this process of "socializing" the United States had already begun. Socialism, Hillquit claimed, was "persistently filtering into the present order;"¹⁸ as a result of recent government actions, Americans already lived "at least in the outskirts of the 'Socialist state.'"¹⁹ In these circumstances, the socialist mandate became a twofold one. First, socialists had to constantly work for the enactment of further reforms: wages and hours legislation, women's suffrage, workingmen's insurance. In this way, more socialist threads would be added to the fabric of American life. But the evolutionary socialists of New York recognized that no capitalist government would go so far as to institute the cooperative commonwealth itself. The members of the Socialist Party, then, needed to gain elective office and, eventually, government control. The SP would not use its power to socialize the economy immediately; socialists could not

take such action "without causing grave industrial dislocation."²⁰ Instead, the socialist government would initiate still further reforms, each of which would represent another gradual -- indeed almost imperceptible -- step along the road to a completely socialist order.

The constructivists' readiness to amend Marxist theory in such significant ways provoked the wrath of a vocal and growing group within Local New York. These men and women simply did not accept Hillquit's off-asserted belief that "Marxism is ... not a final revelation."²¹ They regarded the evolutionist deviation from Marx as one which threatened to transform the SP from a socialist organization into a reform party. Of this group of left-wing socialists, Louis Boudin was the most articulate. In a string of books, pamphlets and articles, Boudin derided those New York "revisionists" who expressed such fear of radical change:

It is the implication of the suddenness of the change, and the violent manner in which it will be brought about as the culmination of a struggle, that arouses their opposition. The change could, should and would come in all imaginable ways, but none of them will be sudden or violent. For they are all violently opposed to violence. And not only physical violence, but any kind of violence or disturbance. Therefore, socialism will come, according to their notion, as a gradual enlargement or a gradual diminution of capitalism, but never as an overthrow, more or less sudden, more or less violent, physical, social or economic, as Marx imagined it.²²

According to Boudin, history did move in such sudden leaps. Socialism would come not as the culmination of a plethora of insignificant changes but as the result of a swift and sudden revolution. Although this revolution could involve violence,

New York's left wing more often conceived of it as a peaceful transformation that would follow an SP Election Day triumph. Reforms should not go ignored; they could provide needed amelioration of working-class suffering in the period before the revolution. But neither should such reforms become the be-all and end-all of party life, as the evolutionists seemed to desire. The SP's first priority was to prepare for revolution rather than to work for reforms -- to bring ultimate salvation rather than immediate relief.

The theoretical debate over the proper course of American socialism found its echo in a wide variety of smaller intra-party disputes. The tactics of men who stressed the desirability of gradual change necessarily differed sharply from those of socialists who favored sudden social transformation. New York's SP members, then, argued not only about the grand questions of socialist theory but also about the narrower ones of socialist strategy; indeed, it was the latter kind of dispute which usually generated the most anger. Throughout the years before World War I, heated controversies arose again and again over the SP's electoral strategy, its trade-union policy, and its proper class base.

Every so often, New York's evolutionist leaders nodded their heads in the direction of labor. On these occasions, they would assert that the SP should direct its propaganda efforts toward the city's workers whose material interests most coincided with the party's goals.²³ In making such statements, however, the New York leadership tended to refer not to the

entire working class but to its elite -- the better educated and better paid laborers. Hillquit wrote in 1912:

The unfortunate 'slum proletarians' whose energies, hopes and ambitions have been crushed out by misery and destitution, can only rarely be relied on to rally to the virile battle cry of socialism.²⁴

In all, Hillquit argued, the socialists should propagandize among machinists, printers and builders but not among the waiters or carmen whom the members of New York's I.W.W. tried to organize.

In practice, Local New York was actually most interested in attracting not even the labor elite but the city's middle and professional classes. Hillquit and his supporters believed that the SP desperately needed members of the intellectual and professional strata -- the so-called "brain-workers" -- in order to make political headway. It was from these classes, the constructivists argued, that the leadership of the Socialist Party -- the writers, the speakers, the organizers -- did and must come. Without such leadership, New York City socialism would forever remain a marginal movement.²⁵

Hillquit did not doubt that non-workers could be attracted to a socialist party. Capitalism, he believed, exploited and alienated all classes of society, even the capitalists. The salary earner, who each day experienced a decline in his economic position; the small manufacturer, who found it increasingly difficult to compete with the nation's trusts; the intellectual, who as often as not belonged to the ranks of the unemployed; the capitalist who was "more the slave than the master of his wealth"²⁶ -- all could and would turn to the SP if approached correctly, if shown that socialism was a tenable,

reasonable movement.²⁷ And once the SP began to attract these types of men in large quantities, the party's success would be ensured.

The New York leadership, then, made all possible efforts to convert members of the middle classes to its philosophy. Hillquit himself probably spent more time debating college professors, religious leaders, and professional reformers in front of educated and prosperous audiences than he did speaking to the city's workers.²⁸ He clearly relished such activity; Hillquit entitled the chapter of his autobiography that dealt with his work among the middle classes "The Golden Age." Furthermore, those intellectuals and professionals touched by these efforts did not find themselves unappreciated. Such recruits could be assured of gaining almost immediately both leadership positions and public roles. The muckraker Charles Edward Russell, for example, joined the New York party in 1908 only to be named its candidate for governor two years later. J. G. Phelps Stoke, a millionaire reformer and philanthropist, enrolled in the Local in 1906 and at once became one of its delegates to the National Executive Committee. The New York socialist leaders clearly placed a high premium on attracting and retaining middle- and even upper-class recruits.

The left wing of the New York SP, however, harshly criticized the leadership's courting of non-working-class elements. This faction, consisting of both intellectuals and laborers, protested the increasing middle-class

tendencies of the Local and demanded that the SP be kept a predominantly working-class party. The controversy raged in 1908 when a group of cloakmakers proposed the founding of a special workers' school, entitled the Proletarian Society. The New York SP already maintained the Rand School for Social Science, which offered courses in socialism, government, economics and American history. This school, however, had at its head the middle-class evolutionists who were so anathema to the initiators of the Proletarian Society. The society, unlike the Rand School, was to be "thoroughly proletarian in its direction and personnel."²⁹ Its planners took as the school's motto the French socialist slogan, "Workers, trust your brains"; they might have added, "do not trust those of the intellectuals." In a letter to the New York Call -- printed under the headline "Vive le Proletariat" -- one of the Proletarian Society promoters argued that "the party standard bearers, sometimes misnamed 'leaders'," ignored the SP's working-class members.³⁰ It had thus become necessary to establish an organization

to create internal propaganda for the preservation of the true principles of socialism, to extend education, to foster self-development, and to encourage facility of expression on the part of the comrades of the rank and file.³¹

The Proletarian Society seems never to have gotten officially under way. Perhaps the leadership ensured the school's stillbirth by viciously attacking "the principles of proletarian supremacy"³²; perhaps the job of organizing a new institution simply proved too difficult or time-consuming.

whichever the case, the very proposal of the Proletarian Society demonstrated that some degree of passionate opposition to the leadership's middle-class orientation existed within the party. Moreover, the Proletarian Society controversy showed that this opposition came not only from left-wing intellectuals like Boudin but from working-class members of the New York SP. Although the revolutionary socialist intellectuals supported the Proletarian Society, they did not originate the plan; rank-and-file members were grumbling too.

The perceived middle-class tendency of the party leadership was only one of several issues that provoked dissent during the years before the First World War. Equally important, the New York SP leadership's electoral strategies met with considerable opposition from some of the party's more radical members. This is not surprising, for election campaigns brought out Local New York's moderate character more clearly than did any other SP activity. In theory, New York's SP leaders regarded political campaigns as the best possible opportunities to spread propaganda and educate workers in socialist doctrine. In fact, the SP candidates only rarely mentioned socialist teachings, concentrating instead on the practical reforms socialists would institute if placed in power. Socialists running for office spent most of their campaigns attacking slum housing, proposing social welfare measures, and calling for clean government. The Hillquitians established this pattern as early as 1901, the year of

Local New York's first municipal campaign. For this initial election, the SP Municipal Committee, chaired by Hillquit, prepared propaganda leaflets entitled "The Tenement Evil," "The Sanitary System," "Vice," "Municipal Government" and "Public Franchises."³³ Lest party members complain about this apparent SP preoccupation with municipal reform issues, the committee also published an internal report explaining the campaign literature:

We feel that the voters have a right to ask: "Just what would your party do, if it were entrusted with the government of this city?" and that if our platform does not offer an intelligible answer to this question, it will not receive serious consideration from the people to whom we appeal.³⁴

In addition, the New York socialist leaders saw no reason not to emphasize reforms: The cooperative commonwealth, after all, represented but the culmination of a long series of gradual reform measures. Thus, the Hillquitians believed, the erasure of the tenement evil or the improvement of the sanitary system formed important parts of the socialist program.

Local New York's leadership did more, however, than merely stress reforms; it specifically slighted socialism's ultimate goal. During one of his many campaigns for Congress, Hillquit issued a broadside that read in part:

Even if you are not a socialist, if you are tired of paying 10 cents a loaf, vote for Hillquit Never mind whether you accept all his party's program. It is the cost of today's living and tomorrow's that is worrying you, and Hillquit offers the only relief.³⁵

In this same campaign, the New York socialists consistently stressed Hillquit's business acumen and financial status. It was little wonder that even the generally staid National Executive Committee felt compelled to censure Hillquit for these campaign practices.

Within the city itself, many socialists levelled acid criticism at Local New York's electoral policies and charged the leadership with rank opportunism. The Local's papers contain no evidence of organized protest against SP campaign practices, but individual letters of complaint fill the party's correspondence books. In 1911, for example, a party member fumed that one of the speakers at a socialist campaign rally had proudly announced, "I know nothing about Marx and I don't give a damn for Marx." The letter-writer continued:

I have long been of the opinion that a knowledge of Marx is not required by your Executive Committee of campaign speakers, for if it was, the awful exhibition of ignorance made by some of them would not be officially tolerated.... When the attempt that is now being made to make the S.P. a movement of reaction...has been put under foot by the revolutionists, we will no longer be called upon, as we now are, to apologize for socialism.³⁶

The complainant received for his efforts a note from the Local's secretary, explaining that the Executive Committee had tabled the missive "as they did not consider it of sufficient importance."³⁷ The electoral policies of the New York SP continued unchanged; the grumblings continued unabated. In 1914, to use another example, a rank-and-file member attacked the Local for distributing an editorial

written by William Randolph Hearst that supported Meyer London for office. This member wrote:

We tried to get votes for London by the silliest, the stupidest arguments known. But worst of all, see the first column of that page that the S.P. saw fit to send out. Vote independently. Forget parties, and vote for men only.... Is it for this that we have worked so long, have sacrificed so much to build up our party? So that we may play the game of the vile and unclean Hearst, that we may urge the voters to vote for London...[because] even if he is a bit radical, never mind, it won't do any harm!³⁸

At the same time that some SP members complained directly to the local organization, others made their views known through organs of the party press. Boudin and Henry Slobodin, another left-wing intellectual, wrote several attacks on Local New York's campaign practices, attacks that appeared in both the New York Call and national socialist journals.³⁹ Perhaps the Yiddish humor weekly, Groiser Kundes, made the basic point most sharply; it portrayed the Socialist Party as a corpse, slain by its own "Bluffitis," "Demagogitis," and "Tammanyitis."⁴⁰

Although criticism of the New York SP's electoral policies never assumed organized form, as did condemnation of its middle-class tendencies, the intensity of the former was equally great. On this issue, too, a deep, perhaps unabridgable, divide seemed to separate the party's revolutionary socialists from its constructivist leaders. The left-wing group claimed a number of prominent intellectuals in its ranks -- Boudin and Slobodin are only two examples -- but it also included rank-and-file party members. This ultimately

lethal combination was evident to an even greater extent in the opposition toward the leadership's trade union policies.

New York's leaders often stated that trade unionism could contribute to the socialist cause. By developing among workingmen a sense of class consciousness -- a belief that their interests necessarily conflicted with those of their employers -- trade unions had the potential to turn the politically unaware into committed socialists. Despite this assertion, however, the New York leaders adamantly refused to involve themselves in the internal workings of trade organizations that had yet to proclaim their socialism. According to evolutionary socialist theory, the labor movement consisted of "two arms" -- the economic and the political. New York's SP should concern itself exclusively with the latter of these, which was, in any case, the more important. The economic aspect of the labor movement remained strictly off-limits. As Hillquit said in a debate with Big Bill Haywood:

I consider it a grave mistake for our party or party members as such to direct the internal affairs of the economic organizations of labor from the outside.... As Socialists, we have no reason or justification for taking sides in purely internal controversies of the economic organizations.⁴¹

Hence, Hillquit said, New York's socialists should not express preference for the industrial over the craft form of organization; they should not attempt to breathe the spark of militancy into staid labor leaderships; they should not found or even support dual unions. According to Local New York's

leadership, SP labor activity should confine itself to persuading union members to vote socialist and to providing proper union struggles with financial support. Otherwise, as the official organ of the New York SP editorialized, "the Socialist Party is not responsible for what happens within the unions."⁴²

This view ran directly counter to that of the revolutionary socialists within the party. Louis Boudin believed that trade unions represented "the most important factor from the Marxian point of view in the final overthrow of capitalism."⁴³ This could only be the case, however, if labor unions were militant and organized along industrial lines. Conservative craft unions could not develop the unity and class consciousness that alone would lead workers to vote the socialist ticket. They could not compel a resistant capitalist class to accept an SP electoral victory. Nor could they prepare the workers for the administration of industry in the cooperative commonwealth. According to such left-wing leaders as Boudin and Slobodin, then, the socialists needed to do all in their power to set New York's unions on a militant path. If that meant interfering with some other "arm," so be it.

