



# West Virginia Historical Society

Volume XXIV, No.2, FALL 2010

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**The Socialist Party in Progressive Era  
Ohio County, West Virginia  
by: Christopher Price**

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West Virginia has a long history with organized labor. While the United Mine Workers of America is probably the union that first comes to mind in relation to West Virginia, the United Auto Workers (UAW) also had at least one very strong tie to the state. In 1998 *Time* magazine gave a list of the most influential people of the twentieth century. Wheeling native Walter P. Reuther was noted in this list of one hundred. Reuther served as president of the UAW and the Congress of Industrial Organizations and “is credited with achieving much for his workers: comprehensive health care programs, tuition refund programs, life insurance, profit sharing, severance pay, pre-paid legal service plans, bereavement pay, jury duty pay, improvements in vacations, holidays and rest time.”<sup>1</sup> Before being elected president of the UAW in 1946, Reuther had

already seen quite a bit of action as a union organizer. He had been fired from Wheeling Steel Corp. for organizing against working on Sunday. His union activity also led to his termination from Ford Motor Company in 1933. He traveled extensively with his brothers and was for a time involved with the “anti-Hitler underground” in Germany. Upon his return to the United States after his world travels, he was thrust into the national consciousness as a result of his part in the Battle of the Overpass at the Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan. Reuther and some associates planned to pass out organizing literature at the Ford plant on May 26, 1937. The union men were severely beaten by company police, and Reuther “arrived on the scene as a scuffler with blood on his face.” This was not the enduring image, however, as “he would evolve into one of labor’s most dynamic and innovative leaders, as well as a humanitarian whose impact ranged well beyond his field.”<sup>2</sup>

Walter P. Reuther was not the first member of his family to be involved in the labor scene. His father, Valentine Reuther, was involved in the labor movement as a teamster for the Schmulbach Brewing Co. in Wheeling and as president of the Ohio Valley Trades and Labor Assembly. Val Reuther discussed the role of unions with his family and “instilled values within his children to ‘do whatever turns you on to help society.’”<sup>3</sup>

During the Progressive Era, the elder Reuther was also involved in the Wheeling



Walter Reuther (center) with father, Valentine, mother Ana and brothers Roy and Victor. (Photo courtesy of West Virginia State Archives.)

branch of the Socialist Party of America. Ohio County was one of the leading hotbeds of socialist activity in West Virginia during the early twentieth century.

The first two decades of the twentieth century are generally referred to as the Progressive Era in United States history. Some of the more notable figures from this period are Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, and Woodrow Wilson. Four constitutional amendments, the sixteenth through the nineteenth, are associated with this era. The progressive amendments gave Congress the power to tax incomes, provided for the direct election of Senators, prohibited the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors,” and provided women with the right to vote.<sup>4</sup>

Many new technologies and ideas

gained momentum during this period of time. Socialism was an ideology that grew in influence during the Progressive Era. Even some people who are considered very mainstream had socialist leanings. One prominent example was William Jennings Bryan. Bryan is today a well-known hero to Christians, at least partially due to his defense of Christianity against Darwinism in the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial. He was also known as the Great Commoner because of his fight for the common man against the banking and business establishment of the day. At least some socialist ideas were considered by Bryan. In a 1906 speech in New York, the great orator gave a speech that advocated the nationalizing of the railroad industry, arguing that the rails “must ultimately become public property and be managed by public officials in the interest of the whole community.”<sup>5</sup> While Bryan would not be considered the prototypical socialist, there were nonetheless radical socialists present in the United States.

An in-depth study of the Socialist Party in West Virginia was done in the early 1970s by Frederick A. Barkey. He argued that Ohio County, and particularly Wheeling, had “the earliest and most impressive Socialist organization in West Virginia.” Wheeling was the first truly industrial city in the state, so it was logical that the labor movement would be strong there.<sup>6</sup> The Wheeling Branch of the Socialist Party of America was active during the Progressive Era and some interesting information regarding their movement can be observed by looking into some of the surviving account books, membership lists, and meeting minutes.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the relative strength of the socialist movement in Ohio County is apparent through a study of national, statewide, and local election results.

