
The Immigration Question

by Ernest Untermann

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The immigration question has recently been discussed in Socialist magazines of Europe, especially the debates on the exclusion of Asiatics at the recent national convention of the American Socialist Party in Chicago ["National Congress," May 15-21, 1910].

In the *Neue Zeit* [New Times] the scientific organ of the "orthodox" Marxians of Germany, Comrades Algernon Lee of New York, Gustav Eckstein of Germany, and Sen Katayama of Japan, have expressed their opinions about the position taken by the majority of our committee on immigration.

Lee, as usual, is very fair. Eckstein and Katayama are biased and unfair.

In the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* [Socialist Monthly] the scientific organ of the "revisionists," Max Schippel has a very comprehensive and objective report on the same subject. Only he is mistaken in counting Guy Miller with the minority. Comrade Miller does not agree with Comrade [John] Spargo, but with the majority of the committee, as shown by a letter which he wrote me previously to the convention.

Eckstein's article contains the false assertion that [Joshua] Wanhope and I are adherents of Comrade Berger. As a matter of fact, we agree with Comrade Berger in this particular respect. But Wanhope and myself are the original framers of the report of the majority of the Immigration Committee. Berger did not take part in the sessions of our committee, because his time was taken up with sessions of other committees. I finally succeeded in getting a copy of our report into Berger's hands a short while before it was presented to the convention. He read it carefully, agreed with it, and signed it. In this way this report was gotten up, and if the question of adherence is to be raised, Berger is an adherent of Wanhope and myself, not vice-versa.

Eckstein tries to create the impression that Comrade Berger is a "practical politician" in the ban meaning of the term, and that Wanhope and I are in this respect like Berger. The insinuation is unfair to Berger as it is to Wanhope and myself. Everyone who is familiar with the Socialist literature in the United States knows that Wanhope and I as well as Berger are greatly interested in the scientific theories of Marx. So far as the immigration question is concerned, Wanhope and myself had long come in contact with the Asiatic portion of this problem, before this question was raised in any Socialist convention.

At the National Convention of 1908 [May 10-17, 1908] I had already taken the same position which I took, after two years of continued study, in 1910, and Berger did not take issue with the European comrades on this question until after the Stuttgart convention [August 18-24, 1907], where the American delegates disregarded the instructions of the National Executive Committee, which some of them had been instrumental in passing, and voted for the European view.

The resolution of the American National Executive Committee likewise, which protested against the interference of European intellectuals in this special problem of American evolution, and took issue with the Stuttgart resolution, had been presented by myself, not by Berger, who, however, agreed with me and voted in favor of it.

While Comrade Eckstein calls Wanhope and myself adherents of the "practical politician" Berger, Comrade Katayama asserts that "the American Socialists like Berger, Untermann, Lee, and [Robert] Hunter, who favor the exclusion of the Asiatics and nevertheless claim to be in accord with the Stuttgart resolution and with the *Communist Manifesto*, are not familiar with the actual conditions on the Pacific coast, where most of the Japanese immigrants live. They take their departure from fantastic pictures of their own immigration."

In the first place, we did not claim to be in full agreement with the Stuttgart resolution, but took issue with it. In the second place, Comrade Lee did not support the report of the majority but a substitute of his own to [Morris] Hillquit's amendment. Hunter supported this substitute, which was but a brief restatement of the Stuttgart resolution.

In the third place, Berger knows this problem from actual contact with it in the American Federation of Labor, and Wanhope and myself have been sailors, who for years struggled against Asiatic competition on board of ships plying the coasts of the Pacific. On board of

European and American vessels we had to compete against the lowering of the standard of living of Asiatics. Personally, I had 12 years of practical experience with it before I became a full-fledged Socialist. In Kobe and Nagasaki, in Hong Kong and Shanghai, in Rangoon, Calcutta, and Madras, in Manila and Iloilo, in Batavia and Socrabaya, in Apia and Honolulu, in Melbourne, Sidney, and Aukland, in Capetown and Delgoa Bay, in Valparaiso, Iquique, and Guyaquil, in San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, I found myself being displaced by Asiatics.