This opposition view commanded the support of at least some of the party's rank and file. In 1913, discontented SP members formed the Industrial Socialist Propaganda League, an organization based in Branch 3 of the Local. Six league members explained in a letter to Local New York's secretary that they had founded the new organization because

the Party as a whole repudiates the realities of the class struggle [and] is afraid of helping develop real economic initiative and class organization of America's wage workers at the point of production on the basis of real, militant and direct effective combat...⁴⁴

The League hoped to counteract such conservatism and lead the party into the arena of active industrial struggle.

The leaders of the party expressed a curiously detached concern over the establishment of the League. Hillquit and his fellow evolutionists did not become truly alarmed until Branch 3 invited Daniel DeLeon to give a speech on the merits of industrial unionism. DeLeon's views on the proper trade union policy of a socialist party accorded in many respects with those of the SP left-wing dissenters. Although the revolutionaries within the New York SP placed less emphasis than DeLeon did on the importance of dual unionism, they shared with him a basic belief that socialists should constantly encourage union militancy and radicalism. To the SP leadership, however, DeLeon's trade union policies were anathema; indeed, these policies had largely caused the desertion of Hillquit and Cahan from the SLP. Accordingly, Local New York's Central Committee dissolved Branch 3 and called off the DeLeon lecture. The immediate problem had been solved.

The larger difficulty, however, had yet to be overcome. Algernon Lee, the editor of the New York Call, wrote to Hillquit shortly before the Branch 3 affair, "We shall have our hands full, during the coming months, to prevent

Local New York from falling into the hands of queer elements."⁴⁵ But neither a few months nor a few bureaucratic reshufflings could remove the "queer elements" from the New York Party. Alongside New York's practical evolutionary socialists, an active left wing had developed -- a left wing of intellectuals and workers who were irked by the Hillquitiens' respectability and committed to the principles of revolutionary change. These vocal and highly persistent left-wingers presented a strong challenge to the Local's moderate leadership throughout the years before World War I. In doing so, furthermore, they were not alone. At the same time that revolutionary socialists were making their presence felt within the party, numerous Jewish garment workers were doing much the same within the socialist trade unions. These workers' opposition to socialist leadership was no less heartfelt, no less real, and no less potent than that of the revolutionaries themselves.

CHAPTER III

THE PROTOCOL OF PEACE?: DISSENSION WITHIN THE ILGWU, 1909-1916

On the evening of November 22, 1909, thousands of shirtwaist workers streamed into the Lower East Side's Cooper Union to attend a meeting of the ILGWU. For the past several months, these shirtwaist workers--about seventy-five percent of whom were young women--had grown increasingly dissatisfied with their working conditions.¹ Long hours, low wages and sexual exploitation had prompted several shop strikes; these stoppages had, in turn, only heightened the waist makers' rebellious mood. The workers had come to the meeting to hear SP and ILGWU officials discuss the best means of remedying the industry's working ills. The leadership's proposals, however, seemed hardly adequate. Meyer London and others spoke words not of militancy but of moderation; rather than calling the workers to action, they counselled patience. "For two hours," one worker later wrote, "attentive audiences were cautioned to use due deliberation, to be sober in their decision."² Suddenly, a teenage shirtwaist maker named Clara Lemlich burst forward from the audience to deliver a fervent Yiddish

plea for an industry-wide walkout:

I am a working girl... (and) I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared--now!

The audience responded with thunderous cheers and overwhelming assent. Two days later, 15,000 waistmakers--long thought, by virtue of their sex, to be the most unorganizable of all garment laborers--walked out of their workplaces and into socialist meeting halls.

Quite apart from dramatics, the Lemlich incident perfectly illustrated the widely varying attitudes which the leadership and the rank and file brought to union work in the garment industry. Notwithstanding their impeccable Socialist Party credentials, the garment unions' officials always displayed caution and moderation in their trade policies. They disclaimed the strike, strove for industrial harmony, and accepted--indeed encouraged--the mediation of trade disputes by the non-socialist state. In short, the garment union leadership of New York City urged accommodation rather than militancy. Like Lemlich, however, the workers themselves often expressed great impatience with their leaders' policies. Schooled in socialist thought by the Russian Bund, re-radicalized by the conditions of the garment industry, a significant proportion of the rank and file charged its leaders with collaborationism and advocated greater militancy in trade-union activity. Although this

leadership-membership conflict appeared in each of the three Socialist-controlled garment industry unions after 1909, it unfolded with particular force in the largest and most powerful of these--the ILGWU.

The intra-ILGWU controversy began with the shirtwaist makers' strike, but it did not become truly bitter until the next year, when the union's leadership signed the Protocol of Peace.⁴ This agreement, which established an intricate system of collective bargaining in the industry, arose out of a cloakmakers' strike and soon spread to the needle-trades' other branches. During the negotiations for the Protocol--negotiations conducted with the aid of several prominent liberal Jews, including Louis Brandeis--ILGWU attorney Meyer London clearly expressed the socialist leadership's point of view:

We do not come to control your business; we do not come to control your trade. I, personally, would have liked to see a state of affairs where mankind should control everything in a cooperative effort but I realize in the year 1910 and in the cloak trade it is hardly possible of realization,⁵ and I have advised my clients...[of] that view.

Accordingly, the socialists settled for something less than the cooperative commonwealth. It is true that the Protocol granted the union several of its important demands. Most critically, the employers belonging to the industry's Protective Association agreed to recognize the ILGWU as the legal bargaining agent of the women's clothing workers. These manufacturers also increased the striking

workers' wages and shortened their work week. In return, however, the socialist leadership surrendered much that militant trade unionists considered essential. The union, for instance, agreed to forego its demand for a closed shop, accepting instead the Brandeis-inspired "preferential shop," by which employers agreed to "give the preference to union men, where the union men are equal in efficiency to any non-union applicants."⁶ Far more crucial than even this concession, the ILGWU surrendered the weapon that unionists generally considered the most powerful in their arsenal: the right to strike. Of course, the signers of the Protocol realized that industrial disputes would inevitably arise and that they would have to be settled in some manner. The Protocol thus established a Board of Arbitration and a Committee of Grievances, on both of which an "impartial" public representative was to hold the swing vote. These bodies were alone responsible for enforcing the Protocol and mediating conflict within the industry. The socialist leadership had substituted public arbitration for worker rebellion as the primary means of effecting short-term industrial change.

In essence, the Protocol of Peace, far from a socialist document, was an exceedingly liberal one, bent upon establishing a pluralistic system of industrial government and an equilibrium of class interests. The Protocol assumed that industrial disputes resulted from ignorance and misunderstanding rather

than from inevitable class antagonisms. If well-intentioned employers and employees could meet within an institutional framework, the Protocol posited, they would be able both to maintain industrial harmony and to promote business prosperity. Traditional enemies would become partners, and everyone would benefit.

The notion appealed to reformers of the day. Jewish socialist Melech Epstein later wrote;

The ILGWU had acquired a prestige unknown to the other unions. Protocol was on everybody's lips... The ILGWU was heralded as a trail-blazer of a new principle in labor-management relations vital to the entire country.⁷

As Melvin Dubofsky has carefully shown, the union's signing of the Protocol met with much approval from New York's middle-class liberals. The workers themselves, however, expressed little admiration for this precedent-setting experiment in industrial government. Rank-and-file members needed no profound knowledge of Marx to recognize that the Protocol ran directly counter to both their own immediate interests and the underlying socialist principle of class struggle. To many workers, industrial peace did not seem a fit socialist end; nor did a partnership with the employing class seem a fit socialist means. As Meyer London's official biographer writes:

Workers schooled in the agitation of twenty years could not but revolt at [the Protocol's] innovations. These men had been taught never to trust the good intentions of the employer; never to believe his promises, never to take stock in his code of ethics.⁸

In fact, the Protocol would probably not have been signed at all had not a State Supreme Court Justice issued a permanent injunction against the union's pickets. In these straitened circumstances, the leadership glossed over the Protocol's no-strike provision, and the rank and file accepted the agreement.⁹

The launching of the Protocol, however, only made more apparent the split between the militant elements of the rank and file and the conciliatory union leadership. Within months, garment workers began to feel constricted by the Protocol; soon after, they started openly to flout its provisions. These violations were necessary, rank and file members argued, because garment industry employers consistently contravened both the letter and the spirit of the agreement. According to many of these workers, the manufacturers directly violated the contract's terms by illegally discharging employees, refusing to pay for overtime and religious holidays, and levelling retaliatory measures against active shop chairmen. In addition, the workers claimed their bosses evaded the Protocol by sending increasing amounts of their work out of town, where the agreement was not in effect.

The union leadership admitted such transgressions occurred, but counselled the aggrieved workers to do no more than take their complaints to the Protocol's adjudicating boards. These boards, however, simply could not handle the deluge of grievances brought against the industry's

manufacturers. Unfinished business chronically jammed the committee's dockets; decisions were months in coming. Industrial justice seemed unobtainable by peaceful methods, and workers increasingly defied the Protocol--and the socialist leaders who had forged it--by turning to the strike. In 1911, ladies' garment workers participated in 70 unauthorized strikes; the next year, the number rose to 160.¹⁰ The leadership responded to these spontaneous work stoppages not by reevaluating their commitment to the 1910 agreement but by disciplining the workers responsible. In at least one instance, the leadership itself used scabs to break a shop strike.¹¹

Such actions could not help but arouse the wrath of the garment workers. New York's cloakmakers, in particular, attacked the leaders of the International and the SP for collaborationist policies. The Nave Post, a cloakmakers' weekly, proclaimed in 1912: "A union which obtains the support of the manufacturers' association has no moral right to exist."¹² Later that year, the same publication described the union's leaders as "reactionaries" and "traitors" who had made themselves--and the workers with them--"slaves to the Protocol."¹³ The leadership did not allow such remarks to go unanswered. John Dyche, President of the ILGWU, accused his critics of "ignorance and dogmatism plus demagogy."¹⁴ He then hastened to assure the manufacturers' Protective Association that the dissident workers "do not in the least

express the opinions of the responsible leaders in our organization, but rather voice the sentiments of irresponsible and irreconcilable elements..."¹⁵ The manufacturers probably did not need to be so advised. As early as 1911, Protective Association attorney Julius Cohen observed that two different policies were struggling against each other within the union: "[O]ne is the policy of constructive statesmanship, and the other is the policy of constant and continuous warfare with the manufacturers because of the 'war between the classes.'"¹⁶ Cohen also recognized on which side of this battle the SP/union leadership was fighting. In 1912 he wrote to Hillquit: "The Socialistic view, as defined by men like you, is not inconsistent with the view of true efficiency... [I]n working to develop the Protocol, you and I occupy common ground."¹⁷

This ground, however, became increasingly shaky over the course of the next year. Prior to 1913, opposition to the Protocol, although strong, had no organizational base. In that year, however, the situation changed dramatically. In January, Dr. Isaac Hourwich, an economist deeply opposed to the Protocol, became Chief Clerk of the Joint Board of Cloakmakers of New York, a body that represented over 50,000 workers, more than half of the union's total membership. Hourwich soon convinced a majority of the Joint Board to challenge the authority of the union's leadership to administer the Protocol in the cloakmaking

industry. If the cloakmakers themselves could gain the right to administer the agreement, Hourwich reasoned, they would also gain the right to violate it. Not surprisingly, the union's leaders did not take kindly to Hourwich's power bid, and they set out to remove him from the ILGWU's ranks. Meyer London successfully recaptured a majority of the Joint Board, and this body proceeded to demand Hourwich's resignation. Yet both London and the Joint Board had underestimated the depth of the cloakmakers' support for their Chief Clerk. These workers had come to see Hourwich as their champion in the anti-Protocol battle, as their best hope to destroy the hated agreement. "Revolutionary Socialists...do not believe in agreements with the bosses," Hourwich had trumpeted. "Are we going to put an end to the Protocol?"¹⁸ The workers answered with a resounding 'yes'. In a referendum, they overruled--by a vote of 6,553 to 1,948--the Joint Board's dismissal of Dr. Hourwich. If that vote had not made their sentiments clear enough, the cloakmakers organized mass meetings, marched in street demonstrations, and, as a last step, entirely ransacked the union's headquarters.¹⁹

Some rank-and-file members, of course, supported the leadership. This was particularly true of the cutters, the most highly skilled and conservative of the union's workers. But the cutters formed a distinct minority of the ILGWU's membership; they tended, too, to be the object of the majority's scorn no less than of its envy. The leadership's

more potent allies lay among the employers. As Hourwich gained ever-increasing power in New York, alarmed manufacturers threatened an industry-wide lockout. Notwithstanding the continued support of the cloakmakers, Hourwich wavered in the face of this threat. Believing that the cloakmakers could not successfully brave a lockout, the Doctor acceded in January 1914 to a second Joint Board request for his resignation. Hourwich's departure, however, failed to quell the controversy within the union's ranks. Locals 1, 9, and 11 recalled those of their delegates who had voted to accept Hourwich's resignation, and New York representatives to the ILGWU convention of June 1914 attacked in scathing terms the union's leadership. Indeed, these representatives voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution--only narrowly defeated by the national convention--repudiating the Protocol as a hindrance to "the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism."²⁰ The cloakmakers had lost their leading crusader. They had lost their only powerful representative in the union's officialdom. But they had not lost their inclination to protest vociferously the SP and ILGWU leadership's moderate approach to trade union work.