The Wheeling socialists were not a large group numerically. A membership list

on the first few pages of a cash account and membership book that spanned the years 1912 to 1918 shows one hundred thirty-seven names. Most of the names listed appear to be of Northern European (i.e. British or German) origin. This is very similar to the conclusion that Barkey came to in studying the makeup of the Socialists in West Virginia, although his demographic study focused on interviews in Kanawha and Fayette counties in Southern West Virginia, rather than the Wheeling area. Some of the surnames listed in the Wheeling register, in addition to Reuther, were Hilton, Beltz, Kramer, Boyd, Tracy, and McDermott.<sup>8</sup> Although this ethnic breakdown would not be expected based upon the stereotype that socialist radicals generally came from the new immigrant stock of Southern and Eastern Europe, it is in accordance with the ethnic breakdown of West Virginia around the turn of the twentieth century. Kenneth R. Bailey writes, "West Virginia's population at the end of the Civil War, with the exception of a small number of blacks, was almost exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant." Immigration occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bailey also includes a table in his work on immigration that shows that many of the new immigrants (i.e. Italians and Hungarians) in 1910 were employed in the coal mining industry. Most of these miners would have been employed in Southern or North Central West Virginia, not in the Wheeling area.<sup>9</sup>

In order to maintain active membership, dues of \$0.25 per month were assessed, although it is apparent from an overview of the account books that members were often in arrears.<sup>10</sup> The payment of dues did not bring in a great deal of revenue to the socialist organization. In addition to monthly dues, "collections" were taken up at each meeting. These voluntary contributions were generally small, as well. For example, special collections at the meetings of the Fifth and

Sixth Wards Branch of the Wheeling Socialist Party taken up between May and December 1911 came to \$0.30, \$0.50, \$0.51, and \$0.50.<sup>11</sup> One cash account book for the Wheeling Socialists at one point showed a balance of cash on hand of \$1.78.<sup>12</sup>

With little cash coming in, there was little to spend. Where the money went gives a good idea as to the things that the small group of socialists believed important. In addition to the normal rent and utility payments, some of the finances went toward socialist literature and political campaigns. In May 1909, \$3.00 was expended to pay for six two-month subscription cards for the *Chicago Daily Socialist*.<sup>13</sup> At a March 21, 1911 meeting, a motion was "made by Comrade Paul Kotchka to buy literature for free distribution and that each member shall pay 25 cents additional to his monthly dues for same literature." The motion carried. At the same meeting, Kotchka made another motion "to get a map and divide each ward into sections and give each member a certain amount of pamphlets to be distributed among the working peoples." This motion also carried.<sup>14</sup> In December 1911, Kotchka "suggested that Ohio County should have a monthly Bulletin."<sup>15</sup> In the July 25, 1911 meeting, there was a motion to accept the

Proposition of the National Socialist Lyceum Bureau as outlined in the official Bulletin of the Socialist Party for a lecture course...by paying for \$300.00 worth of subscriptions for the entire course without further charge given with every \$1.00 subscription card. The cards to be good of the face value for any socialist papers or book.<sup>16</sup>

From these examples, the importance of socialist literature and the need to recruit new members for the cause is evident. An undated inventory of literature lists a couple

of the titles that the socialists had on hand. The inventory showed that there were ninety-four copies of “Shall Socialism Be Overcome” and forty-five copies of “Socialism and its Message to the Church” on hand.<sup>17</sup> These somewhat religious overtones appear to be quite common in socialist literature. Barkey points out that “West Virginia Socialist platform and publications went to great length to show that there was no basic conflict between socialism and Christianity. Jesus Christ was often portrayed as the first socialist...It was the monied interests of that day who had been behind His crucifixion.”<sup>18</sup>

