
Joining the Socialist Movement

by Emil Seidel

An excerpt from Part III of the memoir *Thy Kingdom Come: Sketches from My Life* (1944), pp. 37-41; 46-47. Manuscript at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

One day while working at the Wisconsin Iron & Woven Wire Works, I met the foreman of the galvano-plastic shop, who introduced himself: “My name is Heumann — Adolf Heumann,” in the brogue of a southern German. To put him at ease I spoke German and told him my name. We had chatted but for a few minutes when both of us discovered that the other was a Socialist. It was he who told me of the *Vereinigung* [Association], and of a German workers’ newspaper, the *Arbeiter Zeitung* [Workers’ Newspaper] published in Milwaukee by Victor L. Berger.

Comrade Heumann took my subscription for the *Zeitung* and my application for membership in the association. At the first meeting I attended there were perhaps 25 members present. I was not at once accepted but could attend the meetings. They kept me on probation for some time. There was no catechizing. I might take part in discussion, was encouraged to speak. From my speech they judged my fitness to be a comrade. It was all so informal yet so very efficient and democratic. Withal, there was no vow of secrecy. We paid 25 cents a month dues to have a fund when needed for literature, stationery, and the like.

The *Vereinigung* had been formed after the collapse of 1886. It was not a political party; rather a group of class-conscious socialists, waiting in a watchtower biding their time for action. We paid no hall rent but met in the printery of Comrade Jacob

Hunger. The printery was located in the basement of Union Hall, on the Northwest corner of 6th and Chestnut Streets. The total number of members was between 35 and 40, all of them readers of the *Arbeiter Zeitung*. The power of the association was greater by far than its membership would indicate, for outside there were several thousand subscribers to the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, nearly all of them Socialists.

At the *Vereinigung* I met most of the prominent Milwaukee Socialists of the early '90s: Comrades Berger, Brockhausen, Baier, Doerfler Sr., Elsner, Hampel, Hunger, Carl Kleist, Knappe, Kranzfelder, Luchsinger, Moerschel, Petersen, Richer, Schranz, Ziegler, and others whose names, alas, do not come readily. George Moerschel was the secretary, Jacob Hunger the treasurer. The chairman was chosen at each meeting. That custom was continued in all the branches of the Party.

As I began to know the members of the *Vereinigung* better, my esteem of them grew and I had the one fervent desire: to be counted one of them. They had stood the ordeal of persecution and had not failed. Now they had but one aim: to liberate the working class from the bondage of wage-slavery. That was the first, the last, and the only article of their creed. And the means: Workers of the World, Unite! It was as simple as that. It was to my liking to the exclusion of all else.



There was another group in Milwaukee, the Socialist Labor Party. It had its national seat in New York and was really the forerunner of the Social Democracy as it grew in Milwaukee, Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and other Midwestern and Western cities. The SLP was also known as the "DeLeonites," from Daniel DeLeon, who was the national head of the movement. He was an able man to whom we owe the English translations of numerous German Socialist pamphlets.

DeLeon vitiated his usefulness to the Socialist movement by his autocratic methods, which kept the membership of his organization in constant turmoil of harmful quarrels. Any local matter might be appealed to the National Office, whence it was spread through the whole party. Trivial matters became issues. Authority went to seed — in the terms of a coarse saying, “What they built with their hands, they upset with their hams.”

Most of the members of the *Vereinigung* had belonged to the SLP and quit because “there was too much quarreling.” The *Arbeiter Zeitung* had not been thriving when Victor L. Berger bought the paper to become its publisher and editor. The SLP kept up a feud on Berger, the *Vereinigung*, and the *Zeitung*, under which the finances of the paper suffered most. These were dark days for the paper and its help. Many paydays passed without the help or the editor getting one cent of pay. To increase his income, Comrade Berger wrote such insurance as the comrades placed with him. Such was the financial situation of the *Arbeiter Zeitung* when I subscribed to it.

The paper came to my home. One evening there was no paper, nor the next and the next. On inquiry I was told that the *Arbeiter Zeitung* had died. The Socialist Labor Party had maintained a constant guerilla war and boycotted the paper. This political element could not work constructively itself and it would not let others build. But on Saturday there came a new paper to my home — the weekly *Vorwärts* [Forward]. And Victor L. Berger was its editor. For decades the *Vorwärts* came regularly every weekend. Phoenix-like it rose from the ashes of the past to do yeomanly service in the building of the Social-Democratic Party.

Let it be remembered that during all this time the industrial depression raged with unabated fury. His service through all these years gave Comrade Berger the undying loyalty of the old comrades, who stood by him through thick and thin. Like a

prophet from his lookout, Victor watched the political horizon for signs of the coming of labor's spring.

