

## Municipal Socialists Against the New Deal: Struggles Over the City, 1927-1937

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Socialism is back. But what ever happened to it to begin with? From 1901 through the mid-1930s, the Socialist Party of America (SP) was the most significant third party in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Socialists led major unions and won elections across the country, taking more than a thousand local, state, and even national offices.<sup>2</sup> For a handful of decades, the Party was at the vanguard of the global Socialist movement.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, U.S. Socialists were deeply linked across internal and international borders.<sup>4</sup> Eugene V. Debs rans the most competitive third-party campaign for president of his time and became a hero to millions of Americans.<sup>5</sup> Dozens of unions and numerous state federations of labor backed the Party in those years.<sup>6</sup> Despite its early promise, though, the SP fell apart rapidly. Many date its demise to the early 1920s.<sup>7</sup> Others, however, cite the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> The latter find that, in a number of industrial communities, the SP persisted and even

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<sup>1</sup> The first synthetic account of the Party's history is David Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History*. (New York: Macmillan, 1955). James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984) is a major account of the Party's heyday. Jack Ross's very recent synthetic account attempts to bring the 1930s and beyond into the broad story of the Socialist Party but tends to follow factional feuds and dramas among national leaders, leaving aside the substantive work Socialists did on the ground, electorally and otherwise. Nonetheless, it is a major work with much information to offer. Ross, *The Socialist Party of America* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015). Additional works will be cited below.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, *The Socialist Party*, 609-638.

<sup>3</sup> On the pre-WWI Socialist Party, Eric Foner made this point in "Why is there no Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop* No. 17 (1984), 57-80.

<sup>4</sup> Shel Stromquist, "Claiming Political Space: Workers, Municipal Socialism, and the Reconstruction of Local Democracy in Transnational Perspective." in *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, edited Leon Fink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: the workplace, the state, and American labor activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Weinstein halts his major history, for example, at 1924. In their major compendium, *Failure of a Dream?: Essays in the History of American Socialism*, major historians of the SP tend to coalesce around this timeline, and with good reason: both in membership and geography, the Socialist movement shrank significantly after 1920.

<sup>8</sup> Cecelia Bucki's *Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal* is a study of one of the three major post-1920s Socialist cities, Bridgeport, CT. Other works that deal seriously with the Party in the 1930s include: Sharon McConnell-Sidorick's *Silk Stocking and Socialism: Philadelphia's Radical Hosiery Workers from the Jazz Age to the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), Frank Warren, *An Alternative Vision: The Socialist Party in the 1930s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974). Works on the New Deal often discuss the important social

grew in size and influence, compared to its 1920 nadir. Yet, at the height of the Depression, the Party finally, more or less, left the American scene. Why? The general story informs us that, in a period famous for radical politics spread by working-class uprisings and mass upheavals, the SP faltered for two general reasons. Factionalism tore it apart from the inside, pitting young against old, militant against moderate.<sup>9</sup> From the outside, cultural conservatism, it has been argued, foreclosed the expansion of Marxian politics *in general*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in the age that gave rise to the CIO and a (briefly) surging Communist movement, the Socialist Party apparently exited stage left, quietly and, perhaps until recently, for good.<sup>11</sup>

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movement work Socialists undertook in numerous industrial cities, but do not explore the continued political and electoral projects SP members pursued. See Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Jo Ann Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore: People and Government in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Ross provides a detailed account of the split as it played out in New York, alongside other shifts among the SP's base. *The Socialist Party*, 336-377.

<sup>10</sup> One of the most influential accounts of Marxian Socialism is Daniel Bell's *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967). This account, though not a history, set of generations of debate over the nature of left history, as Michael Kazin noted in a 1995 essay, "The Agony and Romance of the American Left," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (1995): 1488-1512. Bell controversially argued that U.S. Marxists had never achieved significant success because they were "in but not of the world"—that is, they operated outside the boundaries of cultural and political life and therefore never made proper inroads. For a more recent overview of varied approaches to socialism in this era, see Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), Chapter 4. In that work, Kazin attempts to bring the history of socialism into political history's mainstream, arguing that, at least for a time, the SP made an impact on the country's politics. Kazin stops the clock around 1920 and pivots thereafter to Communists.

