This Is Your Ballot—Do Not Destroy or Lose

Declaration of Principles
of the Socialist Party of the U. S. A.

The Socialist Party is the party of the workers, regardless of race, color, creed. In mill and mine, shop and farm, office and school, the workers can assert their united power, and through the Socialist Party establish a cooperative commonwealth answer free from human exploitation and class rule.

If the workers delay and drift, they will prolong the period of their enslavement to a decadent capitalism. This unrestrained, wanton and brutally oppressive social system takes jobs away and turns millions into producers into the streets with no assurance that ever again they may be national government; for the extension of their economic domain they expose to the appalling ravages of new imperialist wars the innocent youth in our own and other countries, on whom they will lay the ruthless clutches of dictatorship and send to fight these wars. To sustain the voting masses and retain their authority, they maintain great political parties whose appeal plays on the cleavages between rank reaction and factional liberalism, neither of which offers to the workers any substantial or enduring program for the acquisition of their birthright. Only those who labor with hand and
Introduction

From the dawn of the twentieth century through the 1960s, the Socialist Party of America represented an intellectually vibrant tendency in American political thought and a dynamic current in the radical and reform movements in the nation. The Socialist Party, declared Eugene V. Debs in his acceptance speech as the party’s presidential candidate in 1912, “is fundamentally different from all other parties... Its spirit is militant and its aim revolutionary,” for it “expresses in political terms the aspiration of the working class to freedom and to a larger and fuller life than they have yet known.” Debs, a former locomotive fireman and union leader, was perhaps the most prominent Socialist in the United States. An impassioned speaker, he held crowds spellbound with oratory that moved together radical politics and moral imperatives with an almost religious fervor. In an election that pitted him against Republican President William Howard Taft, former president Theodore Roosevelt, and Democrat Woodrow Wilson, Debs won over 900,000 votes. Hardly enough to challenge the dominant political parties, the six percent of the vote Debs received, and the considerable attention his campaign attracted, signaled that Socialism, while a distinct minority current, was gaining a substantial hearing during the Progressive Era.

The party Debs led was formed in 1901 with the merger of a number of small left-wing political organizations. Committed to working through the American political system and using electoral means to win office and influence, the Socialists differed from their Democratic and Republican counterparts in significant ways. Unlike the dominant mainstream parties, Socialists identified the economic system based on the pursuit of profit – capitalism – as fundamentally problematic. Capitalism produced “[p]overty, high prices, unemployment, child slavery, widespread misery and haggard want in a land bursting with abundance.” That system had divided society into two classes – “capitalists and workers, exploiters and producers” – that allowed the capitalists, “while comparatively few,” to own the nation and control the government, with “the courts and the soldiers” at their command to hold the great majority of workers “in slavish subjection,” Debs declared in 1912; the purpose of government was to keep workers as a “subject class” at the “mercy of their masters.” (Eugene V. Debs, “Address of Acceptance” in Socialist Campaign Book (1912), Folder 201901-140-0370. Note: all folder references in this guide are to the Socialist Party of America Papers in ProQuest History Vault) By the early 20th century, Socialists believed workers were awakening, rubbing the “age-long sleep from their eyes” to understand the cause of the “brutalizing effect of class rule” that they had long experienced. Becoming class conscious, they were “no longer on their knees; their bowed bodies are now erect.” With the arrival of the socialist movement, “despair has given way to hope; weakness to strength; fear to courage.” Through the growing power of the Socialist Party, “industrial slavery” would be abolished, all people would win economic freedom, and the working class would be emancipated. The result would be the “birth of a new civilization and the dawn of a happier day for all humanity.”

That was the utopian dream. The reality was more complicated. The Socialist Party never swept to power; it never succeeded in its declared mission of overturning capitalism, abolishing private ownership of the nation’s factories, mills, and mines, and ushering in the “collective ownership and democratic management” of railroads, telegraphs and telephones, land, banking sectors of the economy; and its presidential candidates never won more than a small fraction of the vote. Yet its vision of capitalism’s abolition terrified leading politicians and industrial leaders.