Berger did not believe that the labor movement would develop according to one fixed pattern alike in all countries. That movement must naturally be different in the United States than in any other country, because all conditions were different.

At about this time the Populist movement was growing rapidly in some parts of the United States. In Milwaukee Henry Smith, Bob Schilling, and others were soapboxing for the People's Party and money reform. In 1892 the People's Party cast over a million popular votes. It seemed as if some sort of an awakening was impending.

Berger attended the next [July 1896] People's Party convention, which met in St. Louis, if I remember rightly. This convention declared for the "unrestricted coinage of silver and gold at the present legal ration of 16-to-1, without waiting for the consent of foreign nations."

When Berger returned from that convention, his *Vorwärts* denounced the bimetallist plank of the People's Party as utterly unfit to correct any of the workers' and farmers' grievances, and he warned that if enacted into law bimetallism would add an unsound money system to the wrongs from which the working class was suffering.

Among the readers of the *Vorwärts* was Charley Pfister, a Republican of considerable wealth, active in current politics and ranking high in the counsel of his party. He had read the Berger article and recognized its effectiveness as a campaign document in the coming election of 1896. The Populists and Democrats had nominated the "silver-tongued orator" William Jennings Bryan as their candidate for President; the "silver" Republicans had also endorsed Bryan.

The regular Republicans had nominated William McKinley of Ohio to be their candidate for President. They feared Bryan, whose oratory was sweeping the masses before him. The "sin-

cere,” simply written article of Berger’s became a godsend to the worried Republicans. So Pfister asked Berger to print a second edition of 100,000 copies of the *Vorwärts* containing the coveted article, for which he would pay Berger \$10,000. Pfister would distribute this edition where it would do the Republicans the most good.

It was a flattering and tempting offer, considering the poverty of the Socialists. But Victor L. Berger measured up to the situation and declined the offer. He would not stoop to print his *Vorwärts* to help Republicans. There was an overrun of a few hundred copies which the office sold at five cents a copy. At the next meeting of the *Vereinigung*, Berger reported the incident. His comrades commended him for his loyalty to principle.



Comrade Berger keenly watched the labor movement. Eugene V. Debs had organized the American Railway Union in 1893 and served as its president. Grover Cleveland had entered upon his second Presidential term. The ARU went on strike in Chicago, which Debs managed. The greatest railroad center of the country was completely tied up. Milwaukee Socialists stood on tiptoe; something was bound to happen. So it did. Debs and his fellow workers were enjoined from interfering with the transport of mails. President Cleveland ordered the military to Chicago. Debs was indicted for contempt of court, tried, and sentenced by a federal judge to serve six months in Woodstock [Illinois] prison.

When a man’s in jail, then’s when he needs a friend. And Berger proved himself to be that friend; he called on Debs in prison and brought books from his own library for Gene to read. The organizer of workers in Milwaukee explained Socialism to the organizer of labor in Woodstock prison. The pages of

history are soiled with too many foul deeds of man while mankind's finest acts are lost in the passions of that struggle.

One metropolitan daily cartooned Debs as a harmless cub sent to prison — and discharged at the end of his term as a full-grown lion labeled “Socialist.” Speaking figuratively, that's exactly what happened. Eugene V. Debs came forth an avowed Socialist, girded with an indomitable faith in his cause, ever to do battle for Social Justice to the end of his days. Of what the two men spoke, looking beyond prison walls, space, and time out upon a suffering world, they left us nary a word. What a gem we lost when that conversation between Victor and Eugene was not recorded.

* * *

The new Socialist movement began taking shape in Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and at other Eastern and Western industrial centers. The ARU, Gene Debs' railroad union had disbanded; Debs, under the influence of Victor L. Berger, had declared himself for Socialism. His influence and popularity swayed thousands of followers. In Milwaukee Gene organized Branch One of the Social Democracy at a meeting in the West Side Turn Hall. I was the first one to hit the “sawdust” trail and sign my name. Branch Two, Three, Big-Four, Five, and Six followed in short order. To avoid confusion we later named the branches after the wards.

In 1898 we nominated our first municipal ticket in Milwaukee under the name “Social Democracy.” Robert Meister was the candidate for Mayor, Thomas C.P. Myers for Comptroller, Howard Tuttle for Treasurer, and Richard Elsner for City Attorney. On election day we garnered 2,414 votes.

In the month of June following the election the Social Democracy had a National Convention in Chicago. The Colonist faction had been through much trouble with their colony and

were in financial straits. Those delegations which were opposed to linking our political movement to the colonization scheme, including Milwaukee, were instructed to get rid of it. Failing in that the Anti-Colonists bolted, held their own convention, and founded the Social Democratic Party. The colony scheme died soon after that. The few Milwaukee comrades who had joined the Colony returned in time, poorer and wiser.

The Social Democratic Party grew rapidly.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · September 2013 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.