

Why is there no socialism in the United States??

Andy Yorke Thu, 02/10/2008 - 22:00

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Mainstream American politics is 'big business' and the latest presidential contest is no exception. The eye-watering amounts of money thrown at Obama and McCain by the American rich testify to the simple fact that both the Democrats and Republicans are capitalist parties - neither has ever represented the independent interests of American workers. **Andy Yorke** asks, 'Why have American workers never had a party of their own??' The answer, he argues, can be found in the historical struggles of the working class.

In 1906, the German socialist Werner Sombart published his investigation into the working class movement of the United States under the title 'Why is there no Socialism in the United States??' Sombart was not the first to consider the question of 'American' exceptionalism - the features of America's historical development that were substantially different from other western states. The subject had interested Marx and Engels and was also made famous by De Toqueville's *Democracy in America*. Sombart, however, was the first to relate the discourse on American exceptionalism to the prevalent political ideas across the working class and his work has been continually re-examined since. In Europe, a militant trade union movement and mass strikes went alongside the development of mass parties of the working class that were organised as part of the Second International. Like Europe, the United States had gone through a series of mass strike waves from 1877 till the end of the century, and had developed a national trade union federation, the American Federation of Labour (AFL) in 1886. However, unlike Europe, repeated attempts at standing labour candidates or forming labour parties to fight elections had not led to the formation of a national labour party. The 1894 and 1895 AFL conventions debated, and ultimately rejected, a political programme that would have been a springboard to 'independent political action?'. Within a decade it turned to supporting the Democrats. The Socialist Party, which had over 100,000 members and a thousand local and state officials at one point, was the closest the US working class ever came to developing a mass working class party, but it never broke through to become the party of the working class like the European Social Democratic and Labour Parties and, from its peak in 1912, it went into decline. The next major upsurge of strikes and industrial unionism of the 1930s created renewed agitation for a labour party but this was ultimately channelled into support for Roosevelt.

For Sombart, at the beginning of the 20th century, the growth of mass unionism, strikes and working class-based parties were all aspects of a larger trend, the growing phenomenon of 'Socialism' in the leading industrialised countries. It was the failure of these trends in the American working class to produce a mass, stable workers' party that he described as the country's 'exceptionalism?'. Since Sombart, academics have puzzled over this idea of American exceptionalism - what is it about American society that has hindered the development of mass class-based politics?

A problem with much of this literature is that it seeks to prove America's 'exceptionalism?' by reference to features that are actually found in most advanced capitalist states. First and foremost, America, like Britain, France, and Germany, developed capitalism relatively early vis-à-vis the south and east, and this led to them dominating the system as imperialist powers, either with colonial possessions or by keeping the

formally independent states in a condition of economic bondage. Their status as imperialist powers had consequences for domestic class relations too, as it led to the development of a large middle class and a privileged upper stratum of the working class.

These similarities were of practical importance in the Marxist tradition because of the barriers they erected in the imperialist countries to revolutionary socialist change. Marx and Engels noted the tendency to 'bourgeoisification' of the upper strata of the working class and the way this encouraged conservatism in their ranks. Lenin completed their analysis of the 'labour aristocracy' which he explicitly connected to the betrayals of the social democratic parties in 1914 as they abandoned revolutionary internationalism and supported 'their own' bourgeoisies in the war.

The American working class was particularly notable for the degree of inequality and stratification within its ranks. This resulted in a split between a minority of skilled workers that dominated the unions (the 'labour aristocracy') and a larger mass of unskilled, non-unionised, often immigrant, workers. This was compounded by the particular features of America's development as an imperialist power that also created conditions unfavourable to socialist, working class politics. Thus, mass migration from Europe, the absence of a feudal tradition, the early development of bourgeois democracy, the mythology of the 'frontier' and 'the American dream' have all made liberal ideas particularly strong and pervasive amongst American workers. The consequent lack of class-consciousness has been a particular problem; even trade unions have been known on occasion to identify their members as middle class, something that may be unique to the United States. Amongst American radicals, populism, as opposed to class-based socialist values, has often prevailed. Even more negatively, America's role in the slave trade and the genocide of the Native Americans have entrenched racist ideas and served to divide the working class on numerous occasions. To this can be added the role of violence and repression from armed gangs of strikebreakers in the 19th century to the anti-communist witch-hunts of the McCarthy years.

Too often, however, debates around American exceptionalism essentially become arguments over which one of these sociological factors is of the most fundamental significance. The danger with such reductionism is that the politics of the matter become lost and history is presented, not as being subject to change and contingency, but as a linear, teleological process that could not have happened any other way. Wrong conclusions, which imply the immunity of American workers to socialist thinking, are often drawn, but these are impossible to square with the radicalism and fierce class struggles that have actually shaped American labour movement history.

In short, just as Lenin did not see the labour aristocracy as an insurmountable barrier to winning workers in the imperialist countries to communism, neither can we explain the historic failure to build a working class party in the United States by such objective conditions alone. We need an historical explanation that connects the social and economic conditions with the political actions, the policies pursued by the workers' vanguard and their leaders. This article argues that, at key historical moments, a workers' party could have been built and that mass support for a socialist, even revolutionary, party could have developed. That this potential was not realised has to be explained, ultimately, by the politics of those who did not grasp the opportunities presented.

The question of an independent, working class party

The need for independent working class political organisation is based on the simple fact that workers need representation not only by unions in the workplaces but also at the political level. In the 19th century, trade unions quickly confronted this problem when they realised that they needed to fight for the state to legislate and enforce even the bare minimum of health and safety standards in industry. The working class as a whole, both inside and outside the unions, as workers or as pensioners, housewives, unemployed or

students, will always seek to use its democratic rights to try to better its social and economic position. For Marx and Engels and, later, Lenin and Trotsky, responding to this felt need of workers for political representation, and fighting for immediate improvements in the living conditions of the working class, was essential to linking their day-to-day struggles to the goal of socialist revolution. For reformist trade union leaders, who did not have this method or goal, the preferred tactic regarding political representation was generally to advocate support for one of the bourgeois parties in the hope they could be persuaded to grant limited social reforms. However, where heightened class struggle made such collaboration impossible, or when a bosses' offensive threatened the ability of unions to exist, the bureaucracy could be pushed to establish an independent labour party.

This difference between the Marxists, on the one hand, and the reformist trade union leaders on the other, led to different historical paths to the formation of workers' parties. The major parties of the Second International, like the German Social Democratic Party, were founded as Marxist political organisations, committed to revolution and socialism. They developed into mass parties of the working class by the early 20th century. As part of their programme of organising the working class, they often took the initiative in establishing unions themselves. In Britain and Australia, however, it was the trade unions that founded labour parties to give workers political representation.

Given these two alternate possibilities, the question of 'Why no Labour Party in the USA?' can actually be understood as two separate but interlinked questions. Firstly, why did the Marxists not win the leadership of the working class and found a mass, Marxist party? Secondly, why did the trade unions not found a party to represent their interests as they had done in Britain and Australia? Today, the distinction between labour and Marxist forms of social democracy is simply one of historical origins. The various large Social Democratic, Socialist, and Labour Parties in Europe and elsewhere all have a working class base but are capitalist parties deeply embedded in state institutions, and committed to defending capitalism. Conversely they have never been parties of the ruling class either, i.e. identified by a section of the capitalists as 'their party', but parties originating in the labour movement that govern for capital. Marxists use the term 'bourgeois workers' party' to describe such parties, a characterisation that captures the contradiction between the sociological make up of their memberships and the bourgeois politics they pursue in practice.²

Nonetheless, Trotsky recognised that these parties were 'defensive bulwarks' of workers' democracy within capitalism, regardless of the counter-revolutionary policies and actions of their leaderships.³ Without such established independence, the workers would be an amorphous, fragmented mass, with different sections pulled in different political directions by the bourgeois parties and middle class movements. Furthermore, the greater tendency in the American working class to reactionary and backward ideas and the widespread hostility to socialism and communism testify to the historically progressive role the mass workers' parties played in the early 20th century, despite the fact that they were either founded as reformist parties (Britain, Australia) or degenerated into reformism (Germany, Austria, France).

In the 19th century, Marx and Engels had made the development of this class independence through a class party the starting point of their struggle. This was a time when the working class began to coalesce, developing out of the petty-bourgeoisie, peasantry, artisans and the dispossessed who were driven into the factories under the hammer blows of early industrial capitalism. In their very first programmatic document, the Communist Manifesto, they famously laid down the necessity of revolutionaries not standing aside from the movements and parties of the working class but intervening into them. Their aim was to show that the communists were the section of the working class committed to the 'common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of nationality', and most clear on the ultimate goal and the 'line of march' the workers must take to reach it:

?In what relation do the Communists stand to the proletarians as a whole? The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties. ?The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.?4

Marx and Engels followed this practice in the First International and with their interventions into the development of the Social Democracy in Germany. They used the method of the united front to work with workers? organisations seeking to develop an independent workers? movement or labour party. For Marx and Engels, the great task of developing an independent workers? party was directly connected to the trade union question and the need to turn the unions outwards to organise the ?broad mass? of the class. This was an issue that led Marx into conflict with the English trade unionists in the First International. Marx had argued that class struggle unions, open to the mass of lower-paid, brutalised workers, could create the best conditions for revolutionary change because the interests of this stratum were irreconcilable with capitalism. He spelled out his vision for the unions thus:

?Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered incapable of organised resistance by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the broad masses of workers that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.?5

Their opponents were not only bourgeois forces (the Liberals in England, Bismark?s regime in Germany) who appealed to the working class but also the middle class reformism of the 19th century utopian socialists, who opposed socialist revolution and counterposed to it the building of small workers? communes or co-operatives. The struggle against utopianism took place not only in the First International but also in the early beginnings of the German Social Democracy. Ferdinand Lasalle drew on earlier utopian thinkers to develop his ?iron law of wages? which argued that workers could not succeed in raising wages under capitalism and that, therefore, strikes were useless. Instead, he emphasised the need for ?political action? to abolish the wages system itself. This was to become an important factor in the United States where Lasalle?s followers, who initiated many of the nineteenth century labour parties, played a key role in early debates in the working class movement, opposing trade unionism and counterposing to it electoral work.⁶ Unfortunately, such utopian socialist ideas dominated the American labour movement in its formative years in the mid 19th century.

The class forces that drove the development of reformist union bureaucracies and bourgeois workers? parties in the imperialist countries in the 20th century were only secondary tendencies at the time of the First International and were to a large extent limited to Britain, due to the early hegemony it developed on the capitalist world market. This led Marx and Engels to have a ?critical optimism? that the political conclusions of the communists, derived from the actual, material relations of the class struggle, would lead to a break of the workers from the bourgeois ?friends of labour? and the middle class utopians, and to the achievement of real, political independence for the workers? movement.⁷ To this end, as the unshaped working class began to find its political feet, organise movements and take political action, including intervening into elections, Marx and Engels exerted constant, friendly pressure. This included letters, meetings, critiques and polemics in order to try to push the fragile, first organisations of the working class onto the correct road without prematurely splitting them. This was a general principle they adopted in their political activism working, for example, with the conservative English trade union leaders in the First

International and in the first German socialist party initiated by Lasalle in the 1860s ? and it held especially true for the relatively underdeveloped American working class. As Engels put it:

?The first great step of importance for every country newly entering into the movement is always the constitution of the workers as an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is a distinct workers? party. And this step has been taken, much more rapidly than we had a right to expect, and that is the main thing. That the first programme of this party is still confused and extremely deficient and that it has raised the banner of Henry George are unavoidable evils but also merely transitory ones. The masses must have time and opportunity to develop, and they have the opportunity only when they have a movement of their own ? no matter in what form so long as it is their own movement ? in which they are driven further by their own mistakes and learn from their experience. The movement in America is at the same stage as it was in our country before 1848; the really intelligent people there will first have to play the part played by the Communist League among the workers? associations before 1848.?8

To the German-based socialist movement in the US in 1886, he argued that they adopt a more open, patient approach to this first great, tentative step by the US workers:

?Our theory is not a dogma but the exposition of a process of evolution, and that process involves successive phases. To expect that the Americans will start with the full consciousness of the theory worked out in older industrial countries is to expect the impossible. What the Germans ought to do is to act up to their own theory?to go in for any real working-class movement, accept its actual starting point as such, and work it gradually up to the theoretical level by pointing out how every mistake made, every reverse suffered, is a necessary consequence of mistaken theoretical views? But above all give the movement time to consolidate? Anything that might delay or prevent that national consolidation of the working men?s party ? on no matter what platform ? I should consider a great mistake??9

Engels went on to argue that a propaganda campaign against Henry George, the middle class leader of the New York United Labour Party chosen by the workers? movement, was less important at the time and that ?a million or two of the working men?s votes next November for a bona fide working men?s party is worth infinitely more at present than a hundred thousand votes for a doctrinally perfect platform.?