Although its publication came slightly after the Progressive Era, a booklet titled *A Socialist Educational Program with a Topical Analysis of Henderson’s “The Case for Socialism”* can shed some light on socialist beliefs and shows an almost religious zeal for attracting converts to the socialist doctrine. Much of the “doctrine” that *A Socialist Education Program* encouraged would be similar to that which the Wheeling Socialist Party adhered—the public ownership of property and the means of production. This pamphlet recommended that each local group “Keep an abundant supply of Socialist literature in your Local’s library.”<sup>19</sup> The purpose for this literature was education. One of the hopes that the booklet’s author, Robert T. Kerlin, espoused was the foundation of “A Socialist Junior School” because “the hope of a new social order” was dependent upon “the very young.”<sup>20</sup> The intent was that the “children of Socialists may be grounded in the faith of their parents and indoctrinated with the ideas, the aims, and the ideals of Socialism...” Kerlin argued that the junior school “might be, and probably might best be, a Sunday School.” These religious overtones continued as the discussion of a socialist junior school drew to a close: “It is hoped that the school will become so interesting that other than Socialist children in the community will be

drawn into it. We must never forget that we are missionaries all the time. We have a heathen world to conquer.”<sup>21</sup> Faith, indoctrination, Sunday School, missionaries, and heathen are all words that are related to religious endeavors. It appears as though Kerlin viewed the task of the Socialists in pseudo-religious terms.

The Wheeling Socialist Party was also somewhat similar to religious organizations in bringing up the sins of members for discipline. In the minutes from an October 11, 1910 meeting, a certain Abe Rapport was chastised “for conduct unbecoming a Socialist. One specific charge is that during the Fred Warren Meeting Sunday October 9 he would not stop selling literature of his own during the meeting when asked to do so by several of the Committee.” The complaint continued, “Another charge the said Abe Rapport is detrimental to the interest of the socialist meetings by continually bringing up personalities and agitations in the meetings.”<sup>22</sup>

A look at the account book of the Wheeling Socialist Party shows that many of the radical ideology’s adherents were young. With many of the names listed in the account book, the age and occupation of the member was also listed.<sup>23</sup> The ages listed show that at least one member had reached the age of seventy by the 1910s, when the list was compiled. A few other men had reached their fifties. Most of the ages listed, however, were younger than forty years of age, with a couple of men having not even reached their twentieth birthday. The occupations of these men were much as Barkey pointed out in his study—semi-skilled. The most common occupations listed were machinists and stogie makers/tobacco workers, with much smaller numbers of steel workers, bottlers, tailors, potters, and others included.<sup>24</sup>

The movement in Wheeling seemed

to reach a high point around 1912. That this is the case can be deduced from a couple of facts. The first would be an increase in membership. The second piece of evidence comes from election returns. The membership roll of the 4<sup>th</sup> Ward in Wheeling shows a sizable increase in just one year's time. The number of dues paying members listed in 1911 was a mere sixteen. In 1912, the number of dues paying members was up to fifty-three. Although this does not necessarily show that the entire party grew at such a rate, election results would tend to indicate that socialism became much more prevalent in Ohio County around 1912.<sup>25</sup>

To show that 1912 was a high water mark for socialist electoral results, the elections of 1908 through 1920 will be discussed. In 1908, the Socialist candidate for president was Eugene V. Debs. Debs polled 441 votes in Ohio County, which was 3.06 percent of the county's vote. This showing compared with 1.43 percent support for Debs statewide. In 1912, Debs was again the socialist candidate for president. On a statewide basis, Debs received 5.69 percent of the vote. In Ohio County, he received 11.3 percent of the vote, with an aggregate total of 1,579 votes.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps more telling is the fact that all Socialist candidates for statewide office received nearly the same number of votes from Ohio County that Debs did. The number of votes for socialist candidates ranged from a low of 1,520 to a high of 1,626, which would indicate that many Socialists voted a straight ticket, and not just for the man at the top of the ticket.<sup>27</sup> As a side note to this paper, the 1912 presidential election was not just interesting for the relative success that Debs achieved. It was during this election that Theodore Roosevelt threw his "hat into the ring" against his hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft. Roosevelt and Taft split the Republican vote, and Woodrow Wilson carried the election in West Virginia and the nation.