<sup>11</sup> The history of the Communist movement in this country has received top billing in studies of the Great Depression Left—and for good reason. Communists were often key organizers and mobilizers of the mass unrest that rocked the country and remade the political landscape, especially through the CIO, which formed in 1935-1937. And, after 1934, the CP was the largest Left organization in the country. But the CP, it should be noted, were never the only game in town. Indeed, the SP, as well as non-SP socialists, were active, even central to the early- and even mid-1930s story. In many cases, the lines could be blurred within any given strike or action, with Socialists, Communists, and Musteites all involved. On the CP, see Zieger, *The CIO*; Jonathan Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) and Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). On non-SP socialists such as the Musteites, see Roy Rosenzweig, "Radicals and the jobless: The Musteites and the Unemployed Leagues, 1932-1936" *Labor History* 16, No. 1 (Jan., 1975), 52-77. Leilah Danielson, *American Gandhi: A.J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 126-153.

Today, I'd like to offer a reinterpretation of the SP's final years as a visible and minimally-viable political party. I will not be focusing on those national dramas that have preoccupied so many authors, or on the more philosophical questions about Socialism and American culture that animated—and infuriated—several generations of commenters. I also harbor no illusions about what the Party was in the 1930s. It never approached the scale or power of either the Republican or the Democratic party, each with a broad national reach. Instead, I propose to do what has so rarely been done: examine the rise and final fall of the Party through the lens of an actual site of SP success. By turning to Reading, Pennsylvania, one of the most densely Socialist communities in the country, whose movement peaked in the Great Depression, it is possible to revisit the history of American Socialism and garner new insights into its 1930s demise.<sup>12</sup> In the process, it is also possible to observe in stark terms the limits of the system that suffocated this left-wing electoral project: New Deal liberalism.

The paper makes two arguments. First, locally-based Socialists that remained active both in the social movement and electoral realms during the Depression occupied a contradictory position shaped by the federalist state structure. In it, Socialists scored electoral wins even as their newly-won seats of power could not match the scale of the social and political vision they articulated. Federalism, in all its complex and shifting forms during the early New Deal, foreclosed the east coast's fastest-growing left outpost, around the same time that the Social Democratic politics of the upper Midwest's Farmer-Labor, Progressive, and Non-Partisan movements and the west coast's EPIC movements came under attack.

Second, this process reveals important tensions in New Deal itself. The process by which Socialists in this particular case began to lose power was complicated, but no player loomed

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<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Local Berks' organizational growth, William C. Pratt, "The Reading Socialist Experience: A Study of Working Class Politics" (PhD Dissertation, Dept. of History, Emory University, 1969).

larger than the relief apparatus of the New Deal state. Yawning gaps in welfare programs for the poor, the unemployed, and the homeless fueled the Party's growth and informed its program. Once in office, even the Party's state-level officials found they had little capacity to shift matters for their members, supporters, and constituents. Left with few options, the Reading organization began to crack. In the country's most densely-Socialist county, the events of the Depression, the iconic development of the New Deal, took a distinct path—one that helps to clarify not only the historical process whereby a *growing* Socialist Party was halted in its tracks but also the limits of New Deal liberalism more generally.

Long before the Socialist Party formed in 1901 or swept city hall in 1935, Reading, about fifty miles upriver from Philadelphia, was a site of radical and Socialist activity. In the decades leading up to and following the Civil War, Reading, developed a diverse industrial base consisting of rail, iron, steel, textile, and machine production as well as food and tobacco processing; it also developed as a hotbed of radicalism.<sup>13</sup> As the city grew, industrialists mixed workplace domination with violent repression. In 1877, amidst the national uprising of railroad workers, seven strikers were famously massacred there. The next year, gathered in Reading, the Knights of Labor, the country's first industrial union organization, elected its first leadership slate. The city remained a site of Populist activism in the 1890s. However, these efforts, part of a surge of late-nineteenth-century equality struggles, did not survive intact.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On nineteenth century labor in Reading, Raymond Albright *Two Centuries of Reading, Pa.* (Reading, PA: 1948).

<sup>14</sup> For a recent synthesis of the postbellum upsurge in movements for equality, see Charles Postel, *Equality: An American Dilemma: 1866-1896*. New York City, NY: Macmillan, 2019. On the Knights of Labor, see Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). On the Populist movement, see Postel, *Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). On the Populists in Pennsylvania, see William Lyons, "Populist in Pennsylvania, 1892-1901." *Pennsylvania History* 32, No. 1 (Jan. 1965), 49-65.

At the turn of the century, out of the ashes of postbellum social upheaval, Reading's workers turned the SP into a vehicle of agitation, unionization, and politicization. Local Berks became a leading force in city and regional life. In 1910, it propelled James Maurer into office as the state's first Socialist legislator, launching a long career in politics and in labor.<sup>15</sup> Maurer, a former Knights and officer in the Machinists Union, eventually became President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor, making him one of the most prominent leftwing union leaders in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest labor organization of the time.