Some years later, Lenin was to rightly criticise those who tried to universalise this position and to turn it into a strategy for loose reformist parties. Engels had been quite clear that this was a stage of development in the context of an initial foray into elections by the first bona fide workers? party to develop out of the first great outbreak of class war by the US workers, Great Upheaval of the mid 1880s. Lenin stressed that strategy and tactics had to take into account changing historical and social contexts and the specific political and economic conditions found in different countries.¹⁰ The Communist Manifesto, he argued, had defined the general tasks of the proletariat in fighting for independent political organisation in the national working class movements of its time.¹¹ The principles and methods of communists, the fight for programme, democratic centralist organisation and united front tactics, do not change, but a materialist analysis of the particular society, its pattern of development and the period through which it is passing is vital to apply the general principles with any effect. In Lenin?s time, the tasks were to change substantially as he and the left wing of the Second International increasingly confronted the growing problem of reformist politics and bureaucratism. It was in this period that reformism became fully crystallised as a class collaborationist current within the workers? movement. From this point on, the context is no longer the era of the first appearance of the working class on the political stage out of inchoate beginnings, free from historical experience and the mistakes and lessons it contains, as had been the case in the 19th century.

The USA?s ?exceptional? historical development

In Capital, Marx predicted of the USA: "When the inevitable transition to the factory system shall take place, the ensuing concentration will, compared with Europe and even with England, stride on in seven-league boots."¹² In the decades after the Civil War, this proved prophetic. A growing national market and production were powered forward by a series of reinforcing, interlocking trends. Population grew in leaps and bounds with massive bursts of European immigration. The United States' continental territory, completed by 1850 through purchase and conquest, was to be filled in thereafter by an ever-growing settlement of farms, ranches, cities and industries linked by an expanding network of railways.

Alongside the development of the railways, the growth of manufacturing and the factory system in textiles created the beginnings of a working class before the Civil War, but it remained weak and in the shadow of the other, larger layers of farmers, craftsmen and middle classes. Workshops, rather than large factories, remained the norm. Workers had significant mobility in the context of expanding agricultural land and urbanisation, and could become farmers or set up as small employers themselves. A fragile trade union movement went through a cycle of developing local or citywide organisations only to see them destroyed by unemployment whenever crises and recessions erupted. In the 1820s and 1840s, these went beyond immediate workplace struggles to the setting up of the first independent workingmen's parties to contest elections.

By granting, albeit very limited, suffrage to some citizens at this time, the American state created unusual political conditions for working class activity. Whereas in Britain, France and Germany the democratic question tended to lead to explosive workers' struggles, in America it fostered illusions in elections and legal reforms. The first wave of workingmen's parties from 1828 flourished briefly before succumbing to the populist agitation of Jackson's revived Democrats. Besides such pressures from the mainstream parties, Middle class journalists, preachers or politicians came to dominate the early labour party initiatives and diverted them away from the struggle for the immediate needs of the workers into movements centred mostly on propaganda for "utopian panaceas" such as ideal educational systems, schemes to give land to all or producers' cooperatives that would apparently circumvent capitalism. If only the capitalists or the state could be convinced to allow the panacea proposed (and pay for it) then there would be no need to fight. These reformers often also promised to set the clock back, restoring the "old" craft status of the workingman, giving land to all and thereby achieving independence from the capitalist, as the way to reverse the growing proletarianisation and abolish the wages system.

The 1840s - 60s saw a new movement of workers for the 10-hour day but the workers' political leadership remained dominated by the utopian reformists or the Democrats. In the 1850s, the great cause of the abolition of slavery and the rise of the Republican party began to draw in sections of Northern workers around the demand "free soil, free Labour". The Civil War boosted the growth of manufacturing and railway construction, with the first transcontinental railway completed in 1869. In the years following the war, industry took off dramatically. In just two decades, American capitalism had its own mighty monopolies and, by the 1880s, the power of the huge "trusts" was widely condemned by the workers' movement and farmers. In 1860, the US was the world's fourth largest manufacturing power; by 1894 it was its first, and responsible for a third of the world's manufactured goods. The US national product was valued at \$9.5 billion that year. To put this in perspective, this was over twice the size of its next largest rival, Britain, and over half the size of all Europe.¹³ As the tycoon Andrew Carnegie put it with only some exaggeration, "the old nations of the earth creep on at a snail's pace; the Republic thunders past with the speed of an express."¹⁴

With the huge development in railways, mining, metalworking and manufacturing went the massive development of the industrial working class. Another prolonged wave of immigration in the last three decades of the century and lasting up to 1914 brought not only millions of new hands to run the machines

and labour in the mines, but also a layer of revolutionary workers who had taken part in the uprisings, new unions and workers' parties of Europe.

In the years following the Civil War, the first national unions sprung up. A National Labour Union was organised in 1866, the first national federation with national unions, city centrals and local unions affiliating. Its founding convention carried unanimously a report urging the organisation of all workers, skilled and unskilled into the unions, and debated a proposal by a German Socialist from Chicago to break with the mainstream parties in favour of a 'National Labour Party'. Despite opponents shelving this into a national labour committee, the question reappeared year after year with increasing intensity. The NLU gained the admiration of Karl Marx for its treatment of 'working women with complete equality' compared to European parties, and after harsh debates it accepted black workers in 1869, joining their unions to the white Labour movement for the first time. The NLU was to falter, however, on the political question. Lassalean influences meant that it moved away from organising unions, the number of union delegates fell from conference to conference until all the unions had left it. By 1870, it was as 'an entirely political institution' in which those remaining were split over political arguments about which of the various bourgeois parties to support.¹⁵ The failure of the 'political' NLU was to leave a lasting impact on working class political organisation, as the rising union bureaucracy used such negative past examples to oppose the formation of a labour party.

The contradictions in the working class movement grew to bursting point in the decades after the Civil War. The needs of the working class for independent class organisation and action 'strikes, unions and a party' came up against the continued pressure to fall in behind the rising agrarian populism and middle class reformers.¹⁶ The trade unions based on skilled craftsmen with a 'trade' were generally too narrow and restrictive to draw in the growing mass of unskilled or semi-skilled machine operatives in the new factories and railways.¹⁷ These contradictions were to come to a head in the 'Great Upheaval' of 1884-6.

Objective conditions and the labour party question

To Sombart, the explanation of American exceptionalism could be reduced to the higher standard of living of workers in the prosperous, industrial giant, where 'all Socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie.'¹⁸ Despite the obvious one-sidedness of this statement, Sombart was touching upon a genuine reality. The US developed into the biggest industrial power and exporter before World War One, and a major financial power afterwards. The wealth created by the huge development of the productive forces and supplemented by the massive flow of tribute from the semi-colonial world, developed a skewed domestic class structure, with a large middle class and labour aristocracy that had a high standard of living, even compared to other imperialist countries. That the social weight of these middle strata has had a major impact on the class struggle in the US cannot be denied.

Related to this, we can also point to the unusually high level of stratification in the US working class compared to other imperialist countries. A minority of skilled, well-paid, mostly white and male workers, with a middle class outlook and standard of living, are, to a degree, separated off from, and sometimes hostile to, a mass of poorer, unskilled, labouring masses, often black, or Latino migrants. This division has meant that the unions do not organise the 'broad masses', as Marx had once argued and hoped for. Instead they consist primarily of those whose demands for better wages, hours and conditions can be accommodated by American capitalism. Meanwhile, the mass of poorer, more casualised workers, with their more radical demands, are left unorganised and cut off from the power of the unions. This stratification and division of the US working class has played a key role in labour's defeats in the past and in sabotaging moves towards a mass, independent working class party.

Such material, sociological factors 'raise the bar higher' for the proletariat in some countries compared to

others where capitalism and its chains are weaker. For example, Trotsky noted this difference when contrasting Russia's development to that of the United States:

“In spite of the fact that the productive forces of the United States are ten times as great as those of Russia, nevertheless the political role of the Russian proletariat, its influence on the politics of its own country and the possibility of its influencing the politics of the world in the near future, are incomparably greater than in the case of the proletariat of the United States.”¹⁹

The reason that Russia was a country imbued with revolutionary ferment in 1905, despite its sociological backwardness, was that, while the working class was much weaker than their American brothers and sisters, the capitalist class was weaker still. The American capitalist class, with the economic power it wielded through its massive monopolies, and the repression it could unleash by its private strikebreaking forces, state militias and Federal troops, was much more powerful relative to the working class movement it faced. This led Kautsky to conclude: “in no other country than America is there so much basis for speaking of the dictatorship of capital.”²⁰

While bourgeois democratic institutions, established in 1787 and 1791 with the Constitution and Bill of Rights, did come to America earlier, the extension of the franchise was, like in Europe, a long process. In 1791, only white male property owners, around 15 per cent of the population, had the vote, and men with no property, women, slaves, some free black men, Native Americans, apprentices, labourers, felons and those considered incompetent for whatever reason, were all excluded.²¹ However, from 1820 onwards, white male suffrage steadily expanded along with Jeffersonian populism. In stark contrast to this, the enslavement of the Black American population, with no social or political rights at all, let alone suffrage, did not come to an end until 1865 following the Civil War and they only gained citizenship and voting rights with the passing of the fifteenth amendment in 1870. Racist oppression of Black Americans has remained a feature of America's development since and has remained a key dimension of the highly stratified nature of the American working class. As Trotsky put it:

“The characteristic thing about the American workers' parties, trade union organisations, and so on, was their aristocratic character. The skilled workers who feel set in the capitalist society help the bourgeois class to hold the Negroes and the unskilled workers down to a very low scale.”²²

Racism and ethnic ghettoisation has historically fractured the labour movement, so much so that some of the most militant and consciously socialist sections did not build English speaking unions, journals or organisations. The role of anti-immigrant Nativist movements in exacerbating religious differences, equating Americanism with protestantism and anti-catholicism, is also an underlying factor in the continued importance of religious divisions. The proliferation of these ideas is, to a degree, a reflection of immigration and the economic, material divisions it created within the working class.

The balance of class forces, and the material, social and historical conditions, can help explain the barriers to the development of the trade unions, the winning of strikes or the establishment of workers' parties. However, this is not the decisive factor in explaining the failure to advance on these fronts. Material factors become secondary once industry and the working class have reached their modern form. At such an historical stage, political leadership becomes key to the development of events and the patterns of change and continuity. The strength of reformism and populism, or those “revolutionary” currents that in reality adapt to these ideologies (“centrists”), is what Marxists call the “crisis of working class leadership” and it is key to understanding how capitalism has survived two tumultuous centuries of class struggle, war, social dislocation and economic crisis. This is no less true in the United States where the development of modern industry and working class after the Civil War saw several opportunities to stop the developing union bureaucracy from consolidating its grip on the unions, and to advance towards a workers' party won to a

programme for socialist revolution. From 1877 to the 1930s, the working class engaged in mass mobilisations and new organisations were built. From the mass layers of the unskilled and semi-skilled proletarians, the potential was there to break open the craft-dominated unions, and to build sizeable vanguard parties through a consistent revolutionary struggle.

1880s: Craft unions versus class organisation

In the period 1873-1897, the US underwent a long deflationary crisis and period of stagnation, bracketed by major depressions in 1873-8 and 1893-7 that saw declining profit margins and record bankruptcy rates. In this period, industrial growth saw shorter periods of expansion and the growth rate halved. The response of employers was to slash costs, either through lower wages or by breaking the strength of skilled workers, 'diluting' their skill or eliminating them through mechanisation or a new division of labour.²³ Two movements developed in resistance to this and vied for the adherence of the working class and the unions in the 1880s. The Federation of Organised Trade and Labour Unions of the United States and Canada (FOTLU) was established in 1881 and quickly gained the adherence of several important unions including the Cigar Makers' International Union (CMIU) headed by Samuel Gompers. The FOTLU was the precursor to the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and Gompers, its most active organiser, would go on to become the AFL president.

A defining moment in this period was the defeat of the mass railway strike in 1877, which was a serious blow to the workers' vanguard. The strike had seen railway workers rally thousands of trade unionists and unorganised, impoverished workers across the continent into solidarity strikes, blockades of rail yards and battles with police and even troops. The violence of this uprising and its failure, and the collapse of labour electoral initiatives despite early victories in the immediate aftermath, all consolidated a conservative perspective for a group of more skilled trade unionists, including Gompers, which was to lead to the 'pure and simple unionism' of the AFL. Simultaneously with the establishment of FOTLU, the Knights of Labour rose to prominence, becoming a mass, public organisation in 1881 after developing from a 'secret society' industrial body founded in 1869. Despite its early locals being craft unions, its main slogan, 'an injury to one is the concern of all', unfurled the banner of working class unity across all trades and industries, all nationalities, religions, races and sexes, creating a striking contrast to the narrow craft-ism of the trade unions. The success of the Window-Glass Workers' Association, which developed within the Knights as a national organisation on the back of successful strikes, opened the Knights up to unionisation. They organised local and national 'trade assemblies', with new groups of workers under the Knights' umbrella. National assemblies of workers in particular industries were encouraged in the effort to organise all workers into one, single organisation.