But this sweeping, transformative vision was accomplished by a more prosaic program that attracted considerable support: equal rights for all men and women; women’s suffrage; the abolition of child labor; the adoption of the initiative, referendum, and recall; greater support for education; the promotion of health and other social insurance measures; minimum wage scales; and the graduated income tax. These were pressing issues during the Progressive Era and, in many instances, after as well. Socialists may have seen themselves as revolutionaries, but their greatest impact came as reformers. Indeed, Socialists, from the early 1900s through the 1960s, played central roles in many of the nation’s most important battles over political, economic, and social reform. Their imprint can be found in myriad social movements extending over half a century. It is impossible to understand the history of many reform movements without recognizing the contributions of Socialists to these struggles.

ProQuest’s History Vault module containing the Socialist Party of America Papers and the Addendum to the Papers offers scholars, teachers, and students an abundance of resources to reconstruct both the history of one of the century’s most important revolutionary movements as well as Socialists’ role in a countless reform campaign. The following are a sample of the many topics that can be explored in depth through the module.

[Image of Socialist Candidates]
The 1912 Presidential Election. Candidates William Howard Taft (the sitting Republican president), Theodore Roosevelt (the former president and Bull Moose Party candidate), Woodrow Wilson (the Democratic Party candidate), and Eugene V. Debs (Socialist Party candidate) squared off in a contest for the presidency, each offering different analyses of what ailed American society and visions for addressing those problems. ProQuest History Vault documents allow students to analyze the Socialists’ platform and vision and examine the Socialists’ critique of the two major parties and the insurgent Bull Moose party.

For documents on the 1912 election, see especially the “Socialist Campaign Book” (Folder 201901-140-0370), “Eugene V. Debs, But Two Parties and But One Issue. This Is Our Year” (Folder: 201901-136-0992), “Eugene V. Debs, Address of Acceptance” (Folder: 201901-136-0965)

Politics in the Progressive Era. The first decades of the twentieth century have been dubbed “the Progressive Era,” a period of reform during which activists targeted some of the more egregious abuses of urban and industrial life. The Socialist Party embraced that reform at the same time it considered it inadequate to address the genuine problems confronting American society. Socialists vigorously pursued reform and sought to push it to the left. They also actively participated in local, state, and federal campaigns for political office; in the party’s heyday, voters elected hundreds of party candidates as to office as assemblymen and city councilmen, mayors, and even congressmen.

For documents on politics in the Progressive Era, try searches within the Socialist Party of America Papers for keywords such as “minimum wage,” “child labor,” “initiative, referendum, and recall,” “social insurance,” “graduated income tax,” and “women’s suffrage.” Some examples of documents on this topic come from Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, page 29 “Why Should a poor man vote the rich man’s ticket” and page 44 “Throw your vote here.” See also Folder 201901-136-0632, August Claessens and William Morris Feigenbaum, “The Socialists in the New York Assembly” (1918).

The Bolshevik Revolution and American Communism. The Russian Revolution of 1917 brought the Bolshevik faction to power in Russia and sparked the formation of Communist parties in numerous countries. In the United States, the Socialist Party initially celebrated the overthrow of the Tsar and the Bolshevik
revolution, but the party split sharply over whether to emulate their Russian colleagues by pursuing a non-electoral, overtly revolutionary path. One significant faction of Socialists broke away from the party to form several Communist parties which eventually merged into a single unit. Although both Socialists and Communists were sharp critics of capitalism from the late 1910s onward, they were also sharp critics of each other. Many Socialists remained fiercely anti-communist for decades to come. That conflict manifested itself on countless occasions and in many political battles.

For documents on this topic, try searches within the Socialist Party of America Papers on “Bolshevik,” “communist,” or “communism.” Interesting broadsides and leaflets on Communism can be found in Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, page 280, “Let the truth be known! Mass Meeting on the Moscow Trials and Trotsky,” page 365-366, “The ‘New’ Communist Line: Another Bolshevik Fraud and as Danger,” and page 433, “Read this, then ask yourself these questions.”

The New Deal during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The New Deal — a heterogenous number of programs advanced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his congressional supporters following the 1932 election, aimed at ending the Great Depression through economic reform and providing jobs and welfare to the victims of the Depression. If conservatives blasted the New Deal as socialism, for their part Socialists criticized the New Deal from the left, insisting that President Roosevelt’s programs to stabilize capitalism would do little to end the Great Depression. The New Deal, the party concluded in 1936, “has utterly failed,” with big business granted “almost unheard of powers” while twelve million Americans remained “jobless and hunger and destitution exist throughout the land.” (“New Order, Not New Deal, Party Goal,” Socialist Action (May 29, 1936): 3 in Folder: 201901-129-1258) In addition to analyzing and critiquing the New Deal, Socialists continued to run their own candidates in elections, advocated for the creation of a farmer-labor party, and participated in campaigns to organize the unemployed, build trade unions, and support strikers.