Socialist activity in Reading was a reflection of an economic and cultural process of struggle and community formation. At the turn of the century, workers toiled increasingly in textiles and metalworking.<sup>16</sup> In new mills and factories, they encountered intransigent bosses who repressed labor uprisings and kept wages lower than in comparable industrial communities. Workers built their own institutions and formed a community of solidarity, consolidating a social and cultural world that served as the basis for action well into the Depression.<sup>17</sup> In the interwar era, Socialists pushed local and state politics toward the left as they added members, fomented street protest and workplace organizing drives, and became the dominant radical force at the ballot box.

From the late 1920s until the middle of the 1930s, the Socialist Party was growing—and fast. Viewed from the vantage of 1930, or even 1935, the demise of a left third party that *actually contested for power* was not a given. Nationally, the Party more than doubled its formal, paid-up

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<sup>15</sup> James Maurer, *It Can be Done* (New York City: Rand School Press, 1938).

<sup>16</sup> Reading's industrial economy was diverse and included steel and iron production, machine production, food, tobacco, and other activities, but textiles, and in particular hosiery, were at the fore of both industrial expansion and labor radicalism in this period. By the late 1930s, "hosiery accounted for more than half the employment of Berks County's work force, five times the size of the next biggest industry." James L. Holton, *50 Golden Years: History of the Full-Fashioned Hosiery Industry in Berks County, Pennsylvania* (Reading, PA: Schuylkill River Greenway Association, 1993), 5.

<sup>17</sup> On industrialization, see Albright, *Two Centuries*. On hosiery's rise, see Holton, *50 Golden Years*. See Maurer's *It Can Be Down* for a first-hand account of many of these conflicts as well as Stetler, in particular on comparisons to neighboring communities. Henry Stetler, *The Socialist Movement in Reading, Pennsylvania, 1896-1936; A Study in Social Change* (Philadelphia, PA: Porcupine Press, 1974).

membership between 1929 and 1935.<sup>18</sup> Parallel, overlapping, and allied organizations proliferated, including urban unemployed movements and the rural Southern Tenant Farmers Union. In and outside its formal membership structure, the Socialist Party was on the rise. Until 1934, its rolls remained longer than the Communist Party, which did not experience its massive growth spurt until after the breakup of the SP.<sup>19</sup> And, in a few locales, the Party not only grew its base but laid the groundwork for its own form of political dominance.

Reading was at the fore in growing a Socialist Party that agitated for and won political power. There, between 1927 and 1937, the movement flourished. Over the same period, Local Berks, the SP group that extended into the surrounding county, ballooned.<sup>20</sup> But formal membership numbers only tell a partial story. Though no records exist to give definite insight, SP-organized movement organizations brought thousands onto the streets to protest the deprivations of the Depression and the insufficiency of the state's response; Reading's Socialist-Labor newspaper, the *Reading Labor Advocate*, reported a membership in the main protest organization in the thousands by 1934.<sup>21</sup> With a physical home in the city's downtown Labor Lyceum and a growing menu of social, cultural, and educational activities open to all, including card parties, dances, anti-fascist mass meetings, and extended night school for workers' political

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<sup>18</sup> James N. Gregory and Rebecca Flores, "Socialist Party Membership by States 1904-1940," Mapping American Social Movements Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Retrieved November 24, 2019), [https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP\\_map-members.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP_map-members.shtml)

<sup>19</sup> Gregory, "Communist Party Membership by Districts 1922-1950," Mapping American Social Movements Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Retrieved November 24, 2019), [https://depts.washington.edu/moves/CP\\_map-members.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/CP_map-members.shtml)

<sup>20</sup> Incomplete party records indicate that at least several hundred city dwellers joined the Socialist Party as official members in the period, let alone the many more who registered as socialist voters. By 1935, the Directory of Socialist Party Branches published in the *Advocate* listed thirty-nine distinct branches, including women's committees, in Berks County. The vast majority were in Reading itself. See: Dues Reports, Box 3, Folder 15, Darlington Hoopes Papers. Many new socialists could not afford the required dues stamp; the Party, recognizing that they could not grow without a larger organizational membership, gave free stamps to the unemployed. "Directory of Socialist Party Branches," *Labor Advocate*, Jan. 11, 1935.