Even the most perfect solidarity of the working class possible under the capitalist system could not have done me any good, because the problem was and is now: How can ten men be employed when there is a job only for one?

All theories were refuted by practice. The struggle for existence compelled me to defend myself, and in the end a hand-to-hand fight was the only method left to settle the problem.

Katayama claims that the Japanese do not work more cheaply than European or American laborers. Will he kindly explain in that case what particular motive the American capitalists have in importing Japanese laborers?

Kautsky gave space in the *Neue Zeit* to all others, but held me off with excuses, although in my capacity as chairman of our Immigration Committee, as a globe trotter, and a persistent student of the problem, I was at least as well equipped as the European or Japanese intellectuals to discuss this question.

In Manila in 1884 I came face to face with this problem in its most naked aspect.

The American full-rigger on which I had shipped as an able-bodied seaman, had been run on a coral reef by the captain and completely destroyed. We were taken to Manilla, after drifting around in open boats for several days, and discharged. With the assistance of the American consul we were robbed of the greater part of our wages. Soon the few dollars which we received were spent. Now we wanted a job. The harbor was full of ships, but they either had their full crew or discharged their crews in order to hire cheaper Asiatic sailors. We applied to the American consul for help. He refused to have anything to do with us, because we had been discharged from the American ship and could not show any citizens' papers. The German consul declined to care for us because we had been sailing on board of an American ship and were no longer de facto German citizens. The

English consul offered us a job on board of an American full-rigger that had been wrecked on the coast of Luzon, patched up by a diver, and placed under the English flag. The ship was to be taken to the dry-dock in Hong Kong. After we had signed the articles in the English consul's office, it turned out that this floating wreck was to be commanded by the same captain and the same mates who had just wrecked our own ship. We were sure that this ship had been wrecked on purpose with a view to cheating the insurance company. Now we were supposed to go through the same experience under the English flag. The northeast monsoon was blowing fiercely and the trip would have to be made by the wind, for the greater part of the distance to Hong Kong. The ship was covered with mud several inches deep. We were supposed to clean her during the passage. We rebelled at once. But unfortunately we had signed the shipping articles before we discovered the fraud.

The English consul at once threatened to arrest us. We refused nevertheless and took to our heels. Now we witnessed a demonstration of international solidarity of capitalist tools that I haven't forgotten to this day.

The American, German, and English consuls united to capture us. They applied to the Spanish authorities for police — Tagalogs — and hunted us down like rabbits. Those who were caught were put in irons and dragged on board of the wreck. But they didn't get all of us. Two of my comrades and myself hired ourselves out to some Tagalog lighters and sailed out into the bay, where we were not discovered, until the wreck had sailed for the open sea, and it did not pay to hold us any longer and feed us. So we were left undisturbed in our new positions.

The wreck sank at sea and several sailors were drowned; the others drifted for 14 days in open boats until an English tramp steamer picked them up and took them to Hong Kong. For more than a year I lived on board of one of these lighters, the only white man among Tagalogs.

I lived for 12 months on rice and dry fish, prepared after the Tagalog recipe and eaten by all hands out of one common dish by the help of our ten fingers. I reveled in all the luxuries of the Tagalog larder and tried all its delights, with the exception of Spanish pepper and betelnut. And since that time I feel like Berger. I would rather "fight like a tiger" than be reduced to a scale of living which condemns me to rice and fish and to a wage of 6 reales per day.

I have also learned that all sentimental gush about the brotherhood of man, notwithstanding race peculiarities are facts that cannot be overcome in a very few years. They will have to be respected, even by Socialists, and must be taken into account, not only during our life under capitalism, but also in the transition to Socialism and under Socialism.

This does not mean that any one race is physically inferior to another, so far as efficiency under the same economic environment is concerned. But it does mean that races separated by centuries of economic evolution cannot jump in a few years over chasms of race peculiarities emphasized and ossified by peculiar economic conditions. Any attempt to ignore such peculiarities and pass them off with sentimental phrases is utopian and retards the coming of the real and possible brotherhood of man instead of hastening its coming.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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