The Knights successfully organised women workers with 50,000 women members at its peak (albeit out of a total membership of 700,000) and 80 per cent of these in the Massachusetts textile and shoe factories. Tens of thousands of black workers in the South also joined the Knights, up to 60,000 nationally or ten percent of the organisation, though not without a struggle against segregation in the organisation. In assemblies, in strikes, in marches, the Knights achieved an unprecedented level of working class, trans-race unity which was not to be seen again for nearly another century. As a reporter at a Labour Day parade in Baltimore said in 1886, black and white workers were:

'well mixed in and through the procession. In some instances, you would see an assembly composed entirely of coloured Knights; another assembly would be perhaps half coloured, and in some instances one solitary coloured individual would be marching with any number of his white trades-brothers. The procession was a very orderly one, the coloured and white fraternising as if it had been a common thing all their lives.'²⁴

At the time, Engels recognised this as a key development because it brought together a mass movement uniting the unionised and non-unionised, and so created a momentum that could quickly spark a mass, nation-wide struggle:

‘We cannot help seeing in this vast agglomeration an immense amount of potential energy evolving slowly but surely into actual force. The Knights of Labour are the first national organisation created by the American working class as a whole; whatever be their origin and history, whatever their shortcomings and little absurdities, whatever their platform and their constitution, here they are, the work of practically the whole class of American wage-workers, the only national bond that holds them together, that makes their strength felt to themselves not less than to their enemies, and that fills them with the proud hope of future victories. For it would not be exact to say, that the Knights of Labour are liable to development. They are constantly in full process of development and revolution; a heaving, fermenting mass of plastic material seeking the shape and form appropriate to its inherent nature?to an outsider it appears evident that here is the raw material out of which the future of the American working-class movement, and along with it, the future of American society at large, has to be shaped.’ 25

The combination of craft unions with ‘mixed assemblies’ of workers for whom no union existed, or who were in localities too small to sustain a union, allowed the movement to grow in leaps and bounds without fetter. Indeed, the Knights of Labour leaders condemned as failures ‘trade unions isolated from other trades’ that did not organise the mass of workers and focussed on the narrow interests of their own members. ‘Trades’ Unions ‘accept the industrial system as it is and endeavour to adapt themselves to it. The attitude of our Order to the existing industrial system is necessarily one of war’ and for a ‘radical change’.²⁶

The railway workers were the piston driving the upheaval of 1884-1886 and Knights’ assemblies were to prove to be key in bringing together the mass of railroad workers of all grades across the boundaries of their many different unions and ensuring their direct control of the strike, a process that led to initial, groundbreaking victories. Workers flooded into the Knights of Labour to join in the action and swelled its membership to over 700,000 in 1886. At the height of this struggle, the Knights’ assemblies constituted a significant and progressive advance on the trade unions. They pointed towards the factory committees and workers’ councils that were to develop in the 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolutions and become a central part of revolutionary strategy thereafter.

However, these bodies also had their weaknesses compared to the unions and were certainly sectarian towards them. The Knights had a predominantly middle class leadership under Terence Powderly, who had been the Greenback-Labour Party’s mayor of Scranton Pennsylvania, and the Lassalean faction allied with him. These two forces dominated the very influential Knights of Labour New York assembly. Their petit bourgeois radicalism led them to declare unions to be ‘relics’ and that the aim of the Knights of Labour was to ‘wipe out this trade union feeling and make one common brotherhood of man.’ This anti-union position, and the Knights of Labour assemblies themselves, created a rivalry with the existing craft unions and an excuse by their nascent bureaucracy to split away from the Knights, in the process moving away from organising the unskilled and semi-skilled workers around the militant actions necessary to break the employers’ resistance. The Knights’ leadership combined a utopian backward-looking goal of cooperatives to end the wages system with a cross-class movement admitting farmers, storekeepers, doctors, professors and small employers as part of a supposed alliance of the ‘productive’ classes, against the bankers, monopolists and lawyers. Despite being a minority overall, in some cases middle class forces led the assemblies. The Knights’ leadership fundamentally did not understand the importance Marx and Engels had attributed to union organisation as a basic, elementary defence of working class interests against the bosses or their role in aiding the development of class and socialist consciousness.²⁷

Unions are essential for organising workers around the immediate, day to day issues they face, and maintaining class organisation between peaks of intense struggle, without losing the less militant workers. As such, they are an absolutely necessary level of organisation, at best on an industrial basis that unites all the workers, skilled, unskilled or semi-skilled, in an industry, rather than a craft or trade basis that separates the skilled 'labour aristocrats' from the masses.

The Rise of the American Federation of Labour (AFL)

At the same time as the mass railway strikes were beginning to turn to defeat as a result of the hesitations and outright sabotage of the Powderly leadership in the Knights, a 'universal strike' day in support of the demand for an 8-hour day was called by FOTLU for 1 May 1886. Powderly and the Knights' officialdom rejected requests to support the strike because 'the eight-hour question' is a political one which could not be achieved until 'a just and humane system of land ownership, control of machinery, railroads and telegraphs, as well as an equitable currency system' had been achieved.²⁸ A general strike, they argued, would prove 'abortive' because the workers were not yet 'educated in the movement' and its ultimate aims! However, the Knights' rank and file assemblies enthusiastically took up the demand and organised for it. 150,000 workers won shorter hours (an 8 or 9 hour day) by the threat of a strike while another 42,000 won it after the 1st May action, with 350,000 on strike and thousands joining the unions during the two year campaign building up to it.²⁹

The Knights' leadership alienated its rank and file, especially trade unionists, through such sectarian practices that completely ignored labour's immediate needs and demands in the name of some distant utopia and attacks on the status of the unions. Gompers founded the American Federation of Labour in December 1886 after a struggle with the Knights over the place of the existing craft unions in the movement. The New York Lasallean Socialists, organised in the New York KoL District Assembly 49, began to organise alternative unions to the national craft unions and to pressurise their locals to disaffiliate and affiliate to DA49, with similar incidents elsewhere in the years up to 1886. They were accused by the craft unions of accepting lower wages and therefore gaining bosses' recognition at their expense, gaining them the jibe 'the Knights of Cheap Labour'. These unions, however, organised all workers, including those that the FOTLU craft unions tended to ignore, while both sides accused the other of scabbing on their strikes. The struggle was most intense between Gompers' own union, the Cigar Makers' International Union (CMIU) and the Knights-promoted Progressive Cigarmakers' Union (PCU) and both competed for members and for the wider movements to only recognise their own union label on cigars.

At the May 1886 Cleveland convention of the Knights, the craft unions proposed a treaty which demanded recognition of the complete autonomy of these unions and their control over all workers in their sector but it was ignored. Then, in October, the Knights leadership rammed through a ruling ordering all unions to recognise the PCU and its label (which would have meant a union boycott of the rival CMIU label) and to leave the craft union they belonged to or be expelled. With this order the Knights' leadership gave a great boost to the craft unions around Gompers, and a December convention proceeded to set up the American Federation of Labour.³⁰ The Knights' leadership's repeated betrayals of strikes, Powderly's refusal to support the massively popular Henry George as the accepted candidate of the Labour movement for New York mayor in 1886 and the expulsion of Socialists from the Knights in 1887, all contributed to the Knights' collapse. Outrage after outrage, saw assemblies winding themselves up, the movement disintegrating, or joining the craft unions and AFL, encouraged by the AFL's revived 8-hour movement in 1889-1891. By 1890, the Knights had shrunk to a rural base of around 100,000 members, while the 13 national unions originally that set up the AFL had grown to 40 by 1892 and membership from 138,000 to 225,000 in 1890.³¹

Stressing that only waged workers could join, to keep out middle class elements, the AFL also stressed

union autonomy and a focus on immediate demands such as the Eight-Hour day, opposing political campaigns around longer-term goals like co-operativism ? sticking to ?pure and simple trade unionism? in the words of Gompers. According to the classic formulation by Adolph Strasser, another leader of the CMIU and FOTLU, in 1883: ?We have no ultimate ends. We are going on from day to day. We are fighting only for immediate objects, objects that can be realised in a few years.?³² For the unions to survive crisis, economic change, and repression, Gompers modelled the CMIU on the British ?new model unions?. These craft unions had been established in the 1850s-60s, with the intention of creating stable financial organisations based on high membership rates that allowed the union to provide the benefits that the CMIU leaders saw as ?the secret of the growth and power of trade unions in England?. Gompers argued that unions should be run professionally, like businesses, and he applied this model of ?business unionism? first to his own CMIU, which became a model for the AFL unions thereafter. This meant excluding the mass of workers, but mixed unions were, argued Gompers, a ?siren song? who also insisted ?it was better that the worker remain unorganised than to organise on mere enthusiasm.?³³

In the 1880s, the craft unions that existed and participated in the NLU and Knights of Labour supported organising the unskilled, but now, under Gompers's influence, they moved further away from these layers and any real initiative apart from the defence of the skilled members' interests and union organisation itself. Strikes and boycotts were to be used sparingly, only when no other recourse was possible, and only with permission of the union leadership. The trade union leadership would not allow spontaneous walkouts because the surges of the mass of workers could carry away the union with them and invite repression. The strikes occurred over control issues, like enforcing work rules and union recognition, as skilled workers tried to maintain their privileged niche above the rest of the workforce in the face of technological change.³⁴ For Gompers, speeches and statements on behalf of the AFL sent to the Second International with lofty rhetoric about the ?interests of the wage-earning masses? and ?the emancipation of Labour? were combined with the pursuit, in practice, of developing the AFL as a craft union federation.

Initially, the AFL did courageous work organising black workers alongside white in the South, with the successful 1892 New Orleans general strike as the greatest fruit of this labour. Similarly, Gompers and the AFL emphasised the organising of women workers, appointing women organisers and setting up women's unions where necessary. However, Foner points out they organised only the skilled minority of black and women workers, who were an even smaller minority of those sections of the working class than amongst the white workers. ³⁵ This abandonment of the great majority of black and women workers in practice was taken one step further in the national trade unions with explicit bans on women or black members (the Railway brotherhoods, not in the AFL, even campaigned for the railway companies to get rid of their black employees).

From the start, the AFL (along with the Knights and every other union organisation until the IWW) campaigned for no Asian ?coolie? immigration and later for restricted immigration full stop. The Democrats' policy of restricting immigration was one of the reasons the AFL was to graduate towards them in the early 1900's, as opposed to the Republicans who were backed by big business partly for their support for open immigration. Another symptom of the Labour aristocratic middle class outlook and hostility to the needs of the mass of workers was Gompers' policy of opposition to welfare, pensions, disability funds, unemployment benefits, and so on, because it would sap the moral strength of the working class! The AFL did not drop this until 1932. In short, craft union stability was the priority, well before the harder to reach goals of organising the unorganised, solidarity and political action. After 1895, when the craft union orientation and bureaucracy became entrenched, such rhetoric was simply abandoned. Many of the affiliates went further and remained outright hostile to organising the unskilled, women and black or immigrant workers. As a result, these unions sometimes only organised 10-20 per cent of the workers in some factories.

With the consolidation of the labour aristocracy and craft unions came bureaucracy. Between 1870-1895, national union leaders remained in office for only a year or two before returning to the lower levels of the bureaucracy. In the smaller unions they even went back to the shop floor. However, over the next 25 years, half the national Labour leaders held their offices for at least fifteen years, testifying to the dramatic consolidation of the bureaucracy in these years.³⁶ Even at the start of the AFL, when the officials were still activists living a relatively hand to mouth existence, Gompers was to receive an annual wage of \$1000 at a time when average real yearly earnings were half that or less.³⁷ Gompers himself remained the AFL's permanent president until his death, except for 1894 when a pro-party candidate beat him.