<sup>21</sup> "T.P.L. Urges Gov't-Owned Roads vs. Prince Plan," *Reading Labor Advocate*, Jan. 26, 1934.

education, the Party was remaking the social fabric of the city. Meanwhile, through mass media including print and radio, Local Berks was speaking to Socialists across a five state region.

Their electoral record, however, is especially striking. Already in 1927, Socialists fomented a left-wing tax revolt, leveraging widespread frustration with a lopsided property tax system—one that put disproportionate burden on workers while letting private business off the hook—into a stunning upset. Socialists elected their first Council majority and took the mayoralty that year. In 1930, they ousted both incumbent state assemblymen; in their stead, Reading voters sent Darlington Hoopes and Lilith Wilson, the first Socialist woman elected to the statehouse, and one of the first women elected period, to Harrisburg. In 1932, voters gave 21% of the county’s vote to Norman Thomas, the Socialist candidate for president, and his Reading-born running mate, James Maurer.<sup>22</sup> Hometown pride alone cannot explain such high figures, as the Socialist candidate for Congress, newspaperman and the Party’s county treasurer, Raymond Hofses, outran the presidential ticket, scoring 27% of the vote. Between 1927 and 1935, Socialists won numerous offices, from over a hundred aldermanic positions to two sweeps of city council, two mayoralties, and three county row offices.

This litany of electoral wins on its own does not do justice to the depth of social upheaval and community building Socialists led in the same period. And, the electoral and political aspects of this history cannot be properly understood without situating them in the larger arc of struggle in which workers were engaged. Indeed, just four years after seizing city hall, the Party suffered what, at first, appeared to be a major setback in the 1931 city elections. Competing against a unified Democratic-Republican fusion front, the Socialists narrowly lost their dominance in City

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<sup>22</sup> James N. Gregory and Rebecca Flores, “Socialist Party Votes by County and State,” Mapping American Social Movements Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Retrieved November 24, 2019) [https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP\\_map-votes.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP_map-votes.shtml) and Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 327.

Hall. Instead of dampening the Party's spirit, though, the events pushed Local Berks to redouble its efforts to organize the city and remake its political system.

Unified with the local labor movement, the early-1930s Reading SP not only fomented strikes and work actions, it also supported and even midwived new unions and social movement organizations. Most prominently, the Socialist-led hosiery union, the American Federation of Full-Fashioned Hosiery Workers, staged a series of mass strikes in the country's hosiery heartland. Starting in 1931 and accelerating into 1933, their early strike wave put the New Deal's first major labor provision—section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act—to the test. Reading's radical hosiery workers won, unleashing the “Reading Formula” that guided the first phase of federal protections for organized workers.<sup>23</sup> But the mills were not the only site of Socialist activity. On the ground, Socialists such as George Rhodes, a labor leader and newspaper editor, helped lead the effort to form new unions, such as a 500-member pretzel workers union. Among the city's lowest paid mass production workers, few international unions showed much interest in organizing these workers. But the militancy of the rank-and-file combined with Socialist leaders' efforts turned a bottom-up surge into a concerted process of union formation.<sup>24</sup> The party also founded the Taxpayers' Protective League, a left-wing organization of the unemployed, the poor, the homeless, and their allies, which staged an endless barrage of protests, relief office occupations, and rallies, always advocating an anti-capitalist response to the Depression. Part of the national surge in unemployed organizing, the TPL was a major force on-the-ground that forged the local realignment around the Socialist Party.

In short, from 1927 onward, the Party formed the central locus of mass, disruptive labor and political organizing. It accelerated the development of the New Deal at a national scale and

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<sup>23</sup> Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 174.

<sup>24</sup> Citation of pretzel strikes->union formation

remade the social and political terrain of the city—even the region. Despite losing control over city government in 1931, Socialists continued to win statehouse seats, school board positions, and numerous aldermanic positions. With their continued focus on both electoral and social struggle, by 1935, Reading’s radicals were well-poised to shock the political system.