In the spring of 1915--after approximately a year of relative quiet--the conflict between the union's leadership and its rank and file flared up once more. The new round of squabbling, which was not to end until the entrance of the U.S. into World War I, resulted from the announcement

of the Protective Association that the employers intended to abrogate the Protocol and sever all relations with the union. The ILGWU's leadership, horrified by this possibility, tried desperately to salvage the agreement. Backed by the New York City public, the union persuaded the garment industry employers to participate in a special Council of Conciliation that it had previously convinced Mayor John Mitchel to sponsor. This committee, composed of six prominent New Yorkers including Louis Brandeis, was to hear each side's position and then negotiate a settlement. From the very beginning of the hearings, the union's leadership made clear its propitiatory attitude. In an opening statement to the Council, union attorney Hillquit declared:

We have heard no end of reproaches about radicals being in control of the union and carrying on the Protocol as a contention of their theory of the class struggle. I beg to say that when it comes down to a question of class struggle and radicalism or conciliatory spirit, the record speaks for itself. If the present administration of the union has stood for class struggle...we would not be here before you gentlemen. It was we who maintained the Protocol.²¹

Hillquit went on to disavow the strike as a labor weapon and to argue that the Protocol represented the only means of maintaining industrial peace. "Nothing should be easier," he concluded, "for the men and the employers in this industry than to arrive at an understanding which will produce beneficial results for each."²²

Hillquit's rhetoric could not have had a less appreciative audience than New York's garment workers. Aside

from protesting once again the Protocol itself, many workers scathingly attacked the leadership for accepting--indeed, soliciting--the aid of a capitalist government. Did not the leadership realize, these militant socialists demanded, that the interests of such a government conflicted directly with the workers' own? As Hourwich wrote on July 15:

So sophisticated...seems to be the faith of the Socialist leaders of the Union in 'social justice' that they would readily accept 'any other person of recognized standing in the community' as arbitrator including Mayor Mitchel, who has exhibited his capitalistic bias against labor....²³

Rank and file protest, however, again failed to net any results. The union's leadership continued to plead its case, and the council proceeded to negotiate a settlement that kept the heart of the Protocol intact.

Only a year later, however, the garment workers would finally dance in the Lower East Side's streets. In the spring of 1916, the Protective Association unexpectedly locked out 25,000 cloakmakers; the union responded with a general strike involving over 60,000 workers. Hillquit and the rest of the leadership would have liked to negotiate a revised version of the Protocol, but this time they bent to the will of the rank and file.²⁴ They so acted partly because the manufacturers themselves cherished an animus against the agreement, an animus that could only have been overcome through the union's granting of substantial concessions. Furthermore, the rank-and-file members of the union were growing even

more restive than they had shown themselves to be in the past. During the strike, meetings of shop chairmen in the shirtwaist industry culminated in brawls between the young women workers and the union officials. Such fights resulted mainly from the varying degrees of militancy advocated by the young women workers on the one hand and the ILGWU leadership on the other. Compounding this, moreover, was a growing sense among the waistmakers that the union officialdom either ignored or condescended to women workers. "The officers of the union," one shirtwaist maker complained,

boss us worse than the bosses. Now they tell us to go to work. The next minute they withdraw that order. The women workers comprise...[a large percentage] of the union members throughout the country....Why shouldn't we have something to say about what concerns us most?²⁵

The women demanded that members of their sex be promoted to leadership positions within the union and that the shirtwaist locals be treated identically with the ILGWU's other sections. Several of these other, predominantly male locals, however, were themselves revolting against the union's leadership. In particular, an incident subsequently labelled the "Moishe Rubin rebellion" contributed to the leadership's decision to abrogate the Protocol. This rebellion occurred in Cloakmakers Local Union 1, nicknamed "Mexico" by the leadership because of what Epstein termed its "wild revolutions." Rubin, a long-time follower of Hourwich, had become secretary of Local 1--the largest in the union--in January 1916, and almost immediately convinced its members to defy the

authority of the union's Joint Board. Dissatisfied with the 1915 agreement in particular and the Protocol system in general, Rubin denounced the union's leadership, demanded wider autonomy for each local, and called a multitude of shop strikes. Then, in early July, Rubin proceeded, with Hourwich's aid, to turn Local 1 into an independent union. The defection alarmed the ILGWU's leaders, and their attitude at the bargaining table changed accordingly. The union's largest local, after all, had just seceded, and others--in particular those of the shirtwaist makers--might take its cue. Under the circumstances, the abrogation of the Protocol must have seemed almost necessary. Indeed, the maneuver succeeded; once the Protocol had been scrapped in all the women's garment branches, the members of Local Union 1 returned to the fold.

By the end of 1916, then, the union was united under a new agreement that had removed the Protocol's arbitration machinery and given the right to strike back to the workers. In reality, the differences in attitude between the leadership and the rank and file remained unchanged. The officialdom still coveted not workers' revolution but industrial harmony: "After a while," Hillquit told the Jewish Daily Forward in 1916, "when both sides become accustomed to the new [post-Protocol] situation, they will realize that neither the bosses nor the workers ought to make use of their new rights."²⁷

The leadership, furthermore, still stressed the same moderate goals; as Hillquit told an audience at the Rand School, "The principle purpose of a labor union is to secure proper and decent working conditions to its members."²⁸ These views differed diametrically from those of the more militant members of the rank and file. "Isn't it possible," pleaded one ILGWU member, "to make our trade unions not only trade unions but idealistic ones as well?"²⁹ In different ways, with different words, many garment trade unionists asked this identical question from 1910 to 1916, and most were hardly satisfied with the answer they received. Only in 1916 did worker discontent temporarily decline, allowing the differences that separated leadership from rank and file to recede from view. Such internal harmony set in partly because the Protocol had been removed. But the relative quiet also resulted from the American entry into World War I. On this matter, both union members and union leaders--as well as both the right and left wings of the SP itself--could wholeheartedly agree.

CHAPTER IV

THE PECULIAR INTERLUDE:

LOCAL NEW YORK DURING WORLD WAR I

Most historians have viewed World War I as an unqualified disaster for the American socialist movement. As Daniel Bell writes, "[t]he final gust that shattered the old Socialist Party was the whirling sandstorm of the European War."¹ Bell and others argue that, during the war years, the party suffered greatly from the repression and persecution directed against all those -- especially radicals -- who dared to oppose the American war effort. They further assert that, from 1914 to 1918, strife within the SP began in earnest, as many members quarrelled with the leadership's anti-war position and some deserted the party altogether. Finally, these historians claim that the party's wartime stance spelled the downfall of socialism's influence among American workers, whose economic status greatly improved as a result of the war effort.

The history of Local New York during the World War substantiates none of these conclusions. Despite government and popular repression, the New York SP reached its apex of strength and influence between 1914 and the

beginning of 1918. The leadership's strong anti-war position brought a new element of unity to the city's socialist movement, thus facilitating concerted action toward common goals. Dissenters existed, to be sure; some socialists supported outright the war, while others called for even stronger policies against it. But these voices of opposition commanded little attention and less support. For the first time, the vast majority of both the Socialist Party's and the socialist unions' members found themselves firmly in line with their leadership. The internal harmony did not last long; rather, it represented a peculiar interlude in the party's history. By the middle of 1918, the socialist leadership had retraced its leftward steps, and divisions emerged once again. But in the few short years before this happened, New York City's socialists enjoyed a period of intense activity and success -- a period unlike any they would ever see again.

World War I itself did not overly astonish the socialists. Most accepted, after all, the premise that the competitive struggles of capitalism bred armed conflict. "The capitalists of each country," Hilquit wrote in 1912,

strive not only to preserve and extend their own markets, but also to invade those of the rival nations and to conquer new markets ... the specter of war is thus ever hovering among them.²

In addition, many socialists believed by 1912 that this "hovering specter" would soon alight. Hilquit, for example,

noted the growth of standing armies, the ballooning of military budgets, the heightening of international tensions.³ He drew the conclusion that all these phenomena made increasingly likely the coming of war.

But if the outbreak of the World War did not unduly amaze the socialists, the response of their European brethren did. At numerous Second International congresses before World War I, the socialists proclaimed their opposition to any and all capitalist conflicts. Yet when the European nations actually declared war, each of their socialist parties -- succumbing to patriotic passions and popular pressures -- supported the mobilization. Such conduct greatly confused American socialist leaders, many of whom held considerable admiration for their European counterparts. Accordingly, the New York socialists responded to the onset of the war not by attacking directly the conflict itself but by trying to excuse the Europeans' behavior. In August 1914, the New York Call admitted the European Marxists had "failed" but explained that they had "done their best" in a difficult situation.⁴ A few weeks later, Hillquit expanded upon the rationale in an article entitled "Socialist View of the War and Why They Failed to Stop It." The World War, Hillquit explained, arose out of "murderous European capitalism" and its imperialist yearnings. European socialists were

powerless to prevent the [war] They could no more resist the brutal logic of capitalist warfare

than they could escape the class war and horrors of the capitalist regime Reluctantly but irresistably they were drawn into the insane vortex.⁵

The international socialist movement, Hillquit hastened to reassure his readers, had not suffered "spiritually or morally" from the European action.⁶

Eventually, the party regained its aplomb, shook off its preoccupation with the Europeans, and began to articulate a policy of strong opposition to the war. In January 1915, Hillquit wrote an article designed to convey the official party line. Significantly, the article neither made excuses for the socialists supporting the war nor left leeway for the American SP to follow their lead. "The ghastly carnage in Europe," Hillquit wrote,

has no redeeming features. It is not a war for democracy, culture or progress. It is not a fight for sentiments or ideals. It is a cold-blooded butchery for advantages or power.⁷

This newly-fortified argument led Hillquit to denounce strenuously American preparedness efforts. Increased military expenditures, Hillquit explained, benefited only military suppliers, the so-called "armor ring." While munitions manufacturers accumulated profits, the U.S. as a whole both invited war and brutalized its national life. "A military power is a despotic power,"⁸ Hillquit stated firmly, one that encouraged inhumanity, prevented social progress, lived for war. Preparedness efforts needed to be nipped in the bud, before militarism overcame the nation.

In line with these strongly articulated beliefs, Hillquit emphasized -- as did other socialists both in New York and across the nation -- the SP's special role as peacemaker. Hillquit drafted for the National Executive Committee a comprehensive peace program that -- much like Woodrow Wilson's yet-undevised Fourteen Points -- disallowed indemnities and annexations and advocated the establishment of an international league. In other, more distinctly socialist sections, the program also demanded "social changes in all countries to eliminate the economic causes of war"⁹ and called for total disarmament. Both local and national socialist leaders had taken their stand: They would condemn the war in the strongest terms, strive to avert American involvement, and support -- indeed, try to initiate -- peace negotiations.

Having formulated their policies, the socialists turned with rekindled enthusiasm to active propaganda work. The minutebooks of New York's Central Committee reveal just how seriously the socialists took their mission to preach against the war. During these first years of conflict, the socialists reported holding hundreds of meetings -- some under the auspices of the entire Local, others under those of individual branches. A typical set of Central Committee minutes reads in part:

The delegates of the Lettish Branch report that they are to hold an anti-preparedness meeting. The delegates of the 8th A.D. [Agitation District] report that they held an anti-war meeting which was successful. The delegates of Hungarian Yorkville moved that the Central Committee request the National Executive Committee to set aside a "Peace Day" when all locals will hold peace demonstrations. The motion was passed.¹⁰

Union Square, Cooper Union, the Harlem River Casino, the nearest street corner -- all become sites where members of the Socialist Party would speak of the human horrors and capitalist origins of World War I. For the first time in their party's history, furthermore, the New York socialists viewed an issue as so important that they even consented to share their soapboxes with other radicals. Hillquit, Boudin and Fraina all spoke at meetings with Emma Goldman; occasionally Carlo Tresca, the I.W.W. agitator, would also appear.¹¹

The socialists, however, did more than talk. In Congress, Meyer London proposed a bill in 1915 instructing the President to convene a neutral nations' congress to mediate the conflict -- not in the usual diplomatic fashion but in accordance with the principles prescribed in the SP peace program. Although Congress ignored London's resolution, the New York socialists did not. The East Side Agitation Committee sent a cablegram to each of the European socialist parties urging support for the London proposal.¹² Meanwhile, the Central Committee persuaded the national SP to print and circulate petitions endorsing the bill.¹³ These were not the only petitions New York SP members carried; earlier in the war, for example, they had collected signatures to support an embargo on munitions exports.¹⁴ Finally, the New York socialists wrote. SP printing presses spewed forth scores of new leaflets on such subjects as disarmament, the

From the collections of the Princeton University Archives, Princeton, NJ

These documents can only be used for educational and research purposes ("fair use") as per U.S. Copyright law (text below). By accessing this file, I agree that my use falls within "fair use" as defined by the copyright law. I further agree to request permission of the Princeton University Library (and pay any fees, if applicable) if I plan to publish, broadcast, or otherwise disseminate any material held by the Library. This includes all forms of electronic distribution.