Labour Aristocracy

The overall trend with the rise of industrialisation was towards 'skill-dilution'. Mechanisation and a new division of labour undermined the old craftsman who could deploy the whole range of skills that had once been necessary to the production process from start to finished product. However, the old artisan layer of the pre-Civil War era did not simply disappear, rather its place was taken by a new, privileged, although transitional, layer in the new factory system.³⁸ The development of new machines, technologies and industries also created new skills and occupations, for instance electricians, trolley car conductors and machinists were needed to run and fix the new sophisticated machines. As a result, although the composition of the skilled grades changed, the numbers of skilled workers did not decline; their ranks were continually replenished. In 1870, 20.5 per cent of non-agricultural workers were skilled, and it was still 18.5 per cent in 1910.³⁹ These workers' pay levels allowed some to buy homes and enjoy a fragile middle class lifestyle. By the end of the nineteenth century, the US had the largest wage differential between the lowest-paid and best-paid workers in the capitalist world and, with the huge wave of immigration at the time, this 'dramatically accelerated'.⁴⁰ Engels recognised this ongoing problem for class organisation:

'Your great obstacle in America it seems to me, lies in the exceptional position of the native workers? Now a working class has developed and has also to a great extent organised itself on trade union lines. But it still takes up an aristocratic attitude and wherever possible leaves the ordinary badly paid occupations to the immigrants, of whom only a small section enter the aristocratic trades. But these immigrants are divided into different nationalities and understand neither one another nor, for the most part, the language of the country. And your bourgeoisie knows much better even than the Austrian Government how to play off one nationality against the other??⁴¹

This exclusion deepened over time as the mass movements of the mid 1880s declined, and defeats set in for the emerging mass industrial unions in the 1890s. The Homestead, Pennsylvania steel strike 'shattered' the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers in its stronghold in the area around Pittsburgh. The United Mine Workers was so weakened by its defeat in the 1894 coal strike that it could not even pay its affiliation fees to the AFL, borrowing \$1000 from the federation just to survive.⁴² Most devastatingly, the new, industrially organised American Railway Union was destroyed in the 1894 Pullman strike. Bankrupt, with its membership collapsed, its offices were smashed up after the federal government intervened with troops and injunctions imprisoning its leadership.

The defeats of these magnificent strike movements served as a further warning to the craft bureaucrats of the dangers of linking their careful, cautious campaigns for better conditions for their members to the needs of the mass of workers. The skilled workers already had some control over their labour market. Their limited numbers and key place in production allowed them to cut deals, in which their relatively superior wages and conditions would sometimes come at the expense of the unskilled and semi-skilled who were living on starvation wages. Since skilled workers could be difficult to replace, when they went on strike it was difficult for the bosses to use scabs, and the police and military, who were usually called in to break picket lines, consequently played a reduced role.⁴³ However, in contrast, when the mass of workers

took strike action, mass pickets and violent battles with scabs, police and militia men followed, with union organisation at times threatened with destruction through fierce, violent repression.

The bosses manipulated the differentiation between skilled and non-skilled workers artfully to break union organisation. The Iron Steel Workers' union, for example, was 'one of the richest, and best organised' but its power was destroyed in the Homestead strike, with militants thrown out and remaining skilled workers given even more privileges within a job structure reorganised by steel industry magnates to give skilled workers a supervisory role in production, reinforcing the union's craft basis.⁴⁴

These defeats in the mines, railways and steel industry quite literally physically removed from the AFL the industrial unionists that might have fought for a different approach 'based on the organisation of all the workers in an industry, not just a skilled layer. Archer gives figures that provide testimony to the risks inherent in mass, industrial unionism, while, in stark contrast, there remained possibilities for controlled strike action by craft workers that allowed them to advance their interests gradually. He writes, 'within the ranks of the AFL, the miners' union came closest to being a model industrial union, and the cigar makers' came closest to a model craft union.' Comparing strike figures from 1886-1894, in the coal and coke industry, strikes failed in 57.5 per cent of establishments, while in the tobacco industry strikes succeeded in 54.2 per cent of establishments 'a truly dramatic contrast.'⁴⁵

The fight for a labour party in the AFL

Gompers remained hostile to independent political action, equating it with movements in the past taken over by middle class reformers and noting their failures to advance after initial successes. However, in the mid 1880s the general popularity of standing independent labour candidates in elections, promoted by the Knights' assemblies, was to infect the trade unions too. In the period 1885-1888, 'labour tickets' were mounted as challenges to the two main parties in 189 towns and cities in 34 states and four territories.⁴⁶ In his recent work *Why is there no Labor Party in the United States*, Robin Archer finds that the most decisive factor driving the creation of a labour party in Australia was the strength and success of the 'new unionism', the mass industrial unionism that arose both in Britain and Australia in the late 1880s. Archer argues that the weakness of this in the USA, connected to other features such as inequality and polarisation in the working class (much higher in the US than in Australia) but also the high levels of trade union repression in the US, was the determining factor.

There is a great deal of force in Archer's argument. When the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council made the decision to establish a labour party in 1891, the seven largest unions in New South Wales (NSW) were 'new' industrial-style unions linking skilled and unskilled, while in the US the seven largest unions were traditional craft unions.⁴⁷ The three unions that mounted mass strikes and suffered the most repression in NSW in the lead up to the labour party debate, the shearers, the coal miners and the maritime workers, represented 62 per cent of those affiliated to the Trade and Labour Council and each had leadership positions in it. In comparison, the Iron and Steel Workers were decimated after the Homestead strike, the American Railway Union (ARU) with its 150,000 workers, was not affiliated to the AFL, and the United Mine Workers, although affiliated, made up only 7 per cent of the AFL.⁴⁸ Moreover, whereas the strikes in Australia saw a convergence of the union movement as a whole, craft unions included, in a mass solidarity movement, the AFL viewed the ARU with suspicion. One leader, Strasser, even voiced, no doubt wider-held views, of the new railway union being 'a second edition of the Knights of Labour', the AFL's old competitor. For his part, Gompers did little to help, refused to support the call for a general strike in defence of the railway workers and ordered AFL members who did walk out to go back to work.

The 'new' unions pointed in many ways to the development of an independent labour party. Oriented to

the unskilled, the strategy of controlling the labour market by means of skills was simply not an option for them; the only way to force employers to make concessions was with mass action. Scabs could easily replace such workers, and the resulting police repression to break up pickets, along with the need to establish minimum standards on hours, child labour, contract rights, and so on, meant that such unions were compelled to seek legal rights and reforms in a way that craft unions often were not. Of course, when the courts began to attack the right to strike, boycott or organise, even rightwing craft unions were driven into politics despite their professed 'pure and simple unionism', as the AFL was increasingly after 1900, but for the 'new unions' this was closer to the norm.

Mobilising the mass of workers naturally relied on appeals to solidarity and class that developed a political class-consciousness rather than a narrow, craft identity. And the mass memberships of these unions, often geographically concentrated along with their industry, could easily be turned in times of elections to a bloc of votes and successful support for politicians that promised to help them. Voting records of the AFL conferences show that those unions that were open to unskilled and semi-skilled workers were far more likely to support independent political activity than the more closed craft unions that dominated the federation.⁴⁹ The five early industrial unions in the AFL were to provide the left with support for a labour party from the 1890's all the way up to the 1930's; providing a half to three-quarters of the vote for leftwing causes and labour party politics (49.1 per cent in the 1894 vote) while representing a quarter of the AFL's membership.⁵⁰

In the context of strikes and defeats, of crisis and unemployment, pressure did build up in the AFL for political action and broke out into a debate about a 'Political Programme' at the Federation's December 1893 Conference where the principle of independent political action was adopted. Right from his early struggles to reorganise the Cigar Makers' International Union, Gompers was against the union engaging in politics. Battles with the Lassaleans in New York, who dismissed trade union action and strikes for higher wages in favour of political action, led to a reaction by the nascent union bureaucracy in the CMIU in the other direction. In 1879, it passed a resolution forbidding any union local 'to aid, cooperate or identify itself with any political party whatsoever'. The FOTLU from the beginning restricted itself to lobbying existing parties while unanimously resolving that no affiliated union 'should publicly advocate the claims of any of the parties.'⁵¹ Gompers was temporarily forced to give support to the upturn in labour candidates in the aftermath of the Great Uprising, in order to preserve his own leading position in the AFL. The enthusiasm infected the unions at the founding AFL convention in December 1886 when they resolved to give 'generous support to the independent political movement of the workingmen' and this had been watered down by the Gompers' leadership from a proposal for the formation of an independent labour party.⁵²

From 1893 onwards, the US economy was in the throes of a deep economic crisis with mass unemployment and a renewed offensive by the bosses to slash wages and smash union organisation. Unemployment, coupled with the defeats of the miners and railway workers convinced sections of the unions that trade unionism was not enough to defend their interests. The rise of the agrarian-based Populist Party threatened to draw the workers' movement behind its petty-bourgeois programme. At this crucial juncture, socialists and the mass unions in the AFL, led by the defeated miners and steel workers, began to fight for a Political Programme and an Independent Labour Party. The Programme, which was proposed by Thomas J. Morgan, a Socialist Labour Party member and delegate to the 1893 Convention from the Machinists' International Union of Chicago, was overwhelmingly accepted at the conference (2244 vote to 67) and forwarded to affiliates for them to discuss and mandate their delegates for the following year's convention. It was modelled on the programme of the Independent Labour Party in Britain and contained a series of demands including state education, the eight hour day, the nationalisation of telegraphs, railways and mines, the municipalisation of street cars, water works, gas and electric plants.

The 'socialist' Plank 10, which called for 'the collective ownership by the people of all the means of production and distribution', caused alarm in the media. The preamble praised British trade unionists for adopting the principle of independent political action. By the 1894 convention, the vast majority of affiliated unions, city centrals and state federations of the AFL had ratified the Political Programme including Plank 10. Even Gompers's union, the CMIU, had endorsed the entire programme by a four-fifths majority.

However, the AFL bureaucracy in its bulk, from the Gompers apparatus to the officialdom of the national unions, was dead-set against this 'socialism' and only the United Mine Workers' Union leader, John McBride, was in favour. Gompers deployed his usual strategy of conciliatory statements in public with manoeuvring and dirty deals in private, arguing that rather than come out against the Political Programme: 'We must hold on to every inch we've got till matters resolve themselves into a condition of stability. In revolutionary times it is little use to preach conservatism - better go out the way than try to stem the torrent.' Therefore he told reporters 'Personally I approve of nearly everything in the platform.' However, he convened a week long meeting of top AFL leaders led by himself and the Carpenters' Union leader, P. J. McGuire, before the convention to create a strategy to defeat the Programme. The debate on the Programme was taken on the fourth day, giving them time to cajole and twist the arms of the delegates to break their mandates. The top table carved up the voting, taking the planks one by one rather than the document as a whole, so that the preamble declaring for independent labour action was defeated, and plank 10 amended to calling for 'the abolition of the monopoly system of land holding'. The whole thing was then voted on and rejected by a wide margin (1,173 to 735) - despite being accepted as a whole plank by plank! Delegates, overwhelmingly representing the union officialdom, broke their mandates, claiming the amended version was not what they were called on to vote for, or that their members did not really understand what the Programme meant.⁵³ The socialists, in alliance with those disgusted by the bureaucratic manipulation of the procedures by Gompers, voted him out in favour of the UMW's McBride, but similar manoeuvres saw him restored to the throne in 1895. The defeat was complete and the bureaucracy triumphant, with the union affirming that 'party politics whether they be democratic, republican, socialistic, prohibitionist, or any other, should have no place in the convention of the A.F. of L.' with only 158 out of 1,618 voting against.⁵⁴

In 1897, the US started to pull out of the deep economic crisis that marked the transition from the 'Gilded Age' stagnation period to the rise of the US as an imperialist, monopoly capitalist power in the developing epoch of Imperialism. The US economy was relatively more stable from 1898-1929 with fewer and shorter periods of crisis, none of which were anything like as bad as the 'cataclysms' of the 1870s and 1890's.⁵⁵ America's Gross National Product (GNP) doubled in this period. Just as in Europe, reformism and the trade union bureaucracy became fully crystallised as supporting pillars of bourgeois class rule and the trade union bureaucracy developed its alliance with the monopolistic trusts and US imperialism. The latter had taken its first military steps abroad with the Spanish-American war in 1898. The AFL rushed to support the Spanish-American War with Gompers declaring it 'a glorious and righteous' war and after 1901 the AFL refused to denounce the acquisition of Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.⁵⁶ In this way, the bureaucrats' long-sought accommodation with big business in return for higher wages grew over into support for US imperialism abroad at the expense of semi-colonial workers, a plank that became nailed firmly into AFL policy from this time onwards.

This open class collaborationism was institutionalised when the National Civic Federation, involving industrialists, politicians, and trade union officials, was set up in 1900. While certain national-centred industries did recognise the restricted interests of their skilled workers - Railroads, the Newspaper Publishers' Association - the mass production industries remained extremely hostile to labour. For instance, the new giant US Steel trust, and the Manufacturers' Association launched an open shop offensive shortly after the formation of the National Civic Federation. Reinforced by harsh court judgements

undermining the unions' right to take any effective action, from injunctions to 'yellow dog' contracts⁵⁷, to attacks on the unions' tactics of boycotts, this offensive forced Gompers and the AFL to turn to political action – not towards a labour party but by increased orientation to the Democrats. The marriage was cemented with the Wilson administration and the AFL's support for America in World War One, during which it grew to its highest membership yet, though labour faced hard times again after the war.