Unlike in many cities, Socialists in Reading did not simply organize protest movements; they also created a full-fledged politics around the intertwined themes of crisis and relief. In doing so, they articulated a fierce critique of capitalism and the New Deal. They also proposed a role for formal Socialist politics as the answer to what ailed the city and the country. In speeches, newspaper articles, radio addresses, and campaign literature, Local Berks’ leaders offered anyone who would pay attention an extended critique of the economic and relief state failures as part of a broader argument against capitalism. One 1934 radio address—part of Local Berks’ weekly Socialist political education program—from Hoopes is typical. After listing a litany of rapidly deteriorating housing—conditions faced by the residents of Reading’s “Depressionville” and “Hoovertown,” shantytowns and decrying the N.R.A. and other Roosevelt policies as failures, Hoopes hammered home the Local Berks refrain:

The present capitalist economic system has failed so far as the vast majority of the workers in city and country are concerned. By its very nature it cannot succeed...The only solution to the problem is to end the profit system, give workers the full product of their toil and then they will be able to buy back what they make and it won’t be necessary for millions to be unemployed and live on charity.”<sup>25</sup>

Socialists, he maintained could fight in the here-and-now for pro-worker, anti-capitalist relief even as they built a political alternative to the weak reforms offered by the old parties, a project he and his comrade, Lilith Wilson, undertook relatively successfully in Harrisburg for cash

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<sup>25</sup> Even a cursory review of the transcripts of speeches housed in the Hoopes archive shows just how widespread and consistent this theme was in LB’s 1934-35 campaigning. Hoopes, Darlington. Radio Transcript, July 29, 1934. Box 6, Folder 17. Darlington Hoopes Papers.

payments to the poor, unemployed, and elderly, while also critiquing the organization of relief and naming the underlying structures of crisis.<sup>26</sup>

But the Socialist vision was not limited simply to critique or savvy legislative maneuvering. Rather, throughout 1934 and 1935, the Party mingled political education, voter registration, and mass protest to target and destabilize the local arm of the state relief system and leverage the chaos into a successful claim on power. In 1934, they led a campaign of street-level organizing to identify and register non-voters. Socialists also expanded political education by incorporating it into regular business meetings, increasing the number of public lectures, and growing the size of the Labor College.<sup>1</sup> Events drew hundreds on weekday evenings. They touched on a wide range of subjects, including running union meetings, principles of socialism, parliamentary procedure, “dramatics,” public speaking/debate, and contemporary politics. At the end of summer, Local Berks turned their energies towards campaigning. Through branch-organized block worker teams, the Party fanned out across Reading and registered thousands of socialist-affiliated voters—as well as, the *Labor-Advocate* noted, workers who might register on the old party lines but support the socialist ticket.<sup>27</sup> As a result of these efforts, the number of registered socialist voters grew seventy-five percent from 3,877 to 6,774.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> At various points, Hoopes and, to a lesser degree, Wilson were savvy legislative actors who were able to force pivotal votes on unemployment insurance and other early relief programs. Often, these did not get through the Senate, even though many New Deal Democrats felt obliged to vote for their measures in the House.

<sup>27</sup> Registered socialists never constituted more than about 15% of all registered voters in the city. They were, however, successful at pulling support from registered democrats and republicans. Local Berks General Meeting Minutes, Oct. 4, 1934. Microfilm, Roll 18, Darlington Hoopes Papers.; “Large Registration,” *Reading Labor Advocate*, Sep. 28, 1934, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> “Table XIX: Registered Voters, By Party, Reading, Penna., 1914-1941,” in Henry G. Stetler, *The Socialist Movement in Reading, Pennsylvania, 1896-1936: A Study in Social Change*. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Porcupine Press, 1974).

In 1935, when city government was up for election, they put their newfound strength to the test. Throughout that year, the stronger-than-ever Socialist organization ramped up public pressure on the relief state and the old parties. That spring they launched an investigation into the deficiencies of the county relief board and began to publicly target it on behalf of aggrieved petitioners. In mid- and late-summer they launched a series of mass demonstrations. For example, on August 7, 1,000 marchers descended on the old city hall building where county and state employees coordinated relief work. Brought together by a coalition of the unemployed and relief project workers, the crowd demanded—and won concessions for—easier and faster access to relief funds, expanded appeal rights, and restoration of vouchers for rent and food. When former Socialist mayor and candidate for the office, J. Henry Stump, took the stage at the pre-demonstration rally, he was greeted by raucous cheers. Two weeks later, thousands gathered downtown to protest W.P.A. wage levels and demand that all relief workers be paid at the very least the prevailing wage.<sup>29</sup> That summer and fall, Socialist-aligned unemployed groups hosted numerous mass protests outside relief offices, demanding immediate payment to yet-unpaid relief workers on county and state jobs.<sup>30</sup> In late September, WPA workers began a series of strikes, intensifying agitation against low wages and continuing to critique the New Deal.<sup>31</sup> They energized the city and shaped an ever-more agitated climate, ready for action against the inequities of capitalism and patchwork state relief programs. In the closing weeks of the campaign, Local Berks framed the election struggle as one against both a failed city administration *and* a failed New Deal—both of which they accused of being stooges of capital.