Inquiries about other this material can be directed to:

Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library
65 Olden Street
Princeton, NJ 08540
609-258-6345
609-258-5385 (fax)
mudd@princeton.edu

U.S. Copyright law test

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or other reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or other reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

evils of preparedness, the socialist peace program. New York's socialists had always held a certain fondness for the printed word, but in these first years of the war they even outdid themselves.

In the midst of all this activity, a few dissenting voices issued from the party's left wing. Louis Boudin maintained that the party's anti-preparedness and anti-war positions reeked of insincerity and cant. The leadership had only taken such stances, Boudin insisted, because it had felt pressured by the party's rank and file. Were this rank and file ever to relax its guard on the party's "opportunistic leaders and leaderlets," the latter would begin to act quite differently -- they would, in fact, begin "maintaining an attitude and preaching doctrines which might easily land us in the preparedness camp."¹⁵ Louis Fraina, a recent recruit to New York's left wing, went even further. He denied outright that Hillquit or the other New York leaders had ever taken a strong position against militarism and the war. Indeed, Fraina charged that "in this, as in other matters of policy ... Hillquit is in full agreement with the reactionary elements of bourgeois progressivism."¹⁶ These individual critiques, however, failed to attract any mass support. Insincerity proved difficult to verify; bourgeois attitudes among SP leaders seemed nowhere in evidence. For the first time in their careers, Boudin and Fraina found themselves protesting in a vacuum. During the New York SP's first thirteen years, socialist minutes and records overflowed with

accounts of left-wing opposition. In 1914, such accounts abruptly halted. The records from the initial war years conclusively show -- more by what they do not say than by what they do -- that dissent had yielded to unity in Local New York.

This situation did not change substantially once the United States entered World War I. The Congressional declaration of war hardly caught the New York socialists unaware. On March 4, 1917, the Central Committee had discussed the increasing likelihood of U.S. entrance into the war and had decided that such entrance would not halt the Local's anti-war efforts. Declaring that "relentless opposition to war is and must always remain a cardinal feature of socialist propaganda," the committee denounced those socialists who "give promises of cooperation with the ruling classes in case of actual war."¹⁷ Unlike these "enemies of the socialist movement," the New York SP pledged only to increase the scope of its anti-war propaganda, to enlist the support of organized labor, and to battle the enactment of conscription or censorship laws.¹⁸ In April, Hillquit and Algernon Lee redrafted this program in slightly more poetic form for the national SP's emergency convention in St. Louis.

Neither the declaration of war nor the SP's response to it did anything to increase the scope of left-wing dissent. Leon Trotsky, living in New York until late March,

urged the Socialist Party to adopt more daring tactics in its fight against the war. In particular, he suggested that the socialists publicly declare their intention to transform the international conflict into a civil one by actively resisting government recruiting and by fomenting industrial strikes. Some New York socialists undoubtedly agreed with Trotsky, but it seems that they did not view the difference between the two programs as worthy of debate. At this stage of the conflict, too, indications of left-wing dissent were conspicuously absent from accounts in the Local's records. By moving to the left, the New York leadership had unintentionally but effectively taken the wind out of the revolutionary socialists' sails.

It is true that in ridding itself of substantial left-wing dissent, the New York SP inevitably incurred some right-wing opposition. When the U.S. became a belligerent, a small group of party leaders announced their support for the war. Indeed, the majority of the SP leadership had anticipated this development. In 1916, for example, Algernon Lee had observed in his diary: "It seems that once a country is involved in a serious war, few of its ... intellectuals can escape the infection of chauvinism."¹⁹ Actually, Lee was to be pleasantly surprised by how few party members lived up to his prophecy. Journalist John Spargo -- who later referred to Hillquit as the "spokesman of American Socialism upholding the impudent claims of the guilty Hohenzollern

dynasty"²⁰ -- left the party immediately after the U.S. entered the conflict. Muckracker Charles Edward Russell was expelled. And Congressman Meyer London announced that he would do nothing to obstruct or weaken the American war effort. Such examples, however, were scarcely common. The vast majority of party members -- and even the vast majority of party intellectuals -- fully approved of the SP's opposition to the American war declaration. Accordingly, they approved of their party's increased anti-war activity as well.

Before April 1917, Central Committee minutes mentioned approximately three or four indoor meetings each week. Following American entry into the war, the number of such meetings immediately soared to a weekly average of twelve.²¹ The New York Socialists maintained no figures on outdoor meetings -- both their frequency and their spontaneity probably hampered such recordkeeping -- but their number probably skyrocketed as well.²² Finally, the Socialists began to hold mass meetings in Madison Square Garden, with audiences that even non-socialist newspapers estimated at some 13,000.²³ Most often, the socialists simply protested the war's continuation, using arguments and rhetoric similar to those employed before the U.S. became a belligerent. Occasionally, however, Local New York's speakers yielded to the temptation to protest not only the war but also Woodrow Wilson's rationale for it.

Speaking at Madison Square Garden, for example, Hillquit declared:

We are told that we are in war to make the world safe for democracy. What a hollow phrase! We cannot ... force democracy upon hostile countries by force of arms. Democracy must come from within not from without, through the light of reason and not through the fire of guns.²⁴

Even more frequently, the socialists intoned against conscription. The draft, the socialists insisted, was constitutionally questionable and morally wrong. In accordance with this belief, they circulated and sent to Congress petitions for the repeal of the draft law and unsuccessfully urged a recalcitrant Meyer London to propose a bill to that effect.

The New York socialists also strove to enlist the city's trade unions into the struggle against World War I. Members of the SP opposed all forms of union cooperation in wartime programs but they railed especially hard against the no-strike pledge to which the AFL leadership had agreed. Disregarding their own negotiation of a no-strike provision in the Protocol of Peace, New York's socialist leaders claimed that Gompers' pledge constituted a fundamental departure from trade-union principles. Nothing could be gained from such a departure, the socialists added; the war, after all, was a capitalist struggle whose primary victims were the workers themselves.

In accordance with these beliefs, the socialists lobbied the unions to reject both the no-strike pledge and

other forms of wartime cooperation. As Hillquit told the ladies' garment workers:

there is not one among our employers, as among the employing class generally, who is not ready to take advantage of the world-calamity to coin the misery of the war, the misery of his fellow-men into dollars and fortunes for himself, to accumulate vast fortunes ... and at the same time try to hold down the workers to the lowest possible level on the plea of patriotic duty.²⁵

The socialists, however, did not confine their efforts to those labor organizations that had already proclaimed their allegiance to socialism. Speakers traversed the city, addressing all those unions to which the SP could gain access and repeating Hillquit's words to audiences less convinced.²⁶ Pamphleteers produced pieces, distributed to hundreds of thousands of workingmen, decrying wartime cooperation and the no-strike pledge.²⁷ Members of the SP's Anti-Militarism Conference organized demonstrations and parades to protest the AFL's wartime policies.²⁸

New York's socialists realized they were fighting an uphill battle. Workers were no less immune than other citizens to the wave of patriotism sweeping the nation. Even workers who had originally opposed American involvement in the war soon became enthralled by Woodrow Wilson's crusade for democracy and a just world. Equally important, wartime prosperity, and the National War Labor Board's liberal trade-union policies had brought substantial gains to the working class. Employment opportunities had increased, wages and working conditions had improved, unions had grown. In these circumstances, it is

not surprising that the New York SP failed to convert any new unions to its cause.

The garment unions, however, leapt to the aid of the Socialist Party. These unions, too, had achieved great gains as a result of the war: Government orders for army uniforms poured into the trade, enabling the unions to attain almost without effort better wages and shorter days. Yet such economic gains deflected neither the leadership nor the rank and file from its new socialist crusade. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers commented that the party's opposition to the U.S. war effort "vindicated" American socialism.²⁹ The ILGWU agreed, denouncing World War I as a "fratricidal conflict brought about by the greed and jealousy of kings and rulers"³⁰ and boycotting a national trade-union conference organized by Samuel Gompers to assert labor's support for the war. These unions also harshly criticized the AFL's wartime policies. Advance, the newspaper of the Amalgamated, stormed:

Think of it: Because the nation is engaged in a war against a foreign enemy, the private employer is to be permitted to exercise his powers of oppression over the workers to his heart's content.³¹

Advance spoke for workers and leaders alike. Unified trade unions had joined a unified party to protest and fight the war.

The outspokenness and constant activity of the socialists soon began to irritate the American people and alarm

both the federal and municipal governments. Prior to April 1917, the socialists had enjoyed relative freedom to oppose the war. In 1915, the New York police commissioner had said, "I do not see how a peace meeting in Union Square is in any way objectionable," and most citizens agreed.³² By 1917, however, the situation had changed considerably. The government prosecuted socialists; the police harrassed them; crowds of hysterical citizens lent federal and municipal officials a helping hand. These efforts did impede socialist activity to some extent; more important, however, they provided the socialists with a common grievance. Mass repression unintentionally unified the Socialist Party even further.

The government's contribution to this repression began with the passage of the Selective Service Act, which included a provision prohibiting agitation against the draft. New York's socialists, not realizing that worse was to come, attacked this provision at every possible opportunity. On June 15, 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act, which prohibited any person from willfully helping the enemy, inciting rebellion in the armed forces or attempting to obstruct the government's recruiting efforts. In addition, the Espionage Act gave the Postmaster General the authority to withhold from the mails printed matter urging "treason, insurrection, or forcible resistance to any law of the United States."³³ The power to deny publications second-class mailing privileges, although not included in the act,

was quickly assumed by the Postmaster General.

The government quickly set to enforcing the Espionage Act. Federal officials in New York returned indictments against party leaders and rank-and-file members alike. Scott Nearing, Max Eastman, John Reed, A.I. Shiplacoff and Floyd Dell all fell into the former group; their indictments could, perhaps, have been expected. But other arrestees were more like Morris Zucker, an unknown socialist whom a jury sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for anti-war beliefs expressed in an informal conversation. In all, government officials sent so many socialists to jail on Blackwell's Island that the New York Call facetiously exhorted prisoners there to request a local charter.³⁴ Meanwhile, the U.S. Postmaster General took action against most of New York's socialist periodicals. The New York Call lost its second-class mailing privileges in November 1917 and did not regain them until June 1921. The humorous Jewish weekly, Der Grosser Kundress had its privileges revoked because of an article that satirized, among other things, the government's censorship policy. An issue of The Masses, a socialist magazine run by a group of Greenwich Village intellectuals, was banned from the mails, while several others were delayed.

The socialists also had to cope with harassment from New York's police force and citizenry. Local New York's minutebooks list numerous occasions upon which police officers disbanded socialist anti-war meetings and demonstrations. The Commissioner of Police officially condoned

such behavior, arguing that "inflammatory speeches" made by those who sought to "use the right of free speech to cloak disorder" should be banned.³⁵ Given such sentiments, it was not surprising that the police did little to curb some of New York's more fervently patriotic citizens. Although mob violence never reached the heights in New York that it did in smaller cities and towns, private citizens did disrupt SP meetings and pummel SP speakers. In particular, members of the American Protective League and other patriotic organizations committed acts that one SP member claimed "inaugurated a reign of terror similar to the Black Hundreds in Russia."³⁶

For the most part, New York's socialists responded with defiance. On June 9, the Central Committee noted that:

Delegates of 26 A.D. report that they have very successful street meetings and that one of the speakers was arrested by soldiers and was afterwards released by the magistrate in the night court and that soldiers are interfering with their meetings which they will try to have an even greater number of.³⁷

This response was, in many ways, typical. Local New York held special meetings to protest government censorship. It set up bureaus to provide party members with legal counsel. It scathingly criticized the government, its laws, its officials. The New York socialists believed, according to a lengthy resolution adopted in 1918, that the government was persecuting them not for disloyalty to the United States but for their "loyalty to the struggle

against privilege and exploitation."³⁸ Repression, the resolution declared, would only strengthen socialists' dedication to their cause. To a large extent, the resolution proved accurate. The repression in New York did not succeed in destroying the Socialist Party or demoralizing its members; rather, it succeeded only in driving the socialists closer together by presenting them with a common enemy and by making them feel like martyrs for a just cause.

Local New York's new determination and unity contributed to the great success of the socialists' 1917 electoral campaign. The socialists had nominated Hillquit for mayor, and he entered the four-way race with an all-out emphasis on immediate peace. In his opening speech, given before some 10,000 people at Madison Square Garden, Hillquit announced his slogan -- "A Vote for Hillquit is a Vote to Stop the War" -- and sounded the campaign's keynote:

Capitalism has forced war upon the whole world including the socialists. The socialists will bring peace to the whole world including the capitalists. We are for peace. We are unalterably opposed to the killing of our manhood and the draining of our resources in a bewildering pursuit for democracy which has the support of the men and classes who have habitually³⁹ robbed and despoiled the people of America...