Role of the Left: De Leon and the Socialist Labour Party

The rise of the AFL provided for the first time a potential firm, class footing for the new party, in contrast to the previous years where local and city-wide unions and federations tended to get sucked in behind local initiatives or, where they mounted them, get captured by middle class reformers or utopians like Henry George. The rise of militant, industrial unions, like the railway workers or miners, created the possibility of breaking open the Federation, and building not just a new unionism but a new working class party. A Marxist organisation, combining united front work with a principled struggle against reformist and utopian ideas, should have been able to lead to a mass, socialist party rooted in the unions, as existed in Europe. This could have laid the basis for transforming the unions, and winning the working class to a Marxist leadership. However, the leading socialist organisation, the Socialist Labour Party, led by Daniel De Leon, failed in this task because of its policy towards the unions and strikes and its conception of the role of the party. The party's tactics isolated the militant minority of workers from the main body of unionised workers, and failed to link the immediate demands and needs of the working class to the goal of socialism.

De Leon joined the SLP in 1890 and quickly became its leader. He fought to turn it from a foreign-language dominated organisation, where only 10 percent of the membership were American-born and the majority of members and leaders spoke no English, outwards into an 'American' organisation.⁵⁸ His achievement in this respect was a real step forward. However, like so many Lassaleans before him, he believed that the unions and their struggles for higher wages, fewer hours and so forth, were largely irrelevant and that the task of socialists was to struggle for the abolition of the wages system. The key to the unions was not struggle but a 'socialist programme'. While criticising the AFL's craft unionism by pointing to the new unionism of the British mass unions, he ignored the fact that these mass unions were built through strikes for higher wages and better conditions.

In a similarly sectarian error, he argued that a Labour party would have been a 'betrayal' of the struggle for socialism; the only real party was the Socialist Labour Party.⁵⁹ In this, De Leon broke with the whole method Marx and Engels had developed which was based on building elementary, defensive workers' organisations, to harness the maximum forces for a break with the bourgeois parties and establish an independent workers' party. Marx and Engels recognised that this was the only way to win a mass following in the class for communism and it should come as no surprise De Leon's sectarianism towards the existing workers' movement only strengthened the American trade union bureaucracy and helped consolidate anti-socialism in the unions.

From the beginning, De Leon took a generally correct analysis of the AFL's tendency towards bureaucracy and class collaboration. His labelling of Gompers & Co. as 'labour lieutenants of capital' was, in the words of Lenin, a 'splendid and profoundly true expression'.⁶⁰ However, he wrote the unions as a whole off as 'fossilised, useless and out of date' with no future, calling for socialists to 'abandon the American Federation of Labour to the sure death which awaited it under the command of the Labour fakers'.⁶¹ De Leon's denunciations and abuse of the AFL leaders as weaklings, traitors and fakers did little to break AFL workers from their leaders. On the contrary, it actually made them suspicious of the party and gave credibility to the AFL's leaders' claims that the SLP was an enemy of the unions. De Leon called for socialists to leave the AFL after Gompers blocked the affiliation of the SLP-controlled New York Central Labor Federation in 1890-1 and again after the Political Programme defeat, playing into the hands

of Gompers (and helping him get re-elected a year later). Engels spoke of the provocative, mistaken tactics of the SLP in 1891:

“But when I think of next year’s international congress [of the Second International] in Brussels, I should think it would have been well to keep on good terms with Gompers, who has more workers behind him, at any rate, than the SLP, and to ensure as big a delegation from America as possible there, including his people. They would see many things there that will disconcert them in their narrow minded trade-union standpoint ? and besides, where do you want to find a recruiting ground if not in the trade unions??”⁶²

In 1895, De Leon set up a second, alternative union, the Socialist Trades and Labour Alliance.⁶³ Calling on socialists in the Knights and AFL to leave them, he then rammed this through the SLP in a bureaucratic manner, against the many trade unionists in the SLP who maintained that it was important to continue to do work in the AFL. The STLA was still-born, but the battle to disaffiliate from the AFL, and the disruption of AFL strikes, succeeded in alienating trade unionists even further from the SLP and wrecking the more militant unions that supported it, such as the United Hebrew Trades which went from 40 affiliates in New York to five or six by 1897.⁶⁴ Foner sums up the self-defeating sectarian tactics of the De Leonists in the unions:

“The total result of De Leonist socialism, for all its sharp and unrelenting criticism of the rising Labour bureaucracy, was the isolation of militant workers from the main body of organized Labour, thereby strengthening the hold of the conservatives. The continuing rank and file pressure against bureaucracy and class collaboration was deprived of its actual and potential leaders precisely at a time when it was possible for the socialists to supply such leadership.”⁶⁵

When it came to the political terrain, De Leon’s superficial radicalism, however, quickly subsided. In the words of James Cannon, the American revolutionary socialist, De Leon propagated a “conception of political action [that] was rigidly formalistic, and rendered sterile by legalistic fetishism” focused entirely on elections.⁶⁶ De Leon saw the SLP as the party that had “one demand”, the goal of socialism, which made immediate demands unnecessary or, worse, made a party “middle class” (or bourgeois) in its politics. As he put it in his essay “Immediate Demands”:

“There is not a single “immediate demand,” worth realizing, that is not embraced in the comprehensive demand for the unconditional surrender of the Capitalist Class. If so, what harm can come from specifying a goodly number of them? “Immediate demands, tacked in America, to a revolutionary program, deliver the movement tied, hands and feet, into the power of the Ruling Class? Immediate demands are sops.”⁶⁷

He continued by arguing that any party that adopts immediate demands:

“Blurs its constant demand or goal. The presence of these immediate demands in a socialist platform reveals pure and simple politicianism, corruption, or the invitation to corruption.”⁶⁸

Using the same formal logic as that used to analyse the AFL’s future, he wrote off the future of any labour party that did not demand the collective ownership of all the means of production, and argued that any party that did adopt the demand “will be, and can be, none other than the Socialist Labour Party-the American wing of the world’s Social Democracy”, concluding that workers should just join them. With De Leon, there was no sense at all that Marxists needed to use tactics to relate to the working class and to concretise socialist ideas in the existing struggles of the day. The end result was a passive propagandism underpinned by catastrophist predictions for future developments.

At times, De Leon could mobilise formally correct arguments to justify his position. For example, he argued

that a labour party formed by the unions would quickly have to choose a socialist policy or succumb to class collaborationism.⁶⁹ But his approach ensured that socialists would be absent from the struggle over the future of such parties. He had no conception that organised socialists, advancing a class struggle policy within a labour party initiative, could win far more adherents in a short space of time than would ever be possible if they stood to one side of the class struggle and reproduced abstract socialist propaganda. In De Leon's conception, politics lacked any living, dynamic connection to struggle, they were nothing more or less than elections to gain seats, with industrial unions understood as merely the form of organisation necessary to run industrial society after the party took power and to propagandise for socialism and support the election efforts in the here and now. Consequently, his ultra-leftism was in some ways a cover for classic parliamentarism.

The Socialist Party and Debs

The nearest the American working class movement came to establishing a stable, mass workers' party was the American Socialist Party. It was founded in 1901 as a merger of two forces, a group of SLP trade unionists, who rejected De Leonism's STLA, and the small Social Democratic Party, led by Eugene Debs. From 1901 up to its peak around 1912, it grew to 118,000 members, after which it began to decline and lost this mass character, peaking again in 1920, but only briefly. The immense popularity, national profile and union connections of Debs, resulting from his imprisonment for leading the Pullman strike, meant that the new Socialist Party was potentially a great step forward from the SLP. It constituted a real opportunity to overcome the rift between the unions and the Socialists, to re-establish a healthy relationship between them and to develop both along class struggle lines.

Debs' support for AFL strikes such as the 1897 coal strike, coupled with his building of a socialist organisation (first the SDP and then the SP) could have led to a revival of the socialist wing in the AFL and a challenge to the Gompers' officialdom. However, Debs was no friend of the AFL because of the bureaucracy's sabotage of solidarity for the Railway Union's strike. In 1905, he joined with De Leon and the Western Federation of Miners in founding the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The Miners were the driving force, with between 50,000 and 100,000 members, and there is no doubt that the IWW was an enormously promising initiative. The 1905 founding conference was a festival of resistance. It rejected craftism in favour of industrial unionism, racism in favour of organising every race and creed, and sexism by placing women at the forefront of its organisation. Indeed, Lucy Parsons, a black woman, made a keynote speech in which she argued that the occupation and sit-down strike should become the weapons of the class struggle in the future.⁷⁰

In the following years, the IWW was marked by arguments between De Leon and his supporters, who wanted the union to do little more than make socialist propaganda, and the syndicalist industrial organisers, led by Bill Haywood. Haywood emphasised union organisation and class as the key to the abolition of the wages system and, with the slogan 'one big union for all', the IWW (or 'Wobblies') turned to organising the super-exploited immigrant workers. They succeeded in providing leadership in militant strikes by immigrant workers from 1909-1912, culminating in the Lawrenceville textile strike. But, for all their strengths and militancy, Haywood and the IWW leaders never realised the importance of political organisation, or the leading role of the working class in the industrial centres. They left the latter to be organised by the AFL craft unions, and politics to the left parties or even Democrats.

Debs also made the mistake of adopting a sectarian attitude to the AFL. His prestige as the leader of the SP meant that the appeals he made for the AFL to be dissolved and, in 1914, for the Mine Workers Union (MWU) to leave it, damaged the standing of SP militants in the AFL. At the time, several unions were SP influenced, or even controlled, including key industrial unions such as the MWU, the United Brewery Workers, the International Machinists' Union and the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union while

the Socialist printers? union leader, Max Hayes, challenged Gompers for the AFL presidency and got 27 per cent of the vote in 1912. In the same year, Debs got his highest vote for president of 6 per cent.⁷¹

Had Debs had a more positive attitude to the work of the SP in the AFL then it is far from excluded that his current could have taken control of the federation and fought for class struggle unity across the American working class. Sectarianism towards the AFL, however, was not Debs? only weakness. He explicitly rejected leadership and almost never attended SP conferences. This meant that the left wing had to fight without his strength against an increasingly electoralist, reformist right wing taking over the party. More and more officials were winning local elections and being sucked into municipal reformism and they increasingly trimmed their radicalism to win the middle class votes they needed to get into office. James P Cannon, the revolutionary socialist militant from the 1930s, argued this was not just a personality issue for Debs but ?followed from his own theory of the party? He himself always spoke for a revolutionary program. But at the same time he thought the party should have room for other kinds of socialists; he stood for an all-inclusive socialist party, and party unity was his first consideration? Debs? mistaken theory of the party was one of the most costly mistakes a revolutionist ever made in the entire history of the American movement.⁷²

Under Debs? leadership, the SP rejected calls for a labour party as reformist, much like De Leon, and this guaranteed that one potential avenue for developing a wing of allies in the AFL unions, especially the industrial unions that tended to be in favour of such a party, remained closed. For instance, in 1901, the SP packed a Chicago meeting called by the vanguard city?s unions to form a labour party. They succeeded in voting the proposal down, and branches in other cities throughout its history followed suit, claiming that attempts to establish labour parties would just set up ?rivals? to the SP and were a ?capitalist trap?. In 1907, at the United Mine Workers? convention, the SP leader, Adolph Germer, spoke against a resolution to encourage ?the promotion of a national labour party? in words reminiscent of De Leon, arguing that there ?already was a labour party in America?the Socialist party, which was committed to fighting the class struggle.? At the 1913 AFL convention, SP speakers opposed a resolution introduced by the president of the Pressmen?s Union calling for the formation of a Labour party, and it suspended its Arizona branch for helping to start a Labour party.⁷³ This sectarianism not only did not preserve the SP, it imposed a limit on its influence and growth.

Because of this sectarianism in the unions and on the party question, the SP did not go beyond its limited base in the unions. At its peak, its stunning electoral successes, with Debs winning six per cent of the presidential vote and the party carrying 1100 state and local positions in 1912, were based on a maximum membership of 118,000. This could be compared to the 1.9 million for the British Labour Party at the time.⁷⁴ although it should be noted that these were members by virtue of their union membership. The electoral successes also helped to organise and strengthen the reformist elements in the party, while its loose internal regime allowed different wings and localities to pursue, in reality, different tactics because the membership was not educated and steeled in a consistent programme and method. As a result, when the US entered the First World War, the principled, though pacifist, position of the SP in rejecting the war led to its support collapsing and by 1919 its membership had halved.⁷⁵

1930s: Industrial unionism breaks free

At the turn of the century, Gompers and the craft union leaders of the AFL had already identified industrial unionism as a threat to the narrow group of specialised, skilled workers they represented. At the 1903 convention, Gompers argued in a report on the trend towards industrial unionism as exemplified by the miners, that such a trend was dangerous and the AFL unions needed ?to help stem the tide of expansion madness lest either by their indifference or encouragement their organisations will be drawn into the vortex that will engulf them to their possible dismemberment and destruction.⁷⁶ However, the AFL

bureaucracy's determination to defend its craft basis was to prove a long, rearguard battle, as it flew in the face of a long term trend associated with the rise of the mass production industries, and the increasing importance of semi-skilled operatives. The rise of machine production drove both deskilling and a very rapid rate of industrial change that required job flexibility and undermined long-term job specialisation. No less a figure than the President of the giant General Electric company appealed to William Green, president of the AFL at the time, for the AFL to organise its unions on the basis of a single industrial union rather than the fifteen craft unions in his industry ? and Green said no!