For documents on the New Deal, try searches on “New Deal” or on some of the New Deal agencies such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Recovery Administration or the Tennessee Valley Authority. For broadsides and leaflets on this topic, see Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, Page 8, “Norman Thomas, Socialist Candidate for President;” Page 12, “America for All;” page 143, “The NRA is Dead! What Next for Labor? Public Meeting;” and Page 215, “Under Capitalism New Deal or Old Deal.”

Anti-War Activism and Pacifism Prior to and during World War II. The aftermath of World War I disillusioned large numbers of Americans. Socialists shared with a substantial majority of their fellow citizens the conviction that the war in general was evil and that the United States should refrain from any involvement in the impending conflict in Europe in particular. During the 1930s, Socialist leaders and rank-and-file members participated extensively in the Keep America Out of War Committee, urged “non-interference by the U.S. in foreign affairs,” advocated the “liberation of colonies and withdrawal of troops from such territories,” and called for “complete disarmament” and for legislation prohibiting the war loans and the “manufacture, transportation, or sale of munitions or war materials to all belligerents in a conflict.” After the outbreak of the war in 1939, the Socialist Party opposed peacetime conscription as diminishing democracy at home and making American entry into the war more likely, insisted upon U.S. neutrality, and defended conscientious objectors imprisoned for refusing to serve in the armed forces. (“F.P.A. Meeting October 19, 1937,” National office correspondence and records, Folder 201901-035-0681)

For documents on anti-war activism surrounding World War II, try searches on “Keep America Out of War” or “pacifism.” For broadsides and leaflets on this topic, see Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, Page 123-124, “Dividends of the Dead;” Page 245 “How to Keep America Out of War” by Norman Thomas; Pages 256-258 “Keep Out of War! Statement of the Socialist Party U.S.A in the War Crisis;” and Pages 305-307 “No More War!”

Antifascism in the 1930s and 1940s. Socialists opposed war, but they equally opposed fascism, condemning the growing fascist movements in Europe which were, they charged in 1935, preparing “for a new World War” and “menacing the entire world with a new blood bath.” (“Man’s Only Hope – Our Duty: A Great New Deal, see Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, page 8, “Norman Thomas, Socialist Candidate for President;” page 12, “America for All;” page 143, “The NRA is Dead! What Next for Labor? Public Meeting;” and page 215, “Under Capitalism New Deal or Old Deal.”

Stop Soviet Aggression Against Finland!!

PROTEST RALLY

WED. DEC. 6th at 4:30 P.M.

in UNION SQUARE at 17th Street

Stalin Bombs Women and Children
All Out to Union Square Heart:
—

NORMAN THOMAS

AND OTHER PROMINENT SPEAKERS

Anti-Fascist League
395 Fourth Avenue
New York City

A call to action

1. Write and send our Congressman, 1 House of Representatives, Washington, D.C.
2. Write and send your Senator, 1 House of Representatives, Washington, D.C.
3. Write and send to the President, Washington, D.C.
4. Write your newspaper, protest against the bill. Demand its repeal.
5. Contact your organization, urge them to support the bill.
6. Distribute this broadside to your friends and workmates.

The Socialist Movement has long been and our friends and workmates in the fight. Now is the time to act. We must win this battle.

They contributed to the Spanish Solidarity Fund, participated in the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (which backed the Republican government in Spain against the insurgent fascists in the Spanish Civil War), condemned anti-Semitism, and, after continental war broke out in 1939, endorsed the admission into the United States of fascism's European victims. But as the “Fascist juggernaut moves across middle Europe,” the party’s branch in Washington, D.C. cautioned in 1939 that a determination to destroy fascism should not turn into hatred of “Germans, Italians, … and Japanese” in the United States. “If it did, America will have succumbed to fascism itself. In Socialists’ eyes, antidemocratic policies of local and state governments, the suppression of civil liberties and democratic rights, and the subjugation of African Americans in the South portended fascism on the American home front. “Ours is the task to make real the ideals of democracy, of religious tolerance, of racial equality of human brotherhood,” the D.C. chapter concluded. “These will be weapons more powerful than poison gas in the final struggle against Fascism.” (District of Columbia serial The Socialist [Washington, Washington Local of the Socialist Party], 1935-1951, Folder 201901-139-1277, “Hatred is Not Enough,” pages 23-27 [Volume 4, Number 3, March 21, 1939])

Other Documents: Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, Page 250, “Stop Soviet Aggression Against Finland!! Protest Rally” and Page 297 “We Still Have Democracy, Let’s Use it to Prevent Dictatorship.”