Local New York's members and its broader constituency responded with an enthusiasm unprecedented in the city SP's annals. As one historian puts it, "Rather than

carrying on the 'usual propaganda campaign' which Hillquit had expected, the Socialists rapidly imparted a spirit of religious revival" to the race.⁴⁰ Each of the garment unions donated money and manpower to the socialist campaign. Left-wing socialists paid tribute to the quality and militance of the Hillquit bid.⁴¹ Lower East Side Jews formed spontaneous parades of thousands and marched through the streets for hours.⁴²

As the campaign progressed, increasing numbers of New Yorkers came to believe that Hillquit had a chance to win. The New York World reported on October 21 that Hillquit had "gained strength at an alarming rate" and that Tammany, which had previously concentrated its fire on incumbent Mayor Mitchel, was now desperately "trying to cut the ground from under the Socialistic program."⁴³ The Business Men's League of the City of New York sent a letter to its members warning them that Hillquit's candidacy was "not a joke but a serious menace." The League ordinarily opposed Tammany, but this was no ordinary election year. "The next mayor of New York," the League wrote, "will either be Hylan, a Democrat, or Hillquit, a Socialist;" it added that businessmen "must be guided accordingly."⁴⁴ Hillquit himself wrote a friend on October 13 that he believed he could win the race -- a race he considered "the greatest test of American socialism and radicalism ever."⁴⁵

As it turned out, the vote for Hillquit did not quite live up to either socialist expectations or non-

socialist fears. Hillquit finished third in the contest, receiving 145, 332 votes to Hylan's 313, 956, Mitchel's 155, 497 and the Republican candidate's 56,438.⁴⁶ Yet Hillquit's tally represented no mean achievement. Hillquit had polled almost twenty-two percent of the total vote; previous socialist candidates in citywide elections had attracted no more than four to five percent.⁴⁷ Even more important, in those districts where he ran best -- the Lower East Side, Harlem, Williamsburg and Brownsville -- Hillquit swept into local office other socialist candidates. The party elected seven of its nominees to the Board of Aldermen, ten to the Assembly and one to a municipal court judgeship. It was an impressive showing, and the socialists knew it. Hillquit, for example, assessed the campaign by saying it had established the Socialist Party as a "permanent factor in the politics of the city."⁴⁸

Within one year of Hillquit's prediction, however, the Socialist Party succumbed once more to intra-party conflicts. The renewed battles grew primarily from Lenin's seizure of power in October 1917. While all initially supported the revolution, the left and right wings of the Socialist Party interpreted differently the Bolshevik uprising's mandate. The revolution persuaded the right wing to abandon its anti-war stance at the same time it convinced the left wing to reassert its opposition. In the last year of the war, the divisions that had sep-

arated the two groups until about 1914 began to reappear.

Initially, the Russian Revolution seemed an unlikely event to shatter the Socialist Party. When Lenin assumed power in October, the entire spectrum of New York's socialist movement responded with enthusiasm. In a memoir of New York's Lower East Side at the time of the revolution's announcement, one Jewish socialist wrote:

All the coffee houses in the Russian quarter were overflowing with people, with song, with bright eyes and bright gazes.
It is the Russian Revolution!
The Revolution has triumphed!
The truth has triumphed!
The truth of the folk, the truth, the great truth of humankind -- of Revolution!

The leadership of the party shared the popular excitement. Morris Hillquit wrote in the spring of 1918 that the Bolsheviks had "rendered a tremendous service to the... cause of social progress by shaking up the old world and by their telling fight for a great and bold ideal."⁵⁰

The Jewish unions also hopped on the Bolshevik bandwagon. The ILGWU, for example, hailed the revolution as "the first time in the history of the world that the workers showed the determination not to allow themselves to be defrauded of the fruits of their victory by their master classes."⁵¹ In these first months, Local New York organized meetings, demonstrations and parades in support of the Bolsheviks. Together, its members fought for the U.S. recognition of Russia and against a U.S. invasion.

The Bolshevik revolution, however, weakened the

right wing's opposition to the war. As the armies of the Central powers advanced deep into Russian territory, these socialists began to believe the Soviet government could only survive if the Allies defeated Germany. In March 1918 President of the Amalgamated Sidney Hillman declared that the Russian Revolution had given the "struggle against German militarism new meaning."⁵² This sentiment was widely shared in right-wing ranks. Algernon Lee, now a socialist alderman, signed a cable in early March beseeching the German socialists "vigorously to oppose" their "ruler's efforts to crush the Russian revolution."⁵³ Less than one month later, he and five other socialist aldermen voted to support the Third Liberty Loan. And in June 1918, the General Executive Board of the ILGWU itself purchased \$100,000 of these Liberty Bonds, asserting the socialist movement's need to defeat the German Kaiser.

The left wing's opposition to the war, however, remained as strong as ever. In meetings of the Central Committee, these more radical socialists called for the aldermen's resignations,⁵⁴ proposed that the socialist leadership "be communicated with and reminded to abide by the St Louis resolution,"⁵⁵ and re-affirmed their own anti-war stand. To the left wing, the Russian Revolution proved the value and importance of militancy. No one had expected a revolution in agrarian, underdeveloped, Czarist Russia; that such an upheaval occurred was due

solely to the determination and militancy of the Bolshevik party. New York's left wing judged the Russian Revolution to mean that for a socialist party to succeed, it needed revolutionary will, revolutionary tactics, revolutionary doctrine.⁵⁶ Now was no time to support the war; rather, it was a time to increase militant agitation against it.

Hence, by the last year of the war, New York's Socialist Party had once again split in two. The issue in 1918 concerned socialist attitudes toward the war, but it would be wrong to see the new conflict as fundamentally different from the old one. The same leaders took the same sides and argued about the same broad problem: how radical, how militant should the New York Socialist Party be? And yet, the old conflict had been given one new twist. The Russian Revolution had provided the left wing of the party with a new determination -- the determination to either convert the party to revolutionary principles or leave it. For all but three years of its existence, dissension had brewed within the Socialist Party's ranks. In 1919, the mounting controversies would finally erupt.

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT DIVIDE:

1919 AND THE SOCIALIST PARTY SPLIT

Nineteen-nineteen should have been a banner year for New York's socialists. In the months after the armistice, the economic gains which workers and unions had achieved during the war rapidly dissipated. Wage hikes lagged behind inflation; unemployment mounted steadily; employers laid plans for an open-shop drive. In response, New York's workers--released from their patriotic obligations and no-strike pledge--virtually exploded. Four days after the Armistice, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers called a general strike, involving 50,000 of the city's tailors. Not long after, other laborers joined the garment workers on New York's streets. Longshoremen, harbor workers, actors, printing pressmen, railway shopmen--all rebelled against their employers within a year of the war's end. It was the New York socialists' golden opportunity, the moment of worker discontent and rebellion they had long awaited. But in 1919, the socialists had other, more pressing matters on their minds. In that year, the intra-party dissension that had built up for almost two decades came to a climax. In the wake of this battle,

American communism was born.

The Russian Revolution was, of course, a critical factor in the decline of the SP. As James Weinstein has shown, the Bolshevik leaders encouraged a left-wing rebellion in the American socialist movement.¹ In the months after the Armistice, the Bolsheviks still anxiously awaited another revolution. Lenin had read enough of Marx's writings to believe that the survival of his own communist regime depended upon the creation of other, more industrially developed workers' states. Hence, he constantly reiterated to socialists around the world the need for a revolutionary program, conducted by revolutionary socialists according to a revolutionary timetable. In his "Letter to American Workingmen," published in the December 1918 issue of The Class Struggle--the New York left wing's bimonthly periodical--Lenin stressed that the Bolsheviks would remain "in a beleaguered fortress, so long as no other international socialist revolution comes to our assistance with its armies."² Accordingly, Lenin scathingly attacked reform socialists, who claimed to believe in the class struggle but who "revert again and again to the middle-class utopia of 'class-harmony' and the mutual 'interdependence' of classes upon one another."³ The international socialist movement needed revolution rather than reform, action rather than words. The international socialist movement needed to rid itself of constructivists.

American socialists took Lenin's words to heart. They

would not have done so, however, had they not already believed what Lenin preached. In New York, a vocal group of party members had fought reform socialism for almost two decades. They had protested the constructivists' election strategies, trade union policies, middle-class orientation. They had asserted the need for a revolutionary party, with its base in the working class. They had constantly challenged and defied Hillquitian leadership. Max Eastman, a long-time member of New York's left wing, wrote in the Liberator:

There is no use pretending that this split in the Socialist parties is new...It has always been exactly the same--on the one hand revolutionary Marxians, on the other reformers and diluters of Marxian theory.⁴

Eastman exaggerated a bit; although the split had always been essentially the same, it had not been exactly so. Previously, the Socialist Party had experienced conflict, dissension, power struggles--but no full-scale rebellion. The Russian Revolution changed this by making such a rebellion seem both possible and absolutely necessary. In this sense, the rise of the Bolsheviks precipitated the Socialist Party split. But the roots of this split--the cleavage between revolutionary and reform socialism--had long existed. The left-wing revolt of 1919 had its own internal impetus, an impetus which the Bolshevik uprising only strengthened.⁵

Outright left-wing rebellion struck Local New York later than it did other sections of the SP. By the end

of 1918, Boston's and Chicago's revolutionary socialists had organized themselves into official bodies, designed to grasp control of the party machinery. New York's left wing, meanwhile, still suffered from diffuseness and a lack of formal structure. This situation changed abruptly in January 1919, when Local New York held a meeting to discuss five socialist aldermen's support for a temporary Victory Arch along Fifth Avenue. Julius Gerber, secretary of the Local, ran this meeting in a highhanded fashion, refusing to call on known left-wing socialists and prohibiting the proposal of condemnatory resolutions.⁵ At eleven-thirty that evening, after having spent several hours vainly trying to get the floor, the left-wingers decided to bolt the assembly. Gathering in another room, they elected a City Committee of Fourteen, whose duties included drafting a left-wing manifesto and organizing a campaign to win over the Party's rank and file.

With the creation of this committee, New York's left wing finally assumed organizational form. The revolutionary socialists established themselves as an independent force within the SP--a kind of party within the party. They retained their membership in Local New York; indeed, they participated actively in all facets of party life. At the same time, however, the revolutionary socialists organized The Left Wing Section of the Greater New York Locals of the Socialist Party, a section that printed its own membership cards, assessed its own dues, and set up its own citywide

governing committees. Eventually, the left wing hoped, it would not need a separate caucus within the Socialist Party; eventually, it hoped to be the party itself.

As part of this attempt to convert the Socialist Party to revolutionary principles, the newly-organized left wing adopted, on February 15, a document that soon became known as the Left-Wing Manifesto.⁶ Drafted by John Reed and revised by Louis Fraina, the manifesto attacked the reformist leadership and set out the left wing's own program in terms quite similar to those revolutionary socialists had used for decades. In reviewing the events of the past, Fraina and Reed condemned the constructivists for "inertia," "lack of vision," and "sausage socialism."⁷ The authors reviewed the theory of step-at-a-time socialism--the right-wing belief that each measure of social legislation wrested from the state brought the Cooperative Commonwealth a notch closer to realization. Such beliefs, Reed and Fraina charged, had caused the right-wing leadership to lose sight of socialism's original purpose and ultimate aim: In stressing "petty-bourgeois social reformism," the party had failed to act as the vanguard of the working class.⁸ Left-wing socialists, Fraina and Reed asserted, could no longer allow such a state of affairs to persist.

Shall the Socialist Party continue to feed the workers with social reform legislation at this critical period? Shall it approach the whole question from the standpoint of votes and the

election of representatives to the legislatures?
 ...Shall it talk about the Cost of Living and Taxation when it should be explaining how the worker is robbed at his job?

Clearly not, Fraina and Reed answered themselves. But what, then, should the socialists do? The alternatives presented in the Left-Wing Manifesto corresponded exactly to those traditionally proposed by the SP's revolutionary members. First, the socialists needed to promote vigorously industrial trade unionism--the only form of labor organization that could instill in American workers a sense of class consciousness. Industrial unions alone, however, would not attract the requisite number of laborers to the revolutionary socialist cause. In addition, Fraina and Reed counselled socialists to conduct energetic political campaigns, but with a different purpose from that which guided the Hillquitians. SP members, the manifesto declared, should regard each campaign

not merely as a means of electing officials to political office...but as a year-round educational campaign to arouse the workers to class-conscious economic and political action, and to keep alive the burning ideal of revolution in the hearts of the people.¹⁰

Revolutionary spirit, Fraina and Reed concluded, formed the key ingredient of social revolution; if the socialists possessed the former, the latter would inevitably come.

New York's left wing could, perhaps, only have expressed such revolutionary optimism in the years immediately following the Russian Revolution. Aside from the sense of

boundless confidence implicit in the manifesto, however, little about the document was new or different. Granted, Fraina and Reed included one reference to the dictatorship of the proletariat, a phrase that American socialists had never previously used. As Theodore Draper points out, however, the reference seemed to be "tacked on almost as an afterthought."¹¹ Reed and Fraina could just as easily have written the greater part of the manifesto in 1910 as in 1919. Prior to World War I, New York's revolutionary socialists had stressed the importance of industrial unionism. They had regarded electoral campaigns primarily as avenues by which to spread revolutionary doctrine. They had denigrated the value of working for reform measures rather than for the ultimate goal. If any one document provides definitive proof of the continuity between pre-World War I dissent and post-World War I rebellion, it is the Left-Wing Manifesto of 1919.