As a result of this trend in industry, mass unionisation and strike movements driven by this layer of semi-skilled workers burst out both inside and outside the AFL. They threatened not only to renovate the union movement and possibly break it from the bourgeois parties, but also to sweep the rotten Gompers? bureaucracy out of office in the process. These established leaders realised this and became increasingly destructive, fettering the growth of the unions after World War One. The AFL sabotaged mass organising drives and strikes in the meatpacking plants (1917) and the steel industry (1919), breaking up the new industrial style unions back into craft unions, expelling those members and locals that resisted and, in the face of an employer backlash, ended up losing both industries in the process. Consequently, AFL membership dropped back from a peak of 5 million in 1920 to 3.5 million in 1923. An amalgamation movement to fuse different craft or occupational unions into industrial unions grew from 1922-1925, till it was strangled by the AFL bureaucracy, which expelled thousands of members of the newly founded Communist Party who had led the movement.⁷⁷

This policy of sabotage was continued by the new AFL president-for-life, William Green (1924-1952). As a result, by the 1930s, the heavy, mass production industries at the heart of US capitalism had still not been organised. However, a boom in organising and strikes in 1934-1937 was to correct this, transform the American trade union movement and give the opportunity once again to break the craft unions? resistance to establishing a working class party. The Great Depression that saw the collapse of the economy after 1929 and stagnation or recession throughout the 1930s, was to produce the tremendous contradictions that would break through the barriers of AFL and employer resistance.

In 1933, a coalition of monopolies, banks and John Lewis, the UMW president, forced the new Democrat government of President Roosevelt to pass the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).⁷⁸ This compromise act, the basis for the ?New Deal? Democratic coalition, removed anti-trust restrictions on big business and, as part of the compromise, its ?Section 7a? legally allowed workers to strike and to join any union and established union recognition and collective bargaining. A slight recovery in the economic situation, together with the ?green light? to organise given by NIRA, unleashed a tidal wave of workers entering the union movement in the mass industries, chiefly rubber, automobiles, steel, textiles and garments.

This tremendous outbreak of organising then led to strike activity to defend these new organisations from 1934 onwards. The AFL industrial unions seized the NIRA with both hands, with the UMW in particular staking its finances on an all-out organising drive, drumming miners into its ranks with the slogan ?The President wants you to join the union!? The US saw the biggest strike wave since 1877, with 1,856 strikes involving 1,470,000 workers in 1934. Within three months, the UMW organised 92 per cent of all coal miners.⁷⁹ Industry typically ignored Section 7a rights but this sparked mass strikes. The July 1934 San Francisco general strike, precipitated by Longshore workers, was followed by the August general strike of 400,000 textile workers, led by poor white workers in the South, which was only finished by a reign of terror by National Guards, and the AFL forcing workers go back to work. A similar agreement by the AFL with the rubber bosses sabotaged the first strikes in this industry, while Trotskyists ?wrote one of the finest pages in the history of the American class struggle? with their leadership of a city-wide Teamsters? strike in

Minneapolis, the first successful strike in this once conservative stalwart of the AFL.⁸⁰

Green's AFL bureaucracy fought to contain the rank and file upsurge, determined to hammer the square peg of these mass unions into the various round holes of the craft unions. The newly organised workers demanded to keep their unified industrial organisations, both at the official yearly conferences of the old AFL unions that they had swamped, such as the Steel union, or at local and regional conferences of delegates from geographically-concentrated industries (the March 1934 Pittsburgh inter-district steel conference, the meeting of 77 hastily set-up AFL factory unions from the automobile industry in Detroit, June 1934).⁸¹ The AFL bureaucracy did all it could to put the brakes on in order to preserve the craft basis of the Federation.⁸²

At the AFL conventions in 1934 and 1935, the industrial union leaders, led by John Lewis, demanded that the new unions be given industrial charters that superseded the old craft jurisdictions. In 1934, the 'compromise' entailed charters for newly organised industries such as autos, rubber, cement, radio and aluminium but, at the same time, the rights of the craft unions were upheld, with the executive council packed with the old leaders to arbitrate between the two patently contradictory principles! In 1935, bitter battle lines were drawn between, on the one side, Green and the Teamsters' leader, Daniel Tobin, who, on the convention floor, called unskilled workers 'rubbish', and, on the other, the 'industrialists' led by Lewis and backed by the older AFL garments unions. Lewis claimed that the AFL's tactics to contain industrialism meant the new unions were 'dying like the grass withering before the autumn sun?', while the old guard declared him bent on destroying the AFL's foundations.

The old guard won the vote with a resolution stating that craft union jurisdiction was the primary obligation of the AFL (18,024 to 10,933). Immediately afterwards, Lewis established a Committee of Industrial Organisations with the backing of the old AFL industrial unions. Officially, it was within the AFL and had a merely 'educational and advisory' role to promote collective bargaining in the mass production industries. In reality, however, it organised these, and built up the base of the Industrial Unionists in order either to win the AFL by force of numbers, or to break out of it. The AFL leaders demanded its dissolution but the CIO launched its organising drive regardless in early 1936, with the most important of the new mass unions, those of the rubber and the UAW automobile workers, quickly affiliating to the CIO. The CIO threw open its doors, appealing to all workers, skilled and unskilled, including immigrant and black workers. It was expelled from the AFL in August '36.⁸³

The launch of the CIO coincided with a heightened mood of militancy among the millions of workers angered by the sabotage of Section 7a by the bosses, by Supreme Court rulings that struck down New Deal reforms, and the 1936 presidential campaign that threatened to unseat the popular Roosevelt. When November saw his triumphal re-election instead, millions of workers once again saw an opening door for their efforts to organise and fight. In this atmosphere, the refusal of big business to negotiate with the new unions or to recognise the CIO led workers to reach with enthusiasm for the strike weapon, and this time they had the CIO to help, not hinder, them. The leaders of the new organisation needed to win victories quickly to establish their unions, elbow their way to the negotiating tables and force through collective agreements to ensure the stability of the CIO federation itself. A wave of factory occupations was kicked off by the Firestone factory strike in Akron, Ohio. It quickly spread to the automobile workers in the General Motors' plants in Flint, Michigan and from there throughout the car industry, the vanguard of the workers' movement organised in the UAW. The sit-downs peaked in March 1937 when 200,000 workers were involved.

Lewis needed allies and the industrial union bureaucrats opened the door to Communist Party members, Trotskyists and other lefts that they had fought so harshly until then and used them as a much-needed

army of organisers and agitators. With these strikes, the CIO gained an immense prestige among workers. But, as the occupations alarmed the government and forced the bosses to the table, the CIO bureaucracy signed off collective agreements and then began to wind up the strikes. In many other industries, the CIO set up organising committees from above with complete control over strikes. The new union bureaucrats prepared to settle into their role as US Labour federation 'number two', with 3.25 million workers in its ranks by 1937.⁸⁴

Labour Politics and Roosevelt

The New Deal led to real and historic reforms that shook up the political alignments that had existed for decades of hard-line, pro-business governments. Besides the Section 7a and Wagner Act provisions defending union rights, it initiated public works and legislated to reduce work hours in order to absorb unemployment, and a Social Security Act gave minimal but unprecedented benefits, health care and pensions to the unemployed, sick, and old. In the 1936 campaign, Roosevelt was forced to speak to the left in the face of massive court and media attacks, promising more social legislation, attacking the powerful corporations and rich families, and calling for 'a people's government'. His advisors appealed to the CIO unions to help him win. They were to prove central to this effort. John Lewis himself used every opportunity in 1936 to tell workers, 'labour has gained more under president Roosevelt than under any president in memory. Obviously it is the duty of labour to support Roosevelt 100 per cent in the next election.'⁸⁵ In April 1936, the CIO established the Labour Non-Partisan League (LNPL) superficially to give the workers' self-activity an 'independent' political expression, but in reality to channel support and funds into Roosevelt's campaign. Altogether, the unions gave \$770,000 and carried six key industrial states for Roosevelt.⁸⁶

In New York City, the long socialist tradition of the Jewish-worker dominated garment workers, a key base for the CIO from the beginning, put them against the mainstream parties. Sidney Hillman, Lewis' right-hand ally and leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, therefore, went one further to win the vote for Roosevelt and actually established an American Labour Party (ALP) which stood local candidates in New York State but called for a vote for Roosevelt in the presidential elections (and for pro-New Deal New York mayor La Guardia, a liberal Republican, for which it mobilised 500,000 votes)⁸⁷.

Since 1930, innumerable local labour party campaigns had sprung up, the Socialist Party vote began to grow again while, at the same time, a host of middle class populist, 'progressive' or farmer-labour parties regained their vigour in the rising radicalism of the 1930s. By 1936, all of these were supporting Roosevelt nationally while standing candidates at the local or state level, and sometimes taking over local or state Democratic organisations with Roosevelt's blessing, if it was necessary to consolidate his New Deal coalition, to continue to defend New Deal policies and win elections. The popularity of Roosevelt and hopes in the New Deal among workers and blacks, the support by the triumphant CIO bureaucracy and their Labour Non-Partisan League and ALP, the series of 'radical' third parties such as EPIC and the Farmer-Labour party in the areas where the workers were most militant, all this at first glance seemed to squeeze the arena for communists to build their own organisation and develop a united front for a Labour party. Many socialists, including key Socialist Party union leaders, fell for this logic and left the Socialist Party to back Roosevelt as the 'enemies of Labour' circled him and the New Deal reforms. Certainly, the membership and votes for the Socialist Party, originally revived by the Great Depression, fell after 1936 due in part to its refusal to support Roosevelt and its decision to stand against New Deal Democrat candidates - so its membership was a mere 7,000 by 1938.⁸⁸

However, this outcome was by no means inevitable. The massive strike wave of 1934 and the repression of the textile strike that year detonated a wave of labour party organising within the unions in every major industrial centre. From California to Connecticut, meeting after meeting of hundreds of delegates voted to

organise Labour party committees. The SP was split on forming a labour party with a large section in favour. Indicative of this was the Rhode Island State Federation of Labour that resolved to hold a state-wide convention to found such a party. This followed the disgust of New England textile workers with the Democrats after the repression of the textile strike, where 12 Democratic Governors had ordered the militia to break the strike with 14 strikers killed in these states. The anger was so great among this section of workers that United Textile Workers' vice president Frank Gorman sought AFL endorsement for a National Labour Party and agitated for it for the next two years.

The same 1935 AFL convention that debated the 'industrial' question saw Gorman lead delegates from the garment and textile unions, the UAW and rubber workers, all industrially organised. Despite blatant bureaucratic manoeuvres to push it off the agenda, a vote was finally taken, and the resolution lost by 4 votes (104-108)!⁸⁹ Gorman continued to tour the country and organise for the following year's convention, holding mass meetings, while a People's Labour Party was formed in Cambridge, Mass. Support from the vanguard rubber workers and enthusiastic rank and file meetings of the UAW saw repeated calls for labour and farmer-labour parties. Clearly, a militant minority, heavily represented in key, militant industrial unions, was growing dissatisfied with Roosevelt and enthusiastic about a labour party. Even after the Roosevelt bandwagon in 1936, an August 1937 Gallup poll still showed 21 per cent of respondents supported setting up a labour party, while further polls showed 14-16 per cent of the population would join such a party if it was formed.⁹⁰

Revolutionaries had to find a tactic to unite with these workers, whether they were revolutionary or not, and finally push forward the movement for labour's independence. They would have had to do it against the CIO national bureaucracy, which was behind Lewis and collaborating in the New Deal Coalition. Lewis and co had launched the LNPL to fool, absorb and redirect the burgeoning labour party movement into Roosevelt's re-election, in order to win a new alliance between the bourgeoisie and labour. But they would have struggled to do this alone, without the support of a key force within the workers' vanguard. Lewis and the CIO used the Communist Party cadres as organisers for their new federation and unions and this meant that the CP grew to an unprecedented size and influence historically. The Party dominated at least forty unions, the biggest being the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers' Union with 137,000 members. It claimed to control unions representing 650,000 members and to have influence in unions with an additional 600,000 members. Party membership had also mushroomed. In 1929, the CP had 7,500 members; by early 1939 they claimed 100,000.⁹¹ The Communist Party's potential was not limited to its own growth; it also had a substantial implantation within the working class and the CIO. This was the first time (and the last) that a formally revolutionary organisation had such mass roots and wielded such influence in the US trade unions.