By the time that the 1914 election rolled around, those on the socialist slate from Ohio County could not even reach 700 votes. More overall votes were cast in the off-year election, but the best showing by a Socialist in Ohio County was by Albert Bauer, a candidate for State Senate from the First District. Bauer polled 679 total votes, or 4.51 percent of the votes cast in Ohio County for State Senate.<sup>28</sup>

By the 1916 and 1920 elections, the Socialist Party in Ohio County received only a fraction of the support that it had garnered in 1912. Debs sat out the 1916 election, and the Socialist candidate for president, Allan L. Benson, received only 509 votes (3.65 percent) of the votes cast in Ohio County. In 1920 Debs again appeared at the top of the ticket and was able to receive 746 votes (2.78 percent) of the vote in Ohio County. The showing for Debs in Ohio County was higher than that which he received on a statewide basis. Debs received 5,618 votes throughout West Virginia, which was just over 1.1 percent of the vote. What is perhaps more telling about the 1920 election in terms of the Ohio County vote is the support that other candidates on the Socialist ticket received. The Socialist candidate for governor, M. S. Holt, was only able to earn 259 votes in Ohio County, and no other socialist candidate received as many as 500 votes. The results from 1920 show that far fewer of those who had Socialist leanings voted a straight ticket than had done so in previous elections. The electoral results from 1908 to 1920 show that 1912 was a high point from an electoral standpoint for the Socialist Party in Ohio County.<sup>29</sup>

The Progressive Era in United States history was a high point for the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party in West Virginia was also at its height during the same period. One of the main hotbeds of socialist activity



in West Virginia was Ohio County. Some of the records that have survived from the Wheeling Branch of the Socialist Party give insight as to the makeup and viewpoints of the organization. The Wheeling Socialist Party was never very large numerically, nor was it terribly well-financed. However, its political clout exceeded its numerical strength during the Progressive Era, as is evidenced from election results. One of the main emphases of the socialists in Wheeling was spreading the message of socialism. Therefore, they were concerned with providing literature for the working people of the area in the hope that they could draw more numerical strength from the ranks of those disaffected with capitalism. In their efforts to gain converts to the cause, they used language that had strong religious overtones. Although the socialist movement in West Virginia did not ultimately achieve their aims, their story helps to round out an understanding of the labor movement in Progressive Era West Virginia.

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<sup>1</sup> "Local Native Makes List," *Wheeling Sunday News-Register*, December 6, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. A short account of the Battle of the Overpass that includes photographs of Walter P. Reuther is accessible at <http://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/fmc/battle.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Blum, "Statue Honors Family," *Wheeling Sunday News-Register*, October 8, 2006; Michelle Blum, "Reuthers Take a Trip Down Memory Lane," *Wheeling News-Register*, October 12, 2006; "Local Native Makes List," *Wheeling Sunday News-Register*, December 6, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> The Constitution of the United States: Amendments 11-27  
[http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution\\_amendments\\_11-27.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_amendments_11-27.html). Accessed July 8, 2009.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 145-148

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Allan Barkey, "The Socialist Party in West Virginia: A Study in Working Class Radicalism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1971), 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> These resources are available in the Wheeling Socialist Party Collection, Ms2007-006, at the West Virginia State Archives in Charleston, West Virginia (hereafter designated in the notes as Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives). The notes from the Wheeling Socialist Collection will refer to the specific folders in the collection.