Even before the publication of the manifesto, glimmerings of left-wing revolt had appeared, most notably in the Jewish Branch of the 2nd Agitation District. Revolutionary socialists had begun a rebellion in this branch in January 1919, much to the dismay of both its own right-wing members and the Local's right-wing leadership. In complaints to Local New York's Central and Executive Committees, the reform socialist members of the branch accused

the left wing of disrupting meetings and preventing the accomplishment of party work. According to the constructivists, the left-wingers composed a minority of the branch's membership, and yet they "did just as they pleased."¹² Using "anarchistic tactics and filthy language," they had succeeded in driving away a good portion of the branch's respectable, constructivist cardholders.¹³

The left-wing socialists, for their part, denied all such claims. They asserted that Julius Gerber had concocted a set of falsehoods and put them in the mouths of accomodating branch members in order to destroy the section.¹⁴ When asked why Gerber would wish to do this, the spokesman for the left wing replied that the branch housed many revolutionary socialists and that the New York leaders thus wished to eliminate it.¹⁵ No evidence exists either to prove or to refute this charge of conspiracy, but the left wing did predict the outcome of the conflict correctly. Local New York's Executive Committee decided to 'reorganize' the branch, a euphemism for assigning its members to other party sections in an attempt to splinter the opposition.

If Local New York's leaders believed this maneuver would deflect further rebellion, the party's left wing soon proved them wrong. After the publication of the Left-Wing Manifesto, New York's revolutionary socialists began active agitation in all party locals and soon succeeded in capturing about one-half of them. Complaints from reform socialists

throughout the city poured into the Local's Executive Committee. "We the undersigned," members of the 3rd-5th-10th A.D. wrote, "appeal to you for relief from what we feel is a situation under which we can no longer function as Socialists."¹⁶ The petitioners explained that the left wing had taken over their branch, and had subsequently initiated "an anarchist program" which they could not accept.¹⁷ The 8th A.D. reform socialists specified in greater detail the revolutionaries' crimes:

They sowed dissension among the members by constantly hurling the charge of "traitor" on anyone who either disagreed with what they termed "revolutionary ideas" or with their pernicious activities....They created an atmosphere of hostility against the party no less bitter than the hostility existing against the two old political parties. Defending the party was equivalent to defending the enemy of the working class...¹⁸

The 8th A.D.'s reform socialists could tolerate such behavior so long as they retained control of the branch. Eventually, however, the left-wingers began to caucus before meetings and vote as a bloc. "The result," the right-wingers complained, "is that any proposition the organized group is bent on carrying is usually carried."¹⁹ The 8th A.D. reform socialists should have been grateful; the result of such caucusing in other branches was far worse. In the 17th A.D., for example, reform and revolutionary socialists regularly spent their time hurling chairs at each other.²⁰

The party leadership eyed such fractiousness with increasing alarm. All over the city, left-wing agitation

had transformed even the most active branches into at best debating societies and at worst boxing rings. Worse yet, the leadership believed the revolutionaries threatened its own control of the party. The SP had housed a militant left wing for some time, but never such a determined and organized one. Panic-stricken at the sight of branch after branch succumbing to left-wing influence, the party leaders decided to use their power before they lost it. Beginning in mid-April, the New York Executive Committee methodically reorganized each branch that had fallen under left-wing control or that threatened to do so in the near future. One month later, the Committee started to suspend individual left-wing branches that it could not successfully reorganize. Finally, in late May, the Executive Committee decided that each of the twenty-two branches affiliated with the city's left-wing organization should be suspended from the Local.²¹

One day after the Executive Committee suspended the left-wing branches, the New York Call published a lengthy article by Morris Hillquit explaining the party's action. Describing the left-wingers as "temperamental" and "unbalanced," Hillquit blamed them for paralyzing the party at a moment of great opportunity.²² Instead of battling capitalism, Hillquit intoned, the socialists now fought only themselves: "the hatred engendered by the internal quarrels consumes all their energies."²³ Hillquit readily admitted that right-wingers had participated in the

partisan infighting as greatly as had the left. This was only natural, for the reform socialists rightly saw in the left wing's activities a profound threat to the party's continued existence. Revolutionary socialism, Hillquit said, had never suited the conditions of American life, conditions which demanded a program with a "realistic basis."²⁴ The leadership needed to suppress the left wing, Hillquit declared, "not because it is too radical, but because it is essentially...non Socialist; not because it would lead us too far, but because it would lead us nowhere."²⁵ No, Hillquit reasoned, the constructivists could not succumb to revolutionary socialism, but neither could they continue to waste time and effort fighting it. The solution was clear: Only let the opposing camps separate, and the socialist movement could again progress. Two parties, homogeneous within themselves, could inflict far greater wounds upon capitalism than could a single organization torn by dissent. The time had come, Hillquit concluded, to "clear the decks."²⁶

Hillquit's article did more than provide a rationale for the suspension of the city's left wing; it also spurred socialists across the nation to follow New York's lead. At a meeting of the National Executive Committee in late May, the SP leadership suspended the seven left-wing foreign language federations and expelled the entire Michigan organization. A few weeks later, the Massachusetts and Ohio

parties and numerous locals, including that of Chicago, suffered the same fate. Within six months, the party's leaders had either expelled or suspended about two-thirds of the SP's membership.²⁷ Throughout the country, as in New York, the Socialist Party had split, and the communist movement emerged.

Hillquit had expected that the expulsion of the left wing would bring harmony and peace to the Socialist Party. In New York, however, events soon disproved this prophecy. A new internal battle arose in 1920--this time focusing primarily on the SP's relation to the Third International. As we have seen, the right-wing socialists had initially greeted the Russian Revolution quite warmly. By the end of 1919, however, the identification of Bolshevism and American revolutionary socialism was complete. Under constant attack from the Bolshevik leadership for their reform policies, the constructivists gradually withdrew their support of the Soviet state and the Third International. Hailing the rise of the British Labour Party as "a more thoroughgoing revolution than the Bolshevik coup d'etat,"²⁸ Hillquit and the other SP leaders decided against affiliating with the revolutionary, Soviet-led Comintern. This decision, however, aroused the wrath of many who had chosen to remain within the New York Socialist Party. They regarded the Hillquitians' policy as a betrayal of the only workers' state in the world, a state with which all socialists should

be proud to identify.²⁹ During 1920, a number of these New York socialists--led by Alexander Trachtenberg, Benjamin Glassberg and Ludwig Lore--held meetings and demonstrations supporting SP affiliation with the Third International.³⁰

At the same time, these members of the New York SP objected strenuously to a further rightward drift in the leadership's domestic policies. This drift resulted from the expulsion of New York's five socialist assemblymen, whose pledges of party membership were deemed inconsonant with their oaths of office. Hillquit responded to the expulsions by proposing to rewrite the party's bylaws and program. Most notably, he convinced the National Executive Committee to delete sections of the program that called for repudiation of the war debts, resistance to conscription, and the expulsion of party members in public office who supported military appropriations. In addition, Hillquit defended the five socialists during the legislature's hearings not by asserting the righteousness of the socialist cause but by stressing the party's traditional adherence to democratic values.³¹ To men like Trachtenberg and Glassberg such behavior reeked of corruption. The former charged that Hillquit was kowtowing to the Assembly by trying to "paint the Socialist Party as a nice, respectable, goody-goody affair..."³² The latter characterized Hillquit's attempt "to capitalize on the existing American prejudices and illusions about Democracy and Republican Government" as a "disgraceful surrender."³³

These disagreements over the proper relation to the Third International and the proper response to the assembly-men's expulsion caused yet another split in the SP's ranks. In June 1921, Trachtenberg, Glassberg and Lore led a group of socialists--most of whom resided in New York--out of the SP and into the Communist Party. This defection, of course, depleted the Socialist Party still further; by the end of 1921, over two-thirds of Local New York's wartime members had departed.³⁴ Morris Hillquit wrote in 1920 that "all indications point to a steady development and large growth of the movement within the immediate future."³⁵ If Hillquit himself believed his statement, then he was the only one. All indications pointed not to a steady development but to a dramatic decline of the New York Socialist Party.

With the Socialist Party shrinking daily, one might think that the communist movement would have rapidly gained in strength and influence. In fact, the communists fared as badly as did the socialists in the years immediately following the split. For both these groups, the tradition of fractiousness proved too strong to disappear. Just as the socialists continued to suffer internal dissension after the initial split of 1919, so too did the communists. Following their expulsion from the SP, the left-wingers further separated into two organizations, the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party. The programs of these two parties reveal few

differences in ideology or policy; both organizations remained largely faithful to the ideas expressed in Fraina's and Reed's Left-Wing Manifesto. Nonetheless, the CP and the CLP found it impossible to unite. The largely immigrant membership of the CP feared that CLPers would seize all power in a unified party; the largely American membership of the CLP feared the reverse would occur.³⁶ Consequently, the two organizations continued their separate existences and spent much of their time attacking each other.

Meanwhile, the Communists had to contend with extremely injurious external forces. As the strike wave of 1919 continued, Americans voiced increasing fear and concern about radical activities. In New York, the state legislature created in March 1919 a Joint Committee to Investigate Seditious Activities under the chairmanship of Clayton Lusk. In June, the committee began to gather material on the "reds," primarily through a series of spectacular anti-communist raids conducted over an eight-month period. The largest of these raids took place on November 8, when over 700 policemen and special agents swooped down on the headquarters of the CP and CLP, seized mountains of radical literature, and arrested hundreds of people. Among those the state prosecuted--under a criminal anarchy law used only once before--were such important New York communists as Benjamin Gitlow, a leader of the CLP; Harry Winitzky, the CP's executive secretary; and Gus Alonen and Carl Pavio,

editors of The Class Struggle. The New York Communist parties went underground immediately following these raids. "Considering the law as it now stands," explained the editors of the Communist, "it must be said that open discussion of Communism is now a crime in the United States."³⁷

The effects of the Red Scare on the communist movement were nothing short of cataclysmic. Nationally, membership in the two communist parties decreased from an estimated 70,000 in 1919 to 16,000 in 1920. No figures exist for the New York sections alone, but the percentage drop in their membership was probably comparable; if anything, the intimidation, deportation and arrest of radicals that ravaged the party across the nation assumed their most severe form in New York.³⁸ In addition to depleting the parties themselves, the government's repression made communist organizing efforts impossible. Conspiratorial organizations, by definition, cannot conduct mass propaganda, cannot participate in electoral campaigns, cannot engage themselves in trade-union work. Alexander Bittelman, a New York communist, admitted in 1921 that, while they were underground, the CP and the CLP did 'not exist as a factor in the class struggle.'³⁹ Furthermore, as they grew increasingly removed from American life, the communists became ever more attached to their Bolshevik brethren. The Soviets themselves bear partial responsibility for this. As the years passed, the Bolshevik leaders grew increasingly dictatorial toward the other

members of the Third International; indeed, Gregory Zinoviev, the head of the Comintern, stated flatly that the Soviets believed it "obligatory to interfere" in the internal affairs of the world's communist parties.⁴⁰ But New York's communists proved quite willing--even eager--to accept such Soviet direction. The U.S. communists frequently requested the Soviet Union to settle their internal disputes, allowed the Third International to hand-pick their leaders, regarded the U.S.S.R. as their native country.⁴¹ In effect, the American communists' political and psychological identification with the Bolsheviks strengthened in the same measure as their own sense of accomplishment decreased. Small, divided and isolated, the communist parties had to live vicariously.

By the end of 1921, however, the Communist's prospects began to look somewhat brighter. In May, the Comintern had forced a merger between the two communist parties--a merger that did not quell all communist sectarianism but at least muted it to some degree. Furthermore, as the Red Scare passed, the Communists edged towards the formation of a legal party. Max Eastman, the best-known intellectual supporter of the Communists in New York attacked the CP in mid-1921 for continuing to divorce itself from American life. Other Communists--especially those who, like Lore and Trachtenberg, had only recently quit the SP--echoed Eastman's charge.⁴² As a result, the New York communists formed in the fall of 1921 the Worker's League, which nominated Ben Gitlow for

mayor. Shortly thereafter, the communists created the Worker's Party as a legal outgrowth of the illegal CP, and in April 1923 they finally dissolved the CP altogether.

Despite these faint glimmers of Communist revival, however, the New York radical movement of the early 1920's could not compare with that of the previous decade. The sectarianism that had always characterized the New York Socialist Party had finally exacted its toll, and the socialist movement almost entirely collapsed. In the place of one visible and growing party, there now existed two almost insignificant ones. In the place of frequent but usually unorganized intra-party dissent there now existed constant and institutionalized division. In fact, only one remnant of radical strength still remained in New York. Despite the splits, despite the SP's own vastly reduced membership, the Socialist Party still commanded the allegiance of New York's garment unions. The question was: For how much longer?