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<sup>29</sup> “Strikes and Protests Agitate Reading,” *Labor Advocate*, Aug. 9, 1935; “Protest in City Park Voices Stand Against ‘New Deal’ Labor Code,” *Labor Advocate*, Aug. 29, 1935.

<sup>30</sup> “Demonstrations Last Saturday To Be Followed By Protest Against Local Relief Policy,” *Labor Advocate*, Aug. 2, 1935.; “Demonstrat’n Saturday for Ample Relief,” *Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1935.

<sup>31</sup> “Strike Call Halts Jobs,” *Labor Advocate*, Sept. 20, 1935.; “Labor Unites In Battle On WPA Slavery,” *Ibid.*, Sept. 27, 1935.

While Local Berks avoided personal attacks against Roosevelt, their messaging viciously critiqued work relief and welfare programs, echoing the TPL and relief workers union.

The upsurge in worker organizing, socialist street campaigning, and anti-capitalist, anti-New Deal messaging helped bring the socialists back to power in Reading. Registration climbed to record-breaking heights.<sup>32</sup> The old parties were unprepared for the Socialists' campaigning.<sup>33</sup> The same day Bridgeport re-elected a Socialist mayor, Local Berks retook city hall thanks to widespread anger at the continuing Depression, the inadequacy of existing New Deal programs for addressing the thousands of unemployed in the city, and belief in Socialists' capacity to do something constructive about unemployment and abusive employers.<sup>34</sup>

A month after Local Berks' historic victory, Pennsylvania's governor, George Earle, griped to his fellow State Emergency Relief Board (SERB) members that they had to keep down taxes while dispensing relief for the poor and elderly.<sup>35</sup> The patrician Democrat, first elected just eleven months earlier, was nervous not because of anti-tax sentiments from the Right; rather, Earle and his party had learned to their dismay in that November's election that the Socialists were coming for them from their left.<sup>36</sup> That same month, the head of the Works Progress

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<sup>32</sup> "The 44,247 Registration," *Labor Advocate*, Sept. 6, 1935. The *Advocate* suggested that this practice was due in part to workers' fears that anti-socialist employers would discriminate against socialist-registered employees.

<sup>33</sup> "Record Registration on First Day Shows Voters Alert in 'Socialist Year'" *Labor Advocate*, Aug. 30, 1935.

<sup>34</sup> "Campaign Meetings" *Labor Advocate*, Oct. 4, 1935.

<sup>35</sup> "Socialists Sweep Reading," *Ibid.*, Nov. 8, 1935.

<sup>36</sup> George Earle was a wealthy Philadelphian who came from a historically Republican family and converted to the Democratic Party in 1932. He served as U.S. minister to Austria in 1933-34 before winning the 1934 race for Governor. See James T. Patterson, *The New Deal and States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 149. In 1937, Earle was the most popular Democrat other than the President and Vice President in the country. "George H. Earle III Historical Marker," *Explore PA History* (accessed December 10, 2019), <http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-331>.

<sup>36</sup> Throughout the Depression and amidst the unfolding of the new relief programs, Reading's socialists argued against taxes on the working classes and for taxes on the rich—as well as for largescale industrial expropriation. For the governor's quote, see: "Meeting Minutes," December 18, 1935. Folder SERB Minutes Jan. 8, 1935-Oct. 21, 1936, Box 6A 23.359, RG 23 State Emergency Relief Board Records, Pennsylvania State Archives [hereafter RG

Administration (WPA) in Pennsylvania, a federal appointee overseeing a notorious patronage machine, was himself in a tizzy over the Socialists. In a fiery speech lashing out at political enemies, he attacked the looming threat not just of Republicans and but also of Socialists.<sup>37</sup> The heads of the two main relief agencies, the state and federal ones, registered serious alarm. At the very center of Depression-era uprisings, in the state with more strikes than any other in 1934 and 1935, the Socialist Party (SP) was making impressive inroads, threatening to bring their labor and social movement strength from the factories and the streets into the halls of power.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of a chaotic relief system, however, Reading's newly-empowered Socialists found their route to long-term success more complicated than winning the election or disrupting the industrial system. SERB was consistently underfunded and served an easy target for Socialist critique. By 1936, it was also *en route* to being dismantled and turned into a permanent Department of Public Assistance. In its place, federal programs became increasingly important. And the main such agency, the Pennsylvania WPA, operated as much as a political machine as it did relief agency.<sup>39</sup> Despite its rapid growth and impressive performance, the

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23, PSA]. The specific context for his statement was a debate over the proper funding mechanism for county-level poor board services to the disabled and elderly.