<sup>8</sup> Cash Account and Membership Book (1912-1918) folder, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives. The number of names referred to includes only those that were not crossed out. The list also has several names crossed out. It appears that the names that were not crossed out were active members. Similar names can be found, with some overlap, in most of the folders in the Wheeling Socialist Party Collection. Barkey, 83-89.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth R. Bailey, "Strange Tongues: West Virginia and Immigration to 1920" in Ken Fones-Wolf and Ronald L. Lewis, eds. *Transnational West Virginia: Ethnic Communities and Economic Change, 1840-1920* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2002), 243-258.

<sup>10</sup> The amount of monthly dues is evident from every cash account book in the Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Receipts and Expenses Book, 1911-1912, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Ward Branch, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Cash Account and Membership Book, 1912-1918, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Account Book, 1904-1910, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Minute Book, 1910-1911, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives. This minute book kept records for the Central Committee of the Wheeling Socialists.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Cash Account Book, 1910, 1911, 1918, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Barkey, 74-76.

<sup>19</sup> Robert T. Kerlin, *A Socialist Education Program with a Topical Analysis of Henderson's "The Case for Socialism"* (Keyser, WV, n.d.), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Kerlin, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Kerlin, 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> Minute Book, 1910-1911, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives.

<sup>23</sup> Cash Account and Membership Book, 1912-1918, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives. Not all of the names listed as members included ages and occupations. Many do not. However, the ages that are listed tend to be fairly young. The majority of those listed were under forty years of age.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Membership and Cash Account, 1910-1912, Wheeling Socialist Collection, WV Archives. Barkey analyzed election results from the Progressive Era and gave some analysis in his previously referenced dissertation.

<sup>26</sup> John T. Harris, Ed. *West Virginia Legislative Hand Book and Manual and Official Register* (Charleston, WV: The Tribune Printing Co., 1916), 712-750.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> John T. Harris, Ed. *West Virginia Legislative Hand Book and Manual and Official Register* (Charleston, WV: The Tribune Printing Co., 1917), 681-715; John T. Harris, Ed. *West Virginia Legislative Hand Book and Manual and Official Register* (Charleston, WV: The Tribune Printing Co., 1921), 360-377.

### ARCHIVES AND HISTORY SECOND ANNUAL SHOWCASE

Those who attended last year's Showcase of West Virginia documents and artifacts at the State Archives won't want to miss the second Showcase scheduled for December 6, 2010 at 7:00 p.m. An expanded demonstration of photographs, rare books, Civil War medals, video clips, slideshows, Veterans Memorial biographies and much more is planned. A popular part of last year's program, the behind the scenes tour, will be

repeated. As with all programs at the Archives, the Showcase is free and open to the public. For more details, visit the website at [www.wvculture.org/history](http://www.wvculture.org/history).

### STATE ARCHIVES LECTURES AND WORKSHOPS

Last year, the staff at Archives and History developed a series of lectures and workshops of a variety of topics. The series was well received and has been continued for 2010-2011. Programs announced to date are:

September 7, 2010: Charleston, Then and Now with Dr. Billy Joe Peyton

October 5, 2010: Yiayia's Bundle, A Greek Experience in West Virginia with Pam Makricosta

November 9, 2010: Researching Military History, with Terry Lowry

December 7, 2010: Digging into the Draper Collection, Researching the Settlement of Western Virginia, with Jaime Simmons

### MARY E. JOHNSON ASSUMES EDITORSHIP OF WVHS MAGAZINE

Mary E. Johnson, historian at the West Virginia Department of Archives and History since 2000, has assumed the post of editor of this magazine. Ms. Johnson is a Charleston native who has a master's degree in public history. She was the assistant editor of *West Virginia History* before responsibility for that magazine was moved from Archives and History to West Virginia University. She brings a wealth of knowledge, ability and experience to the post. She replaces Kenneth R. Bailey who is retiring from the position he has held since 1995.



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