International Solidarity Committee. Formed in 1946, the committee extended moral and financial support to “democratic anti-fascists” in Europe following World War II, sending food and clothing parcels and medical supplies abroad to aid “labor, socialist and democratic anti-fascists” in need. Prominent figures active in Committee affairs included Roger Baldwin, James T. Ferrell, Sidney Hook, A. Philip Randolph, among others. (A search on International Solidarity Committee includes numerous folders, such Folder 201901-113-1317, May 1-17, 1946; Folder 201901-116-0566, March 1948; Folder 201901-113-0605, January 1946; Folder 201901-113-0430, December 1945; and Folder 201901-118-0258, January-March 1950)


For documents on civil rights, try a search on this topic and also see Folder 201901-141-0355, Norman Thomas and A. Philip Randolph, “Victory’s Victims? The Negro’s Future;” and Folder 201902-001-0357, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, General Material, 1919-1976, Page 59 “March for Freedom Now!”

Broadsides and leaflets on civil rights include Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, Page 228 “Smash the Power of the Ku Klux Klan;” and Page 409 “The Harlem Interracial Platform presents Norman Thomas.”

The Labor Movement. Socialists viewed trade unions as important institutions for advancing reform and revolution; they constituted a main vehicle by which the working class organized itself, fought for improved conditions, and, ideally, engaged in the broader class struggle against the capitalist system. “To unite means union, union means organization and organization means POWER to improve living conditions,” the Socialist Party insisted. But it meant more: Through unions workers wrested concessions from corporations, giving them a “consciousness of power, a sense of that human solidarity and brotherhood that gives life and joy to those who feel it.” (Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, Page 130 “Why Join a Labor Union” page 130-132) Socialists fiercely supported the labor movement while simultaneously critiquing its conservative elements.

Socialists were well represented in many trades and industries and, over time, thousands of union members and leaders, first in the American Federation of Labor and, by the 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, participated in party activities.

Southern Tenant Farmers Union. From 1934 through the 1940s, black and white sharecroppers in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and elsewhere organized to protest the oppressive conditions suffered by agricultural workers in the South. The STFU, led by H.L. Mitchell, the party’s white state secretary in Arkansas, and E. B. McKinney, a local African American socialist, brought national attention to sharecappers’ plight, combatted government repression, and engaged in strike activity. The Socialist Party celebrated this “revolt of the sharecappers” to “throw off [the] yoke of [the] plantation system” and offered substantial moral and financial support for sharecroppers, defending their right to unionize, backing their 1936 strike and ongoing organizing efforts, publicizing landowners’ “acts of tyranny and terror,” and advocating the wholesale reform of southern agriculture. (Socialist Action [February 23, 1935], “Share Croppers Fight Serfdom,” pages 13-15, Folder 201901-129-1258, and Southern Tenant Farmers Union, 1935-1942, “Acts of Tyranny and Terror Committed against Innocent Men, Women and Children of the Southern Tenant Framers’ Union in Northeast Arkansas” Folder 201901-126-0003)


Workers Defense League. Beginning in 1936, Socialist Party members spearheaded a legal support group that served as a non-communist alternative to the International Labor Defense, a communist organization. The Workers Defense League, which defined itself as a “militant, politically non-partisan organization” devoted “exclusively to the protection of labor’s rights,” fought against peonage in Florida and Arkansas and led the highly visible but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to save the life of Odell Waller, a Black sharecropper convicted of killing an abusive landowner in self-defense.

Free Speech and Civil Liberties. Free speech and civil liberties were core Socialist values from the 1910s onward. The party, frequently the object of government harassment and repression, engaged in campaigns on behalf of the rights of its members – and other activists in radical and labor circles – to exercise the right of free speech, protesting in the streets, union halls, and the courts. The party battled the anti-labor regime of the powerful Democratic politician, Mayor Frank Hague, protested “gag laws” against the distribution of protest literature, fought against the violence of the Ku Klux Klan against southern African American and white labor organizers, defied the Indiana governor who had banned rallies and arrested socialist speakers, and denounced the incarceration of Japanese Americans by the U.S. government during World War II.