<sup>37</sup> The entirety of the speech is available in "Meeting Minutes," December 19, 1935, Folder SERB Minutes Jan. 8, 1935-Oct. 21, 1936, Box 6A 23.359, RG 23, PSA. The W.P.A. in Pennsylvania was notorious for operating as a Democratic Party patronage machine. For more information, see Priscilla Ferguson Clement, "The Works Progress Administration in Pennsylvania: 1935-1940," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 25 No. 2 (Apr. 1971), 244-260.

<sup>38</sup> In 1934 and 1935, more workers in Pennsylvania than in any other state were involved in work stoppages, which the Bureau of Labor Statistics synthesized in regular studies of strike activity. For statistics on 1935, see Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* Vol. 42, No. 1, 1299-1312. On 1934, see Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Analysis of Strikes and Lockouts in 1934 and Analysis for September 1935," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> The historical literature on the New Deal has long recognized the significant changes it made to the structure of government power in the U.S., finding that in general the federal government, with state governments as partners, centralized a significant amount of authority, thereby minimizing the power of local governments that had previously been relatively independent, especially in terms of relief. Such independence did not entail uniformly good or emancipatory relief systems, of course, a fact that Argersinger's book makes clear by following carefully the efforts of Socialists and others to use the federal government's new power to weaken the grip of reactionary local elites on local systems of power in *Toward a New Deal*. On changes in federalism more generally, see James T. Patterson, *New Deal and States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), John Joseph Wallis, "The Birth of the Old Federalism: Financing the New Deal," *The Journal of Economic History* 44,

Party, which structured its electoral campaign around the failures of capitalism and the inadequacy of the New Deal to provide necessary relief, was rapidly coming undone.

In the face of these changes to the relief system, the Socialists struggled. They could not control federal funds and relief distribution. Though the unemployed movement and unions continued to march together, the realities of the relief state and the limits of municipal power weighed heavily on Socialist leaders.<sup>40</sup> They simply had no direct power over the provision of relief. The Democrats, ascendant nationally, did. In late 1935 and early 1936, poor residents of Reading flooded Socialist leaders' mail, begging for support.<sup>41</sup> Hoopes' papers, the main archival source on the period, are filled with such supplications. A number reference a shared political philosophy—some even noted their lack of shared party affiliation but nonetheless praised Hoopes. "While I am not of your party," wrote an F.F. Boas in August, 1936, "I wish you success in the coming election. From my reading and what some of my friends tell me you have been one of the best members of the house."<sup>42</sup> All reflect a sense that the socialists understood their plight, fought to change things, and had the ability to succeed. They would be disappointed, however, by the movement's swift unraveling.

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No. 1 (1984), 139-159 and "The Political Economy of New Deal Fiscal Federalism," *Economic Inquiry* 29, No. 3 (July, 1991), 510-524 for classic analyses. Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the states: the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American political economy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989). advances important claims about centralization and its corrosive effects on preexisting social democratic movements. A growing literature on political history emphasizes the central importance of federalism to twentieth-century changes in U.S. politics. Thomas Sugrue jumpstarted this focus with his essay, "All Politics Is Local: The Persistence of Localism in 20th Century America," in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, Jacobs, Novak and Zelizer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). A trio of historians, Karen Tani, Brent Cebul, and Mason Williams have taken on the task of theorizing the multilayered state through the idea of "intergovernmentality," which holds that change is multidirectional in the divided state structure of the U.S. They urge historians to turn towards the subnational as fields of significant historical action. Brent Cebul, Karen Tani, and Mason B. Williams, "Clio and the Compound Republic," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 47, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 235–59, Each of these authors has published or will publish monographs on this theme. This paper attempts to embrace their call and think critically about the relationship between national and local change, a relationship that took place at the points of tension in a shifting system of intergovernmentality.

<sup>40</sup> "Thousands March and Cheer to Re-affirm Satisfaction With Results of Recent Elections" *Ibid.*, Nov. 22, 1935.

<sup>41</sup> Patsy S. Quillac (spelling unclear) letter to Darlington Hoopes, 1936, Microfilm, Roll 13, DHP.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Boas to Hoopes, Aug. 12, 1936, Microfilm, Roll 13, DHP.