CHAPTER VI

THE FINAL CONFLICT: CIVIL WAR IN THE ILGWU

The split of the Socialist Party in 1919 necessarily extended to New York City's garment unions. Since their founding conventions, these unions had maintained close ties to Local New York; they had looked to it for leadership, given it their support, lent it their strength. Yet for all these years, a significant number of workers within the unions had expressed deep discontent with the moderate policies that the socialist leaders pursued. Such rank-and-file disquiet only intensified in the post-war years, primarily as a result of the recession which hit the industry in 1920. Now, unlike before, the workers had an option: If they disliked socialist leadership, they could turn to the communists, whose party longed to seize control of the unions for itself. In the 1920s, then, the garment unions became the battleground for yet another episode in the continuing war between constructive and revolutionary socialism. This episode, however, would be the last--or at least the last of any consequence. The

sectarianism that raged within the garment unions during the 1920's utterly destroyed needle-trades radicalism--and, with it, the hope for any potent anti-capitalist movement in New York City.

The conflict between the socialists and the communists unfolded with particular force in the most powerful of the garment unions--the ILGWU. Members of this union, like workers in the lesser needle-trades labor organizations, confronted a severe economic downturn in the early 1920s. The contracting system, which had declined slowly but steadily in the 1910s, returned in full force during the recession, since many manufacturers found they could no longer afford to produce their own garments. Unemployment rose sharply, as increasing numbers of employers joined an exodus to open-shop towns. Wages and hours worsened, when those manufacturers left in New York abrogated the agreements they had previously signed with the union. These economic ills revived the old controversies between the ILGWU's leadership and its rank and file. Many ILGWU members believed that only through militant action could the union hope to arrest the downward spiral of working conditions. The leadership, however, followed exactly the opposite path. In an effort to limit the growth of contracting, the union forged a virtual alliance with the large manufacturers. Occasionally, the union loaned these employers

money; more often it either encouraged them to strengthen their industrial associations or helped them to improve the productivity of their workers, even if this meant sanctioning the use of speed-up.¹ Such policies could only anger much of the ILGWU's membership, for not only did they seem unsocialist, but they also proved remarkably unsuccessful.²

Just as new economic conditions intensified divisions within the ILGWU, so too did an expanding union bureaucracy. The ILGWU's leadership had always operated at a safe distance from the rank and file, but in the early 1920s workers became increasingly aware of an oiled and polished union machine. ILGWU officials, for example, often placed supporters in the best shops--or even gave them money from the union treasury--in exchange for their cooperation. In some locals, the stuffing of ballot boxes to retain power became common practice.³ As Melech Epstein, a prominent Jewish socialist, later noted, "democracy was gradually giving way to power groupings" within the ILGWU.⁴ The influence of the ordinary rank-and-file member over union activities suffered accordingly.

In 1920, discontent over the bureaucratic nature and the conservative policies of the ILGWU led to the creation of the Shop Delegate League, an opposition group designed to express rank-and-file grievances against the leadership.

The members of the Ladies Waist and Dressmaker Union Local 25 who founded the league claimed that the reigning ILGWU leadership was deviating from the socialist-democratic ideology that was supposed to be the union's keystone. They proposed a plan, imported from the shop stewards' movement in Britain, to reorganize the ILGWU along shop rather than craft lines, with a committee of each shop's delegates forming the governing body of the union. The adherents of the loosely-knit league movement--which spread to at least three other locals--hoped that this new structure would turn the ILGWU in a more militant direction by giving the workers, rather than the paid officials, direct control over union matters.⁵

It is in this larger context of rank-and-file opposition to the ILGWU leadership--opposition bearing a distinct resemblance to that which had arisen before the war--that the rise of the communists within the union should be understood. Communists had been present in the ILGWU as early as 1919, the year the American Communist Party was formed. The activity of these men and women, however, remained extremely limited until 1921, when the CP emerged from the underground and the International directed it to adopt the strategy of "boring from within." The purpose of this plan was to capture the Socialist Party's traditional bases of support, particularly the more radical trade unions, and use them to further the communists' cause. As one Communist

newspaper said, the party wanted to place its members "at strategic points so that in the time of revolutionary crisis we may seize control of the organization and turn the activities of the union into political channels."⁶

In accordance with their new instructions, the communists in the ILGWU set out to establish control over the shop delegate movement, which seemed to them the best base from which to bore. They entered the leagues in increasing numbers and began to act as a faction within them, caucusing prior to any decision that the leagues had to make and then voting as a bloc at the meetings. Through this method, the still relatively small group of communists within the union began to win control over the entire shop delegate movement. In turn, they used this control to connect the leagues to the Trade Union Educational League, a CP organization designed to carry out the Third International's union policies by directing and coordinating the activities of party members within established labor organizations.⁷

Within the first year of its operation, the TUEL chose the garment trades unions as its principal area of activity. As Benjamin Gitlow, chairman of the Needle Trades Committee of the Communist Party wrote, the TUEL decided on this particular focus because

the majority of members in these unions were the sort of foreign-born who had been for years under socialist influence and hence attuned to our

ideological approach...[and because the Communist Party] already had some 2,000 of our members scattered in these unions.⁸

The choice was a wise one, reflecting knowledge of the situation within the garment unions and especially within the ILGWU. Aided by the TUEL and based in the Shop Delegate Leagues, the communist members of the women's clothing union began an all-out drive for control of the ILGWU--a drive which fascinated and attracted increasing numbers of workers.

Part of the Communists' appeal lay in their harsh criticism of the union leadership's relatively conservative trade policies. In its attempt to gain support, the left wing claimed that the economic hardships being suffered by the workers were primarily due to the socialists' policy of class collaboration. In an article entitled "The Socialist Party Gomperists," the Communist Daily Worker contrasted its own concept of unionism with that of the socialists:

The former [Communist viewpoint] holds that the emancipation of the workers can be achieved only by the workers themselves. The latter [socialist viewpoint] believes in peace between capital and labor. The one maintains that the workers must always carry on a persistent struggle not only for better conditions of living but for their complete liberation. The other places its hope upon the good will of the capitalists rather than upon the struggle of the workers...This Gomperist philosophy...is the cause of the chaos, the demoralization, the helplessness of our union organizations.⁹

The words rang true to the men and women who had taken part in the Hourwich affair, the Moishe Rubin rebellion, the

Shop Delegate League. Prior to the war, these workers had raised objections to the union-manufacturer partnership established by the Protocol of Peace. Following the war, they had denounced in a similar vein the union's practice of aiding in all ways possible the larger employers. Now the communists were attacking the union's leadership for those same policies, but in far more coherent, far more pithy terms. In the communists' rhetoric, then, the workers heard echoed their own long-standing criticisms and their own long-standing complaints.

The left-wingers, however, gained rank-and-file support not only through their critiques of socialist trade practices but through their advocacy of a different kind of leadership than the socialists seemed willing, or even able, to provide. Where the socialists had turned bureaucratic, the communists emphasized democratic unionism and the restructuring of the union along shop rather than craft lines. Where the socialists had begun to build a machine within the union, the communists stood ready to tear it down. Where the socialist leaders had erected barriers between themselves and the rank and file, the communists tried to appear as one with the masses. Many workers, then, regarded the communists as representing a new promise of democratic, militant unionism--a promise that the stodgy

right-wing bureaucrats could not fulfill. The rightists had begun to seem routine to the rank and file; in contrast, there was nothing routine or uninspired about the image which the Communists projected. Their insistent calls for democracy and militance touched a responsive chord among the many workers who had grown disenchanted with the manner in which the union was being run.¹⁰

The union leadership's reaction to the incipient leftist movement within the ILGWU only enhanced the communists' credibility among rank-and-file members. Men like Hillquit had always harbored deep animosity toward the revolutionary socialist group, which had challenged their leadership and disputed their views. This hatred had grown even more all-consuming since the formation of the CP, a party whose very existence both threatened and incensed the socialists. By the early 1920's, then, the socialist leadership was in no mood to tolerate the existence of communists within its unions. Accordingly, the socialists summarily divided Local 25--where the communists had achieved their greatest influence--in an attempt to isolate the radical waistmakers from the more centrist dress workers. The action was a dismal failure; in one stroke, the socialists had confirmed the left wing's portrait of them as conservative bureaucrats, removed from the union's rank and file. Workers in the ILGWU objected strongly to the leadership's undemocratic and arbitrary treatment of the union's dissidents, and, in

ever greater numbers, these workers turned toward the communist opposition. The division of Local 25, rather than containing the left wing, enabled it to expand its influence throughout the union and especially into the three largest ILGWU locals--22, 2 and 9.¹¹

The right wing, however, ignored the lessons of this incident and proceeded with policies that only served to substantiate the communists' accusations of corruption and tyranny. On October 8, 1923, the socialist leadership deposed the 19 leftists on Local 22's communist-dominated executive board on the ground that they had discussed union matters with a CP functionary. In the next day's New York Times, Abraham Baroff, General Secretary-Treasurer of the ILGWU, explained the reasons for the action:

A union member may be a Republican, Democrat, Socialist or Communist but we cannot permit union business to be transacted in an outside organization opposed to the International Union. The T.U.E.L. is modelled after the Ku Klux Klan, but in another guise. It's a pity we did not clear up this situation two years ago, when the germ was first planted.¹²

In accord with this belief, the union leadership declared the TUEL a dual union and ordered that all its units in the ILGWU locals disband. The right wing argued, not without some justification, that the TUEL members aimed not to influence existing policy in order to benefit the worker but rather to achieve complete control over the union in line with the Communist Party's political goals. Most

workers, however, found this a less than convincing assertion. The communist leadership could rightly claim that it had avoided a dual union policy at every turn, and this factor seems to have been decisive in the workers' minds. The majority of the rank and file concurred with the communist leaders in viewing the suspensions as the desperate attempt of a doomed leadership to retain its power. As the Daily Worker characterized the situation,

In great fear of the tremendous growth and prestige gained by the militants, this motley crew of labor bureaucrats and their socialist satellites have formed a holy alliance for suspensions and expulsions.¹³

The strategy of the Third International was clearly paying off. Increasing numbers of workers began jumping on the communist bandwagon, some out of sincere conviction that the socialists' policies were harming the union, others out of rage at the undemocratic methods of the right wing. Charles Zimmerman, one of the foremost leaders of the ILGWU leftist faction, wrote in 1927: "We Communists... were helped by the brazenness of the administration."¹⁴ Indeed, by the end of 1924 the left-wingers had obtained a majority on the executive boards of Locals 2, 9, and 22, giving them control of approximately seventy percent of the union's New York City membership.¹⁵

To the socialists, this was an unacceptable state of affairs, demanding immediate correction. As a manifesto

put out by the ILGWU leadership stated,

The so-called Worker's Party, the American section of the Communist International in Moscow, has set before itself the definite task of discrediting and destroying our international union...We have reached the conclusion that our international union must put an end, with a firm and unfaltering arm, to the Communist demoralization in our midst. The Communists have declared war upon us and our reply to them must be--War! Whoever is with the Communists is an enemy of ours and for such there is no room within our ranks!¹⁶

The issue chosen by President of the ILGWU Morris Sigman to begin his all-out attack revolved around a 1925 May Day demonstration called by Locals 2, 9, and 11, at which Moissaye Olgin, a well-known Jewish communist, spoke. The demonstration, which came close to being a Workers' Party affair, ended with a speech by Olgin that denounced the union's leadership in the strongest terms and urged all workers to become members of the Communist Party. Sigman's response was immediate and drastic: the ILGWU suspended every leftist officer of the three locals, reorganized the locals themselves, and subjected their headquarters to quasi-military raids in the hope that, by taking over the left wing's physical locations, the ILGWU leadership would be better able to bring the recalcitrant membership into line.

Although the socialists succeeded in seizing the buildings of Locals 2 and 9, the left wing rebuffed them when they arrived at their third destination. Local 22 became the headquarters of the leftist drive for reinstatement

into the union, a drive directed by a newly formed Joint Action Committee (JAC). While "scores of young Communists from the colleges, Bronx housewives, and party members from the entire city joined the left-wing garment workers in guarding the headquarters,"¹⁷ the JAC began to function as an independent union, collecting dues, negotiating with employers, calling shop strikes. In its efforts, the JAC commanded the support of the vast majority of the left-wing locals' former members, who refused to register with or pay dues to the newly organized Socialist-led locals and who flocked, in numbers as high as 40,000, to JAC-called mass meetings. The JAC, nonetheless, refused to declare itself a dual union; it adhered to the policies set down by the Third International and emphasized that it aimed only to reinstate the left-wing locals.

The 16-week struggle for reinstatement sharply accelerated the socialist-communist conflict. Previously, relatively little actual violence had taken place; the struggle had instead been characterized by such phenomena as the "fainting-brigades", groups of left-wing women who pretended to pass out at socialist meetings, thereby causing pandemonium and breaking up the assemblies. But with the creation of the JAC a genuine war for membership broke out, complete with threats, violence, and the use of professional strong-arm men.

The events of the four months of war convinced Sigman that he had to retreat. The garment center had been turned into a virtual battle zone by the hired thugs of both sides, who roamed the streets looking for blood to spill. Economic conditions were rapidly deteriorating, as employers took advantage of the internal dissension to lower wages and increase working hours. Most important, the socialists were clearly losing the fight for the workers' allegiance. In September 1925, the ILGWU adopted a peace plan which affirmed the principle of political tolerance, reinstated the communist locals in their previous form and scheduled new local elections. In these elections, the leftists gained majorities in four locals, enabling them to take over the New York Joint Board, the single most important segment of the union. The communists were clearly playing their cards correctly; the prospect of total capture of the ILGWU loomed large on the horizon.

