
Finnish Branch Celebrates 30th Year

by Wilno Hedman

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Thirty years ago a group of Finnish immigrants met in a back room of a saloon at 216 East 41st St. and organized a Finnish Workers' Club. From that meeting has grown the largest Socialist branch of New York and of the Finnish Federation. Most of the charter members still retain their membership cards in the Social Democratic Party of Finland.

This group met as an independent Socialist club for nearly two years; but on January 15, 1905, through the efforts of Julius Gerber and U. Solomon, they unanimously voted to join the Socialist Party of America.

After years of cooperation and expansion the branch was able in 1917 to take over their present home at 2056 — 5th Ave., and an era of activity both social and educational was started that has not been surpassed by any organization of Finns anywhere in America. In this building are conducted many lines of activity, among them a dramatic group, an athletic club, a singing society, a sewing circle, a library, dances and entertainment, a restaurant, a billiard room, a book store, and of course extensive lecturing and Socialist propaganda work.

Three National Conventions of the party were held at the Finnish headquarters, in 1920, 1923, and 1928. In 1920 our beloved leader Eugene V. Debs was nominated for President there while he was incarcerated in the federal penitentiary. The state conventions of 1924 and 1926 were likewise held there.

Still the path of progress was not all roses, for on a number of occasions we have been attacked from various fronts. In 1918

representatives of the War Department and the New York police swarmed down on the building and confiscated every available piece of literature and all official records of the branch. Officers of the branch were forced to make several appearances before the war board's investigating committee.

During the first few months of 1921 the so-called left wing members agitated our withdrawal from the Party to join forces with the Third International. After months of debate this group split the ranks of our membership, about 600 of our 900 members seceding to join the Communists. This was the most severe blow the branch has suffered in our entire 30 years of existence.

In 1930 a fire destroyed practically the entire upper floor of the building and only after months of concerted effort were we able to rebuild and reopen the headquarters to again resume our activities.

On July 30, 1931, under the direction of the alien-hating W.N. Doak, Secretary of Labor, agents of the Immigration Bureau and the police conducted a surprise raid at the time a dance was being held in the ballroom and over 400 dancers were subjected to hours of questioning. As a result 18 were taken into custody, being unable at the time to prove proper entry into the US. Morris Hillquit as counsel for the branch vigorously protested to Secretary Doak and to the Police Commissioner against the unwarranted action. As a consequence raids of this sort have ceased.

Membership in the branch steadily increased from its first meeting, until it reached a maximum of 918 in 1921 due to a concentrated effort of the Communist element to secure control. After the split with the Communists the membership fell below 300, but for the past several years it has been consistently averaging between 350 and 400 members.

One of the most important duties of the branch and the members has been the maintenance of the Finnish newspaper, *Raivaaja*. Thousands of dollars yearly have been spent by the branch members for this publication, the only Finnish Socialist daily in America.

During the past year some of our major accomplishments have been: Aid during election campaigns in arranging street corner meetings, supplying speakers, and distributing literature; conducting Socialist lecture courses in Finnish during the entire winter season, including a highly successful series of ten lectures on Workers in American History; a permanent committee to aid members in securing naturalization papers; a school to teach English is in session weekly. Propaganda work has been carried on continuously and a great deal of money has been spent for this purpose.

During the past few months an English-speaking section within the branch was organized by the younger generation.

Every evening this week has been one of great festivity at the headquarters, where special programs are being held celebrating this 30th Anniversary. On Saturday evening, April 29, a get-together of old-time members will take place and all Local New York branches are urged to send representatives. A very fine May Day program has been arranged for Monday evening, including August Claessens as the principal speaker. *New Leader* readers are cordially invited to attend this event.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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