For material on free speech and civil liberties, try searches on these terms as well as “freedom of speech.” For broadsides and pamphlets, see Folder 201901-142-0003, Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, “Socialists Win Free Speech for All Parties,” page 414; Folder 201902-013-0512, Turn Toward Peace papers, 1961-1965, Letter to Kit Komatsu, January 20, 1964, page 1; “Act Now for Freedom to Travel” page 42.

The Socialist Party at the State and Local Level. The Socialist Party envisioned itself as “the party of the workers, regardless of race, color or creed” that ultimately hoped to “establish a cooperative commonwealth forever free from human exploitation and class rule,” as its Declaration of Principles put it in 1934.

That long-term goal of a “new society” would be achieved by ‘peaceful and orderly means’ with a ‘faith in economic and political democracy.’ (Socialist broadsides and leaflets, 1901-1959, “Declaration of Principles of the Socialist Party of the U.S.A.,” 1934, in Folder 201901-142-0003) A national organization with state and local chapters across the United States, it campaigned on platforms supporting unemployment insurance and jobs programs, union representation on municipal boards, labor rights, support for credit unions, improved streets and sewers, and making compulsory public officials’ provision of permits for meetings on public property. (See “Socialists Improve Streets and Sewers,” The Pioneer [Reading, Local Berks, Socialist Party] October 11, 1931, in Folder 201901-132-0025; and “Socialists at Work: Hoopes and Wilson Fighting for Labor Laws in the State Legislature,” The Pioneer [Reading, Local Berks, Socialist Party] April 1931, page 10 in Folder 201901-132-0025.) Over the course of the party’s existence, hundreds of socialist candidates were elected to city offices. The Socialist Party of America Papers contains records of numerous state bodies, including New York, Illinois, California, Texas, Minnesota, Iowa, Oregon, New Jersey, and Washington, DC, (to name just a few), as well as correspondence, reports, leaflets, and newspapers that provide a window into radical activities in Socialist strongholds like Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Reading, Pennsylvania; and Bridgeport, Connecticut, as well as Chicago, Boston, and Denver. Material from these state and local organizations can be found by searching “Series III State and Local Files, 1897-1962,” “Series V. Printed Material, 1897-1964, Part A. Serials, 1909-1967, Group 2–State and Local, 1910-1962,” and “Series C: State and Local Party Files, 1951-1975” or by searching on a particular state or location.

Folder 201901-129-1258 Socialist Action serial (Chicago, Socialist Party), page 3, An Effective New Campaign Poster, Still 10,000,000 Unemployed, October 20, 1934.

The Peace Movement. In the 1950s and 1960s, Socialists were active in the ban-the-bomb campaign, protests of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and Turn Toward Peace, and were among the opponents of the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1964. The Socialist Party was also critical of the escalating war in Vietnam, although U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia divided Socialists in the 1960s and early 1970s.


This resource guide has focused on topics that can be explored using the Socialist Party of America Papers in History Vault but it should also be noted that History Vault includes related content in other modules on the Socialist Party and the American Left in the 20th Century. Workers, Labor Unions, and the American Left in the 20th Century includes material on the prosecution strategy in the case of U.S. v. Eugene Debs and Department of Justice and U.S. Military investigations of the Industrial Workers of the World. Labor Unions in the U.S., 1862-1974: Knights of Labor, AFL, CIO, and AFL-CIO includes the papers of Adolph Germer who was involved with the Socialist Party early in his career. The Papers of Socialist Party members A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin can be found in History Vault’s Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Organizational Records and Personal Papers, Part 1. To learn more about History Vault, see https://about.proquest.com/products-services/historyvault.html

About Eric Arnesen
Eric Arnesen is professor of history at The George Washington University. A graduate of Wesleyan University and the recipient of a Ph.D. in History from Yale University, he is a specialist in the history of race, labor, politics, and civil rights. He is the author of several books and articles as well as a contributor to the Chicago Tribune, The New Republic, The Nation, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, Dissent, and Teamster. A recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Commission, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, he serves as co-chair of the Washington History Seminar at the Wilson Center. He is currently completing a biography of A. Philip Randolph.

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