Yet, within one short year, the communists in the ILGWU had reduced themselves to virtual insignificance. The sudden reversal stemmed from the left's disastrous handling of a general cloakmakers strike called on July 1, 1926--a 28-week strike that brought severe hardship to almost 40,000 garment workers and resulted in little or no economic gain. Initially, the walkout seemed like a golden opportunity for the leftists. Had they managed the strike

in New York effectively, the Communists would have vastly enhanced their reputation throughout the international union. As the New York Times pointed out,

[last fall] the Joint Board was given over to the left by President Sigman's administration to run according to their best judgement. This strike will be their first test case.¹⁸

Paradoxically, however, the influence of the Communist Party itself proved decisive in dooming the walkout and thus, the entire left-wing cause in the union. Even more paradoxically, the communists' loss proved not to be the socialists' gain. When the strike ended and internal peace finally arrived, it became apparent that anything approaching true socialism no longer had a place in the ILGWU.

The communists called the 1926 strike in response to the publication of a Governor's Commission report that proposed ways to stabilize the garment industry and made recommendations for the next cloakmakers' contract. The commission advocated the adoption of the key union demand: a limitation on the number of contractors with whom any jobber could deal. This reform would have phased out the notorious auction system and greatly alleviated the wage earners' plight. The release of the report persuaded many socialists that they at least had a basis for negotiation with the manufacturers. Morris Hillquit, for example, urged the acceptance of arbitration and cautioned the left wing:

And you may be Socialists and Anarchists and Communists, as much as you want to, and be as zealous and enthusiastic in your political beliefs as you want to be...but what I want to impress upon you is the thing that it seems to me you have forgotten....You know it is easy to destroy, it is hard to rebuild.¹⁹

The Communists, however, found certain parts of the report totally unacceptable, notably a suggestion that the employers be given a right to "reorganize" (i.e. to fire) ten percent of their work force each year and a recommendation that the workers not be granted a forty-hour week.²⁰ The workers' objections to these two aspects of the report, together with the compromising effect that the acceptance of a government-inspired settlement would have had on the communists, convinced the left-wing Joing Board to call out its members.

At first, the strike seemed a success: the shops were uniformly shut down. Unfortunately for the communists, however, events went needlessly downhill from there. In the eighth week of the strike, Zimmerman and Louis Hyman, the other leftist leader in the ILGWU, reached an informal agreement with the inside manufacturers' association, which, if not spectacular, was at least respectable. The terms of this agreement included a forty-hour week, a ten percent wage hike and a compromise on the reorganization issue by which employers would gain the right to fire five percent of their workers each year. Hyman and Zimmerman favored

a settlement but they had to get the approval of the Communist apparatus first. As they soon discovered, this apparatus was in no mood to make peace.

The reason for the rejection of the agreement by the Communist Party's Needle Trades Committee had nothing to do with the terms themselves. Rather, it resulted from intense factionalism within the party, with each of several different groups trying to appear more revolutionary than the next in order to gain Moscow's approval. As Epstein later commented, "Factional strife precluded elementary reasoning."²¹ None of the various factions felt able to endorse an agreement which, however good for the workers, might make it appear insufficiently Bolshevik. Zimmerman's later recollections of that fateful meeting are telling:

The minute Boruchowitz got through saying, "Maybe we could have gotten more." William Weinstone, a member of the Politburo, was on his feet shouting, "They didn't get more. If there is a possibility of getting more, go and get more." Ben Gitlow couldn't afford to let Weinstone get ahead of him in militancy so he jumped up and echoed, "Sure, get going. Try and get more"... At that stage of the course, Charles Krumbein, the party's state director, could not sit back and let himself be outclassed... So he took up the cry, and the whole thing kept escalating.²²

The Communist Party's refusal to take advantage of the manufacturers' wish to save a part of their season doomed the strike to failure. As soon as the season ended, the employers once again hardened their line and the strike dragged on. A year later, the admittedly partisan Sigman

commented that "a union can't act on instructions from Moscow...It must have its freedom and act as economic conditions warrant."²³ In this case, Sigman's assertion seemed correct, and the rank and file began gradually to adopt his point of view. The Communist Party's dependency on the Bolsheviks--a dependency which had developed during the years of frustration after the split--had come back to haunt the needle-trades' left wing.

By November, the communists realized that the strike had to be settled, no matter what the terms. Although the walkout continued against the jobbers and contractors, the left wing did reach an agreement with the inside manufacturers--an agreement which could only be regarded as a severe defeat. The new pact gave employers the right to reorganize ten percent of their shops three times in two and a half years. In addition, the agreement postponed the institution of the forty-hour week until 1929 and recognized the demand for limitation of contractors only "in principle." The contract provisions were worse than those recommended by the governor's commission six months earlier, a point which the emboldened socialists did not hesitate to raise. Forsaking the united front, the rightists began to berate openly the joint board for its mismanagement of the strike, a mismanagement which they ascribed to the left wing's link to the Communist Party

and the Third International. In turn, the leftists accused the socialists of cooperating with the employers to sabotage the walkout.

Finally, the socialists believed themselves in a position to take over forcibly the direction of the strike against the jobbers and contractors. On December 13, the General Executive Board of the International declared itself in control of both the strike and the local union machinery. Charging the leftists with devastating the ILGWU for their own political ends, the right wing replaced the communist officers of the Joint Board and the four leftist locals with their own men and proceeded to submit the remaining disputes to arbitration.

Still unwilling to give up the fight, the left wing declared its removal illegal and continued to function as a regular union. Their hour, however, had passed. The Socialists responded by requiring all workers to register with the (now) right-wing locals. Most of the rank and file proved willing to do this, having grown progressively disenchanted with the left as the strike wore on. Those who retained their original support for the communists were soon forced to abandon it: the Socialists convinced the employers to compel workers to join the newly constituted locals under pressure of being fired. Both groups soon brought in thugs to line up union members on their respective sides, but the fierce and physical fight that ensued over

registration was ultimately short-lived. The socialist-employer partnership added the finishing touches to the damage that the Communists had already done themselves by mishandling the general strike. The civil war had ended; technically, the socialists had won.

In reality, however, socialism within the ILGWU had seen its final hour. The struggle between the communists and the socialists led to the expulsion or withdrawal of many thousands of the ILGWU's more militant rank-and-filers, who had previously provided the union with much of its radical outlook. Some of these garment workers had left the ILGWU out of support for the communists; others had quit out of disgust with both sides. In either case, these workers' departure depleted the union's ranks of many of its most active members. Meanwhile, those formerly militant trade unionists who remained within the ILGWU had lost much of their passion for radical politics. These members had watched as the Communist Party subordinated their battle to a seemingly irrelevant connection to the Bolsheviks. They had watched as the socialists resorted to unconstitutional suspensions and overt alliances with the capitalist class in order to remove the left-wing threat. They had watched as communists and socialists alike hired gangsters and thugs to keep straying members in line and pull defecting ones back into it. In the process, these workers had seen their fondest radical hopes and dreams utterly destroyed.

Never again would the ILGWU members be able to retrieve their formal moralistic and idealistic belief in the socialist cause. Never again would a Clara Lemlich rush up to a stage and start a general strike.

Compounding this loss of militance by the rank and file was a distinct rightward shift on the part of the union's leaders. These leaders had never been revolutionaries, but they had been socialists. After the civil war, however, the leadership's socialism rapidly degenerated into mere anti-communism. In a letter he wrote to Morris Hillquit on December 21, 1926, Norman Thomas aptly predicted the effects of such an obsession with the CP. "It is thoroughly unhealthy," Thomas noted, after congratulating Hillquit for ending the ILGWU strike,

that the one issue on which a great many of our comrades tend to arouse themselves, the one that brings into their eyes the old light of battle is their hatred of Communism.

Thomas warned that "a purely negative anti-Communist position" would ultimately kill the socialist cause "body and soul." And then, Thomas continued, no alternative would remain to "the crazy leadership from which the cloakmakers have suffered" on the one hand and the "selfish, calculating, plotting, unidealistic leadership of the average AF of L union" on the other.²⁴

Thomas' forecast came true to a remarkable extent. In attempting to separate themselves clearly and distinctly

from the communists they so despised, the garment unions' leaders veered far away from socialism--so far that they eventually cut their long-standing ties to the SP. In 1933, the ILGWU, along with many other formerly left-wing unions joined the mainstream of American political life by jumping on the New Deal bandwagon. These unions viewed the NRA both as a means of withstanding the depression and as an opportunity to recoup the losses they had suffered as a result of their struggle with the communists. To be sure, the NRA did enable the vast majority of these labor organizations to expand at phenomenal rates. The ILGWU, for example, increased its membership from 40,000 in 1928²⁵ to 200,000 in 1934,²⁶ and regained the industrial power it had lost during the civil war. There was, however, a price. In the process of endorsing Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the ILGWU ceased to be a radical oppositional force, with deep links to socialist politics and ideology.

In 1933, then, New York's Socialist Party suffered yet another blow, as the old progressive unions left its ranks and thereby doomed it to virtual oblivion. The needle-trades unions had been the only bulwark left to the Socialist Party, which had lost most of its membership and much of its spark in the split of 1919. The ILGWU, in particular, had been the last major force of socialist trade unionism in New York. Now the broader effects of the

split had caused the garment unions, too, to desert the party, leaving it with virtually no support. In the following years, the party's leaders seemed to spend more time attacking the communist cause than they did trying to rejuvenate their own. Hillquit, for example, constantly reiterated the theme that "the Soviet regime has been the greatest disaster and calamity that has occurred to the Socialist movement."²⁷ He and other long-time party members ruthlessly assailed any attempts to make the SP more militant as reeking of communism. Even Norman Thomas admitted that the socialists appeared "quicker to see the sins of Communism than the sins of capitalism."²⁸ The socialists' was a sterile program, suited to a sterile party. After thirty years, the socialist movement in New York City was dead in all but name.

CONCLUSION

In our own times, a coherent socialist movement is nowhere to be found in the United States. Americans are more likely to speak of a golden past than of a golden future, of capitalism's glories than of socialism's greatness. Conformity overrides dissent; the desire to conserve has overwhelmed the urge to alter. Such a state of affairs cries out for explanation. Why, in a society by no means perfect, has a radical party never attained the status of a major political force? Why, in particular, did the socialist movement never become an alternative to the nation's established parties?

In answering this question, historians have often called attention to various characteristics of American society that have militated against widespread acceptance of radical movements. These societal traits--an ethnically-divided working class, a relatively fluid class structure, an economy which allowed at least some workers to enjoy what Sombart termed "reefs of roast beef and apple pie"¹--prevented the early twentieth century socialists from attracting an immediate mass following. Such conditions did not, however, completely checkmate American socialism. In the per-

iod between 1901 and 1918, the Socialist Party established itself as a visible--albeit a minor--political organization. Its growth, although not dramatic, was steady and sure; its outlook on the future was decidedly optimistic. Yet in the years after World War I, this expanding and confident movement almost entirely collapsed. Conditions of American society will not explain such a phenomenon: we must look further to find the causes of U.S. socialism's demise.

Granted that one city is not a nation, the experience of New York may yet suggest a new solution to this critical problem. Here, the disintegration of the Socialist Party in 1919 and the socialist trade-union movement in the late 1920s represented but the culmination of a decades-long process of internal decay. From the New York socialist movement's birth, sectarianism and dissension ate away at its core. Substantial numbers of SP members expressed deep and abiding dissatisfaction with the brand of reform socialism advocated by the party's leadership. To these left-wingers, constructive socialism seemed to stress insignificant reforms at the expense of ultimate goals. How, these revolutionaries angrily demanded, could the SP hope to attract workers if it did not distinguish itself from the many progressive parties, if it did not proffer an enduring and radiant ideal? Now, the constructivists angrily replied, could the SP hope to attract workers if it did not promise

them immediate benefits, if it did not concern itself with their present burdens? The debate raged fiercely, but it did not rage alone. At the same time, the needle-trades unions seethed with dissension over the proper policies and tactics of a socialist labor organization. Radicalized Jewish garment workers demanded militant union action, attacked labor-management cooperation, perceived the strike as their most powerful weapon. Socialist union leaders, on the other hand, followed cautious trade policies, advocated industrial government, hesitated to stake their powerful organizations on the outcome of a walkout.

Over the years, the two controversies only grew more bitter, feeding off each other and off themselves. For a brief time during World War I, the socialists of New York achieved unity; during their common fight against the war effort, the deep and critical issues dividing them lay temporarily submerged. The war years, however, were but an aberration, the socialists' newfound unity but a precarious truce between two sworn enemies. That both the Socialist Party and the socialist trade-union movement distinegrated under the pressure of the Russian Revolution is not surprising: The way had long since been paved for just such a collapse.

Through its own internal feuding, then, the SP exhausted itself forever and further reduced labor radicalism

in New York to the position of marginality and insignificance from which it has never recovered. The story is a sad but also a chastening one for those who, more than half a century after socialism's decline, still wish to change America. Radicals have often succumbed to the devastating bane of sectarianism; it is easier, after all, to fight one's fellows than it is to battle an entrenched and powerful foe. Yet if the history of Local New York shows anything, it is that American radicals cannot afford to become their own worst enemies. In unity lies their only hope.