Even before they retook their seats in the city council chambers, Reading's leaders were at the center of intraorganizational conflict in 1935 and 1936. This conflict, which was overlaid with ideological divisions that originated in debates within the national party—old vs. new, advocates for popular front organizing vs. staunchly anti-communist socialists—was also extremely local. In a city still torn by widespread unemployment and energized by labor radicalism in the textile mills, many poor people moved toward the party in an effort to secure their futures. Just after the 1935 landslide, party leaders passed significant new restrictions on pathways to leadership within the local—as well as pathways to membership for the coming flood of newly-activated socialists.<sup>43</sup> In the first Local Berks meeting after their 1936 inauguration, the party secretary recorded that 500 people attended the gathering—leading Local Berks to adopt strict time limits for speaking.<sup>44</sup> The working people of the city looked toward the Socialist administration and the party struggled to discuss the widespread demand for jobs, complaints of the administration failing to adequately expand relief, and the socialists' ultimate inability to address the underlying causes of distress—a crisis that had itself propelled them into office and now robbed them of their success. Within a year of their ascent into office, the entrenched leadership of Local Berks would purge the organization of dissenters, excising the young and the newly-activated while seeking to consolidate the existing base of support.

Internal discord was exacerbated by the growing ability of the local Democratic Party to attract working-class support. The federal WPA program, though bogged down by corruption and uneven in their application, improved Roosevelt's image among the Socialist voting base. By 1937, the divided local movement was further weakened to the point of having to fight a hyper-localized bogeyman of the Democratic Party—one that had little to do with FDR or

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<sup>43</sup> Local Berks General Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1935. Microfilm, Roll 18, Darlington Hoopes Papers,

<sup>44</sup> Local Berks General Meeting Minutes, February 6, 1936. Ibid.

differences in questions of ideology or social structure.<sup>45</sup> Despite still holding control over city government, the Socialists were uncomfortably removed from the glow of FDR and Governor Earle and forced to defend their record in the language of good, efficient government. No longer able to credibly speak on matters of poverty and relief, their position was crumbling. That year, the Socialist campaign began to shed previous radical overtones in favor of a platform structured primarily around the creation of a public electric utility. Simultaneously, local Democrats distanced themselves from previous fusionist tendencies and remade their own image around the rhetoric of stability and working-class solidarity led by the patrician figures in in both the White House and Harrisburg.

In the early- to mid-1930s, Reading's Socialists and the emerging relief state not only antagonized one another, they operated in a kind of reciprocal relationship as well. This competition did indeed produce a winner—the Democratic-run welfare state and dominant political coalition—but only after a multi-year struggle waged on the terrain of relief. Thus, by 1937 the movement was effectively neutralized in Reading. While the SP held city hall for the duration of their term, through 1939, and even retook the mayoralty in the 1940s, Local Berks never regained the momentum it lost when the party split and the masses of unemployed Readingites found out that the Socialists could do little more than distribute a relatively paltry number of city jobs. In the end, the city proved incapable as a political vehicle of doing much of anything about the concerns that made the Socialist movement viable to begin with. Thus, members and sympathizers who happily registered and voted Socialist left the fold, even if they

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<sup>45</sup> “Roosevelt Not the Issue,” in *The Pioneer*, Oct. 31, 1937. Microfilm, Roll 17, DHP. It is worth noting that since the early years of the New Deal, the *Labor Advocate* struck a complicated posture towards Roosevelt. Attacks on the president were a mixed bag of full-throated critique – sometimes equating the president and Hitler in their defense of private capital – and a more circumspect reflections that emphasized the critique was of methods and not the man.

never abandoned the ideological position and political analysis of the radicals. would later help usher in the end of Socialist power in the Reading.

The story of Reading's Socialists helps round out the historiography of the U.S. Left by identifying and explicating a vital branch of the Socialist movement well into the 1930s even as it sheds lights on that movement's limits and the very shape of New Deal liberalism. The city, though never the sole target of Socialists' long-term aspirations, was a uniquely-winnable political space in which such an ambitious, well-organized, and wide-reaching organization made a series of successful gambits. It also represented a truly vibrant Socialist Party communities, whose very existence undermines the fatalistic, New York-centric accounts that prioritize the organization's destruction. Nonetheless, as the federal system was remade under the New Deal, with massive shifts of power and influence from the local to the state and federal levels, epitomized in the de-localization of relief, the Reading Socialist campaign structured around the twinned themes of crisis and relief was sharply limited. In the end, the far less ambitious New Deal programs and visions of relief and social order became the only—if deeply unsatisfying—alternative for the radical workers who, for so long, had dreamed of a much different world.