The problem with the Communist Party (CP) obviously was not its strength but its politics. Thoroughly Stalinised, with Trotskyists and other oppositionists expelled by the early thirties, the American CP went through the political twists and turns dictated by Stalin by means of the Communist International. In the early 30s, this led to wild ultra-leftism and a rejection of the united front but, by the late 1930s, Communist Parties the world over were advancing an open policy of class collaboration they called the 'Popular Front' or 'People's Front'. Rather than pursue an independent communist policy, they entered reformist alliances with social democratic, labour, and even 'progressive' bourgeois forces like the French Radicals. Their aim was the stabilisation of bourgeois democracy in the face of the rise of fascism but, in practice, the policy did nothing to halt the Second World War, although it did effectively sabotage prospects for socialist revolution throughout the 30s in Spain, France, Britain, China, and, the United States. The opportunist policy was adapted by the US CP, which first turned to the Farmer-Labour parties in 1935, while remaining hostile to Roosevelt, in New York it supported the United Labour Party ticket. Then, to keep up with the CIO bureaucracy, it turned to support for Roosevelt, joined the CIO's drive to get him

elected in 1936, and dropped all criticism of the New Deal. Cannon summed up the role of the CP in using its strength not to lead the workers' movement against the Democrats but into their fold in this crucial period when a real window of opportunity existed to build a mass workers' party. He stated the CP was

?'Directly responsible for the demoralization and disorientation of the richly promising movement. The Roosevelt social program was the decisive factor in heading off the mass movement and diverting it into reformist channels. But the Stalinists, who supported Roosevelt for reasons of Kremlin foreign policy, mis-educated, betrayed, corrupted and demoralized the vanguard of this movement ? a vanguard which numbered tens of thousands of the best and most courageous young militants ? and thus destroyed the first great prospects to build a genuine revolutionary party in America on a mass basis.'⁹²

The Communist Party wrote its own suicide note with its turn to the popular front and uncritical unity with the CIO bureaucracy and submission to Soviet dictates. The CP moved from its role in helping the CIO bureaucracy wind up militant strikes in the second half of the 1930s to actively fighting strikes in the name of the war effort, after Stalin allied with the US and Britain against Germany in 1941. CP leader William Z Foster lectured ?The workers have to take the lead in accepting willingly every sacrifice necessary to prosecute the war?and the defense of the nation in this crisis their supreme lodestar?? ? even arguing for the no-strike ban to be continued after the war ended, while dockers under the command of CP union leader Harry Bridges physically broke up strikes. The result was cutting the party off from and alienating the thousands of workers who struck despite government repression during the war. As the cold war heated up from 1948 onwards, the government moved to crush and purge the weakened CP once and for all.

The split in the AFL to create the CIO allowed the industrial union bureaucrats to break with the neutrality of the craft unionists in favour of a political alignment with the Democrats. The US war drive, the imperialist hegemony thereafter, and the long post-war boom would allow the semi-skilled unions to exist in a relatively stable relationship with capital for decades, quite different from the decades before the 1930s, with the industrial unions' constant struggles to maintain themselves in the face of violently anti-labour big business. As the 1930s progressed the CIO itself lost many members as militant strikes were wound up in favour of negotiations and recognition. By 1941 it still only organised less than 3 million workers out of 8.3 million in unions,⁹³ so craft or occupational unions continued to numerically dominate the US trade union movement. However the CIO's turn to patriotism and the Democrats during World War II and after, along with the purge of Communists, meant that by 1955 there was little difference between the two federations in terms of their bureaucracy or politics, leading to their merger in that year.

The Labour Party Tactic

In contrast to the policy of the popular front, Leon Trotsky and the young American party made up of his supporters, the Socialist Workers' Party, oriented to the ferment to the left of the Democrats, including initiatives to establish a labour party. They developed a new united front tactic called the ?Labour Party Tactic? which was to become a key weapon in the tactical arsenal of Communists in such situations.⁹⁴ Its basic premise was simple enough, the communists should strike a united front with reformist workers to build a new mass workers' party and fight for this in the unions. The aim was not the development of new, reformist parties like the British Labour Party, a ?disguised? bourgeois party, but to facilitate the creation of a revolutionary workers' party. By fighting for a new party, Trotsky and his supporters ceaselessly emphasised the need to ?break with the bourgeoisie? and their parties, principally, the Democrats. They therefore appealed to the most class-conscious workers who knew that the Democrats were not ?their? party but an historic party of the American ruling class. The tactic put the Trotskyists alongside these workers without making substantial programmatic agreement a condition of this unity. By maximising the movement for such a party amongst the class, more workers could be exposed to the strategic arguments

of the revolutionaries than would be otherwise. The aim was to use the struggle for a new party to win as many workers as possible to a revolutionary action programme of demands.

At the heart of the labour party tactic was a rejection of the fatalism that had characterised De Leon's approach to the new party question. Whereas De Leon believed a party founded by the unions would inevitably develop into a reformist party, the Trotskyist labour party tactic argued that the party that finally emerged from the process would be the product of hard struggle and debate. It was, in short, a dynamic tactic that recognised that workers' consciousness and ideas were not fixed and immutable but could change through the course of struggle. Trotsky had, however, come to this position late. In the early 1930s, he criticised his American supporters for arguing for a new workers' party. Trotsky was correct to identify a problem with how the tactic was being pursued. The American Trotskyists were presenting a new party as a necessary preliminary stage; first there would be a new mass reformist party, then a revolutionary party some time later. However, Trotsky was wrong to see the new workers' party tactic as necessarily constituting such a stagist approach and corrected the position by the end of the 1930s, unfortunately as the window of opportunity was beginning to close again.

Underpinning the Trotskyist position towards the end of the '30s was a highly developed concept of how to link the day to day struggles for immediate demands with the revolutionary socialist goal. The Trotskyists argued that the revolutionary programme must be a guide to action. In the healthy period of the Communist International, prior to its Stalinist bureaucratisation, the idea of using 'transitional demands' to bridge the minimum and the maximum aspect of the revolutionary programme had been developed and this method was embodied in the Transitional Programme of the Fourth International. Transitional demands aimed to undermine the bosses' power to govern and rule their system and to strengthen the political and economic power of the working class. For example, workers' control in industry undermined the capacity of managers to manage, a workers' militia broke the monopoly on the use of force normally held by the bourgeois state, and a sliding scale of wages indexed to inflation obstructed the bosses' attempts to make the workers pay for the economic downturn in their system.

While some of these demands, like the sliding scale of wages, were also demands on the state to pass legislation, the transitional programme placed a great deal of emphasis on the workers fighting for these demands through their own self-activity and organisation, by strikes, protests and occupations. In the labour party movements, the Trotskyists repeatedly emphasised orientating to the class struggle of the working class and agitated for communist methods of struggle and forms of organisation to defeat the bosses' attacks. So, for example, they fought for action committees of the rank and file to control strikes and, thereby, challenged the AFL and CIO bureaucrats' power to dictate when to call, or call off, the strike movement. Most importantly, the aim was to develop out of the existing struggles forms of organisation that pointed towards the 'crowning' slogans that had opened the road to revolution in Russia: strike committees and councils of action could lead to soviets or workers' councils, picket-line defence or anti-fascist defence groups could develop into workers' militias. This was the essence of the transitional programme and method.

In the first phases, a movement for a new party would assemble through struggle against the union bureaucracy and other hostile forces. Once unity was struck with reformist forces, struggles would quickly emerge from day one, whether the new movement should develop covert alliance with false 'friends' from the bourgeois parties, or the extent to which it should prioritise electoral work. The communists would emphasise the need for a party of struggle, to take up the burning issues of the day and adopt militant tactics and methods of struggle to win workers' demands. Unless a party of struggle were born, a passive tactic that rested on some other force, the union bureaucracy, the radical petit bourgeoisie, the Democrats, apart from the working class, would be sure to develop.

It was clear for Trotsky and his supporters that in a movement for a new party resolute criticism of other reformist currents, open agitation for the revolutionary programme and strategy, and the maintaining of revolutionary organisation, were the essential means to stop a party developing in a reformist direction. If the communists were honest in their efforts and explained their conception of the labour party from day one of the movement then they would be in the best position to win the party to a revolutionary transitional programme upon its foundation. Even if they lost they would be in a stronger position to ensure that the party did not shy away from struggles against capitalism or the bourgeois parties and middle class reformers. In other words, the party could retain the potential to develop into a revolutionary party. Should reformists take over the party fully, as they would inevitably seek to, the communists would split and take the best fighters. Either way, a much larger revolutionary organisation could be the result of the labour party tactic. Trotsky's proposed tactic combined two aspects, the united front to build an independent party, and the advancement of a transitional programme as its basis. Trotsky explained this in discussions of the tactic recorded with members of the American SWP:

?The necessity of a political party for the workers is given by the objective conditions, but our party is too small, with too little authority, in order to organize the workers into its own ranks. That is why we must say to the workers, the masses, you must have a party. But we cannot say immediately to these masses, you must join our party. In a mass meeting 500 would agree on the need for a labour party, only five agree to join our party, which shows that the slogan of a labour party is an agitational slogan. The second slogan is for the more advanced. Should we use both slogans or one? I say both. The first, independent labour party, prepares the arena for our party.?

Trotsky went on to explain how communists could apply the tactic in the ?third party? movements, that often called themselves ?labour? parties, in such a way that the ?abstract? call for an independent party could become concrete, showing the need to break with the bourgeoisie and making clear that the leaderships of these parties had no intention of doing this. Raising the slogan for an independent party alone was:

?Not concrete enough. We must show to the workers what this party should be: an independent party, not for Roosevelt or La Follette, a machine for the workers themselves. That is why on the field of election it must have its own candidates. Then we must introduce our transitional slogans, not all at once, but as the occasion arises, first one and then the other? In the case of the trade unions where the question comes up, I will get up and say that the need for a Labour party is absolutely proved by all the events. It is proved that economic action is not enough. We need political action. In a union I will say what counts is the content of the Labour party, that is why I reserve something to say about the program, but I will vote for it.?95

The Trotskyists intervened in the mass affiliation of unions to the Labour Non-Partisan League when it was set up by the CIO, noting its unevenness, in some areas standing Labour candidates locally while supporting Roosevelt nationally, in others supporting Democratic candidates. In addition, in Minneapolis, where the Trotskyists were strong, the Farmer-Labour Party was dominant and in some areas the Stalinist CP had entered it and used the mass sentiment for political action against the Trotskyists' objections to ?cross-class? parties. But, while the concrete circumstances naturally varied, Trotsky explained that the labour party tactic, the need for political organisation for the workers, and a transitional set of demands, could show that they had real answers to the crisis faced by workers:

Trotsky: ?Are we in favour of the creation of a reformist Labour party? No. Are we in favour of a policy, which can give to the trade unions the possibility to put their weight upon the balance of the forces? Yes. It can become a reformist party ? it depends upon the development. Here the question of programme comes in. I mentioned yesterday and I will underline it today ? we must have a programme of transitional

demands, the most complete of them being a workers' and farmers' government. We are for a party, for an independent party of the toiling masses who will take power in the state. We must concretize it? we are for the creation of factory committees, for workers' control of industry through the factory committees. All these questions are now hanging in the air. They speak of technocracy, and put forward the slogan of 'production for use.' We oppose this charlatan formula and advance the workers' control of production through the factory committees.'

Conclusion

No one is likely to deny that America has certain 'exceptional' sociological features that historically have raised the bar higher for the development of socialist and communist politics. The early development of bourgeois democracy and the importance of local state elections, aided the development of utopian socialist reformism as far back as the 1820s. Dominant ideology, from the myths of the 'American Dream' and the 'Frontier' to the entrenchment of racist ideas and values, certainly mean that the arguments for class based solidarity are harder to win. The great geographical spread of its territory and the availability of land in the 19th century developed a large petit-bourgeoisie, which, in turn, helped the growth of populism. The strength of American capitalism, the large middle class, its status as a great imperial power, and, most importantly, the stratification within the working class this caused, provided fertile grounds for craft unionism, in contrast to the mass industrial unions that were so important to the development of labour parties in Britain and Australia.

But on each of these counts, America's 'exceptionalism' was quantitative, not qualitative. None of these features could absolutely obstruct the development of mass, working class and socialist politics. To understand the failure to build a working class party, we must take seriously the struggles within the working class at the key moments when a new mass party was possible. From the 1894 debate over the Political Programme and the role of the craft union leaders, to the sectarian policies of the SLP and SP, to the treacherous role of the Communist Party in the 1930s, it is quite clear that the wrong policies pursued by the workers' vanguard and their leaders made it possible for the capitalist parties to retain the mass influence over the working class that they have enjoyed for most of the 20th century. In short, the problem has not been the material or sociological obstacles but a problem of politics, the 'subjective' factor in history, and, specifically, the mistaken policies of the left and revolutionaries.

Still, to this day, the working class in America has never had a mass party, but still, to this day, the need for one must be a key element of the argument of revolutionaries in the United States. Armed with negative lessons of the SLP, SP, CP and the syndicalists, and armed with the labour party tactic, revolutionaries today must raise the question in every movement of the working class and oppressed. It is possible to orient the call not just to the unions, but also to the social movements that have arisen in recent years, the anti-war movement, the ferment of immigrant organising, along with the radical unions such as the ILWU longshore workers. The deep crisis in the American economy we see today gives a new contemporary urgency to the long-standing need for the independent political organisation of the working class.

Endnotes

1 W Sombart, Trans, Harrington, Why is there no Socialism in the United States? New York, 1976

2 For a fuller discussion of this topic, see 'Theses on Reformism: the Bourgeois Workers Party?', in Permanent Revolution No. 1, London, 1983, pp 50 -1. Available online

<http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?permanent-revolution-1> [1]

3 L. Trotsky, 'What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat?' in The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany, New York, 1971, p.144 Online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next01.htm#s1> [2]

4 K Marx and F Engels The Communist Manifesto, at

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02...> [3]

5 K Marx, ?Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions? in Karl Marx: The First International and After, ed. D Fernbach, Harmondsworth, 1974 p. 92

6 *ibid.* p. 31,

7 See ?Theses on Reformism: the Bourgeois Workers Party?, *op cit*

8 F Engels, Letter to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 29 November 1886, in Marx and Engels on the United States, Moscow, 1979, p.311

9 F Engels in Letter to Florence Kelley-Wischnewetzky, 28 December 1886, *ibid.*, p. 313

10 V I Lenin, Preface to the Russian Translation of Letters by Johannes Becker, Joseph Dietzgen, Frederick Engels, Karl Marx, and Others to Friedrich Sorge and Others, at:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1907/apr/06.htm> [4]

11 *ibid*

12 K Marx, Capital Volume I, London, 1976, p.589, footnote 69 or at

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm#a168> [5]

13 P Foner, History of the Labour Movement in the United States, Volume 1, p. 58

14 H Pelling, American Labour, p. 79

15 Foner, *op cit* pp. 371-3, 385, 398, 428

16 Foner observes: ?Not only was the working class developing, but a radical layer of farmers began to grow after the Civil War, as the land began to be filled and the swindles of growing monopolist merchants and railroads drove small farmers into debt and took their land. Rural-based populist movements increasingly developed with vigour, with national third-party movements such as the Greenbackers (1870?s) and then the Populists (1880?s-1890s), which based themselves on farmers and their demands: for cheap currency and inflation to help them pay off debts, for higher agricultural prices, and regulation of the railway monopolies that ripped them off or even their nationalisation, adding some ?Labour demands? as an afterthought to get union support and workers? votes for their candidates. While workers could certainly agree with government ownership of transport and communications, often independently advancing such slogans, the other demands though accepted by unions at times in electoral programmes would have meant higher prices for workers. Contrast this to the Chartist Movement of the British working class, one of the original demands of which was against tariffs to protect British agriculture and allow the import of cheaper grain. As Karl Marx said, the ?capitalist evil? the land reformers were trying to avert was ?historically good, for it will frightfully accelerate the social development and bring ever so much nearer new and higher forms of communist movement.? *Ibid* p. 190

17 Partial exceptions were the miners? union and ARU.

18 R Archer Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States? Princeton, 2007 P. 24,

19 L Trotsky, Results and Prospects, in The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects. London 196 P. 197

20 *ibid*

21 In the 1828 election that saw Jackson become president, 56 per cent of white male adults voted, double that of 1824, while 78 per cent voted in 1840, a qualitatively higher proportion compared to Europe and one that signified the removal of this potentially revolutionary question from the agenda before the development of an industrial proletariat in the USA, once again in contrast to Europe. P. 223, The National Experience Part I, A history of the United States to 1877, John M. Blum, Edmund S. Morgan, Willie Lee Rose, Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, Kenneth M. Stamp, and C. Vann Woodward, 5th Edition, 1981, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

22 L Trotsky, ?Plans for the Negro Organisation? in Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination, New York

23 Green, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labour and Political Activism, 1881-1917*, Cambridge 1998; p. 21

24 Foner *op cit.* p. 70. This degree of unity is even greater considering that Baltimore was so sympathetic to the Confederacy in the Civil War that it had to be occupied by the Union army.

25 F Engels. *The Condition of the Working Class in England ? Preface to the American Edition*, in *Marx and Engels on the United States*, *op cit.*, p 283.

26 Quoted by Foner, *op cit* p 79

27 For a fuller discussion see, D. Stocking, *Marxists and the trade Unions*, in *Workers Power* 7/8, London, 1978

28 Foner, *op cit* p 99-100

29 A M Schlesinger *Political and Social Growth of the United States 1852-1933* New York, 2007, p. 207-8

30 Foner, *op cit* Vol 2, p 136-142

31 *ibid.* p. 88, 171 Foner believes that the AFL's figures for its membership were most likely exaggerated

32 T Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, Chicago, 1989 p22

33 In contrast, the Australian unions that went on to found a Labour Party in 1891 saw low dues as essential to the success of their unions and looked to the Knights' mass organisation as a model. See Archer, *op cit* p. 34

34 David Montgomery shows that from 1881 to 1904, the percentage of strikes involving wages fell from 79.8 per cent to 42.2 per cent, while the number of strikes ordered by the unions rather than spontaneous rose from 47.3 per cent to 82.1 per cent. Sympathy strikes rose as a strategy by the craft unions to bring pressure to bear by all workers on employers who got out of line and tried to attack individually the craft lines. See D Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America*, Cambridge, 1979

35 Foner *ibid* p. 206

36 P Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the tragedy of American Labour*, in *Monthly Review*, New York, 1999, p 57. Within four years this was raised to \$1,500 although, as Green points out, this was still less than Gompers could earn as a skilled cigar maker! See J Green *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labour and Political Activism, 1881-1917*, Cambridge, 1998, p.36

37 See CD Long, *Wages and Earnings in the United States, 1860-1890*. Long shows money wages estimated at \$427/year in 1890 p. 68, Table 21

38 For more on this see, Buhle, *op cit.*, p.48

39 J Green, *ibid* p. 21,

40 From 1890-1914 average wages increased 54 per cent, however those of skilled workers rose by 74 per cent, while those of unskilled workers by only 31 per cent p. 149 in *'The Parameters of Craft Consciousness: the Social Outlook of the skilled Worker, 1890-1920'*, Andrew Dawson, In *American Labour and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, Research Ed. Dirk Hoerder, University of Illinois Press, 1983; largest pay gap p. 29 Archer (p. 29) who agrees about the rising wages gap between skilled and unskilled in this period

41 F Engels, *Letter to Schlüter*, 30 March 1892 in *Marx and Engels on the Trade Unions*, Ed. K Lapidés, New York, 1987 p. 143

42 R Archer, *op cit* p. 139,

43 *ibid.* p. 128

44 *ibid.* p. 129

45 *ibid.*

46 Various labels: *'Union Labour'*, *'United Labour'*, *'Knights of Labour'*, *'Workingmen'*, and *'Independents'* See L Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labour and American Politics*, Illinois, 1983, p. 26

47 Archer, op cit p 33

48 According to Archer, if the American Railway Union had affiliated to the AFL it would have represented about 35 per cent of AFL affiliates? membership, see *ibid.* p. 132

49 *ibid.* p. 31, 39

50 The five ?inclusive? AFL unions were the United Mine Workers, Brewery Workmen, Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the Western Federation of Miners, and the Ladies Garment Workers, never amounting to more than a quarter of the membership of the AFL, while craft unions controlled three-quarters of AFL membership up to World War I and after it, never less than two-thirds up to 1929.

Lipset and Marks calculate ?large inclusive unions? such as the miners and dockers made up 38.5 per cent of the TUC in 1900 and 55 per cent by 1910. For more on this see, S M Lipset and G Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, New York, 2000, p. 93-95,

51 Archer, op cit p 101

52 Even this weak statement, committing the AFL to nothing concrete, was hedged with warnings and at odds with the welcoming address to the 1886 convention that ?was a blunt statement in favour of maintaining the traditional opposition to union involvement in partisan politics?. See *ibid*

53 Foner Vol 2 p. 287-292,

54 Lipset and Marks, op cit p 103,

55 A Dawson, observes, ?the chronic instability of the late nineteenth century economy, with its tendency of economy to produce more than could be consumed, was partially solved for the time as a result of the increasing monopolization of industry and America?s developing involvement in overseas markets as an outlet for her surplus goods and capital.? See ?The Parameters of Craft Consciousness: the Social Outlook of the Skilled Worker, 1890-1920?, in *American Labour and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, Ed D Hoerder, Illinois, 1983 p. 149

56 Foner, *ibid* pp. 414, 437

57 These were contracts where the worker agreed as part of their contract not to join a union as a condition of employment, so they could be fired immediately upon joining one; also called ?iron-clad contracts?, they were outlawed in the 1932 Norris-La Guardia Act.

<http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/gompers.cfm> ^[6]

58 Lipset and Marks, op cit p. 138

59 Foner *ibid* p. 281

60 V I Lenin, ?Left-wing? Communism ? An Infantile Disorder, in *Collected Works*, Vol 31, London, 1965, p 43

61 Foner *ibid.* p. 294

62 F Engels, Letter to Schluter, January 29, 1891, *ibid* p. 142

63 Foner *ibid.*

64 *ibid.* pp. 399-400,

65 *ibid.* pp 298-9

66 J P Cannon, *The First Ten Year of American Communism*, New York, 1962 p. 332-3

67 D De Leon, *Immediate Demands*, at: http://slp.org/pdf/de_leon/eds1910/1910?Aug14.pdf

68 D DeLeon, *Demands, ?Immediate? and ?Constant?*, at:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/deleon/works/1911/110621.htm> ^[7]

69 D De Leon A ?Labour Party?, at: http://slp.org/pdf/de_leon/eds1894/jan14a_1894.pdf ^[8]

70 See *The Industrial Workers of the World: One Big Union*, in *Workers Power* 299, London, 2005

71 Lipset and Marks, op cit. pp. 171-172,

72 Cannon op cit pp. 268, 270,

73 Lipset and Marks, op cit p. 173-5,

74 Figures from Lipset and Marks, *ibid* p. 110. It should be noted, however, that these are not individual

members but members affiliated to the Labour Party through their unions.

75 Ibid. p. 144,

76 see Foner, op cit, Vol. 3 p 210

77 Figures from, D Guerin, 100 Years of Labour in the USA, London, 1989 p. 87-8

78 Lewis was no militant, but rather was forced by the AFL policies and economic situation in the coal industry into radical measures. UMW membership declined from 500,000 in 1922 to 75,000 in 1933, and Lewis wanted government support for measures to stabilise the industry (through monopoly) and to allow unions to organise. Lewis expelled communists and militants out of the UMW, often with beatings, and supported the Republican Herbert Hoover in the 1932 elections and then again in 1938 after becoming disenchanted with Roosevelt.

79 <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/lewis.cfm> ^[9]

80 Guerin, op cit, pp. 100, 107,

81 Ibid.

82 F R Dulles and M Dubofsky, Labour in America, Illinois, 1993 p. 259

83 By the end of the 1930's a half a million Black workers had joined the CIO unions. See P Foner, Organised Labour and the Black Worker, New York, p. 200

84 The CIO was to change its name to the Congress of Industrial Organisations in 1938, signifying its stability and independence from the AFL, but ultimately the two bureaucratic federations were to have little to distinguish their methods and structures in the post-war upswing, and with a shared anti-communism and loyalty to US imperialism, and so re-amalgamated in 1955 as the AFL-CIO. See Lipset and Marks, op cit p. 228

85 Dulles and Dubofsky, op cit p. 303

86 E L Davin, 'The Very Last Hurrah' The Defeat of the Labour Party Idea, 1934-1936, in 'We are All Leaders': The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s, Illinois, 1996, p. 122

87 Dulles and Dubofsky, op cit p. 306

88 Lipset and Marks op cit p. 213-214,

89 Davin, op cit

90 Ibid.

91 Disputing this, an ex-member claimed the CP had at its peak 70,000, plus another 30,000 supporters in the Young Communist League. See Lipset and Marks op cit pp. 227-228, 221-222,

92 See L Selfa, The Democratic Party and the Politics of Lesser Evilism, ISO web book, 2004, http://www.internationalsocialist.org/pdfs/democrats_lesserevilism.pdf ^[10]

93 Lipset and Marks, p. 89

94 For an account of the development of the Labour Party Tactic in the United States communist movement, its final refinement by Trotsky in the 1930s, and its roots in the theories and practice of Marx, Engels and Lenin, see 'The Labour Party Tactic' in 'Theses on Reformism: the Bourgeois Workers Party?', in Permanent Revolution No. 1, Available online to buy or <http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?id=59,374,0,0,1,0> ^[11]

95 These discussions between Trotsky and the leadership of the American Trotskyists were held in Mexico City in April/May 1938, where they discussed the Labour Party tactic and its relationship to the transitional programme that Trotsky was writing for the Fourth International, whose foundation congress was upcoming.

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