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1939—PART II

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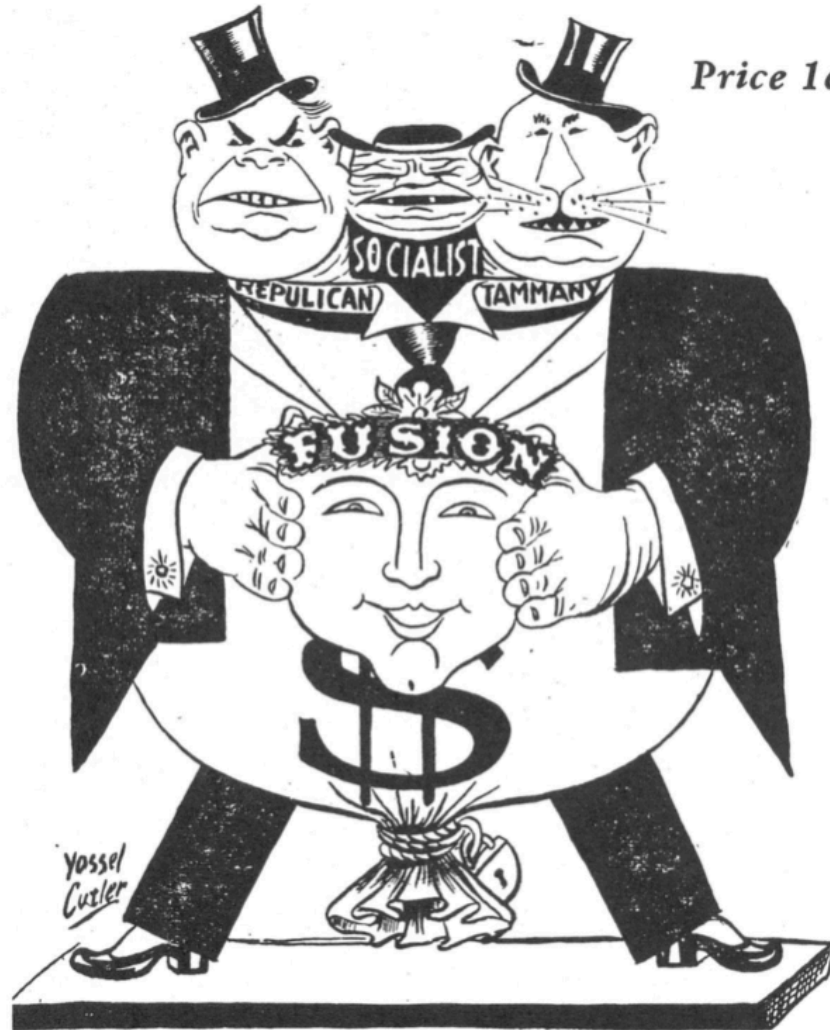
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## TRIUMPH AND DISASTER: THE READING SOCIALISTS IN POWER AND DECLINE, 1932-1939—PART II

BY KENNETH E. HENDRICKSON, JR.\*

**D**EFEAT by the fusionists in 1931 did little internal damage to the structure of the Reading socialist movement. As a matter of fact, just the reverse was true. Enthusiasm seemed to intensify and the organization grew.<sup>1</sup> The party maintained a high profile during this period and was very active in the political and economic affairs of the community, all the while looking forward to the election of 1935 when they would have an opportunity to regain control of city hall.

An examination of these activities, which were conducted for the most part at the branch level, will reveal clearly how the Socialists maintained their organization while they were out of power. In the early 1930s the Reading local was divided into five branches within the city. In the county there were additional branches as well, the number of which increased from four in 1931 to nineteen in 1934. All of these groups brought the rank and file together each week. Party business was conducted, of course, but the branch meetings served a broader purpose. Frequently, there were lectures and discussions on topics of current interest, along with card parties, dinners, and dances. The basic party unit, therefore, served a very significant social function in the lives of its members, especially important during a period of economic decline when few could afford more than the basic essentials of daily life. Of particular interest is the fact that social activities at the branch level were largely the province of the ladies who, at least to some extent, felt involved in the affairs of the party.

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<sup>1</sup> Membership lists for the Berks County local indicate that party enrollment had increased to approximately 700 by August, 1934. This compares with an enrollment of 50 at the time of the first Socialist victory in 1927. See Darlington Hoopes Papers, The Pennsylvania State University.

The Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL) was also an important factor in Reading. This organization grew rapidly after the great Socialist victory in 1927 and provided a significant bulwark during the period of defeat. The "Yipsels," as they were affectionately known, did most of the leg work for the party, the so-called "Jimmie Higgins" work. But more important, the YPSL provided social and cultural attractions for youth as well as introducing them to socialism. It therefore fulfilled a significant dual purpose, particularly during the period 1931-1935, which helped to bolster the Socialist organization in Reading.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps most important of all the social institutions of the party was Socialist park, the party's picnic ground. Not only did the park provide the party with much of its income, it also served as the major recreational center for party members. Picnics had long been a favorite device of the Reading Socialists for both recreational and propaganda purposes, but the party did not acquire its own grove until 1929 when Keller's park, a fourteen-acre site, was purchased for \$8,500. The park was managed by a holding company created by the party and headed by Darlington Hoopes for many years thereafter. Several large gatherings were held there each summer attended by thousands of people, Socialists and non-Socialists alike. The opportunities for propaganda were almost unequalled as large crowds came together in good cheer and fellowship to eat and drink their fill and listen to Socialists of local and national stature. In addition to its propaganda value, Socialist park also provided the party with much needed income. In 1932, for example, receipts went as high as \$15,000, of which the party netted almost \$4,900.<sup>3</sup>

Socialist political and economic activities also went on unabated. In fact, Socialists became more active because the depression continued to worsen after 1931. At the time the Social-

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with Darlington Hoopes, June 17, 1968; personal interview with Mark Brown, June 17, 1968. Hoopes and Brown disagree as to the relative importance of the "Yipsels," the former declaring they were not as important as is indicated here.

<sup>3</sup> William C. Pratt, "The Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists: A Case Study in Working Class Politics" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, 1968), 176-179. Pratt's brilliant work is significant primarily as an effort to identify and give life to those many little known individuals who made up the Reading movement. He attempts with great success to write history "from the bottom up," focusing largely upon the rank and file Socialists, the "Jimmie Higginses," whose activities gave the party its identity.

ists left office there were at least 3,500 unemployed workers in Reading, and the number continued to grow at an alarming rate. Local relief and charitable activities had proven inadequate during the Socialist administration, and the Socialists had opposed publicly financed relief programs, arguing that they would place an unfair burden on working men who were employed. Still, the crisis remained and some action was required.

Fusionist Mayor Hebert Ermentrout and Relief Director Seibert Witman devised a work relief plan early in 1932 which bore a remarkable resemblance to the plan in which the Socialist administration had reluctantly participated a year before. Under this plan a fund of \$200,000 was to be raised from county, city, and private sources to finance work projects. The program got underway immediately, but its effect was minimal at best.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the two Socialists in the legislature fought for the passage of laws designed to ease the conditions of the workers. In so doing, they not only made a great record for themselves as advocates of social justice but proved to be an attractive part of the Socialist organization. First elected in 1930, Darlington Hoopes and Lilith Wilson spent six years in Harrisburg. During this period they introduced legislation calling for workman's compensation, unemployment insurance, socialized medicine, minimum wages, old age pensions, and more adequate relief appropriations. In addition, they introduced and fought for legislation in the state which would have outlawed the yellow dog contract, limited the use of the injunction in labor disputes, and prohibited the company union. They also led the fight to ratify the Child Labor Amendment in Pennsylvania. Of course, almost none of their bills passed, but Hoopes and Mrs. Wilson were effective in publicizing the need for reform and in creating labor support for the Reading Socialists.<sup>5</sup>

As the local and state relief programs sputtered along, the Socialists in Reading undertook their own efforts to rally the un-

<sup>4</sup> Reading *Times*, January 4, 5, 1932. No significant headway toward a solution of the unemployment problem was made, however, until the advent of the New Deal programs.

<sup>5</sup> Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 187-193. Texts of many of Hoopes's bills are to be found in the Hoopes Papers, Penn State. The efforts of the Socialist legislators were also followed closely by the Reading *Labor Advocate*. (See Reading *Labor Advocate*, January 23, 1931, January 27, 1933, November 2, 1934, April 19, 1935.)

employed through the Taxpayers' Protective League which they formed in the autumn of 1932. The TPL, led by Stewart Tomlinson and Charles Sands, assumed watchdog authority over the affairs of the county poor board and soon launched an all out attack upon the board for alleged corruption and mistreatment of the poor.<sup>6</sup>

In late 1932 the first efforts of the TPL were aimed at the appointment of Russell Symontowne, a former editorial writer for the *Reading Times*, as director of county work relief at a salary of \$350 per month. The Socialists claimed that the appointment was to reward Symontowne for his support in 1931 and to insure his aid for the fusionists in 1932 and later elections. The TPL and the party badgered Symontowne unrelentingly until his eventual resignation some eight months later.<sup>7</sup> They also kept up a constant barrage of criticism aimed at the operations of the poor board in general. There was, for example, the matter of the food voucher system. Workers on county projects were paid partially in food stamps which were redeemable at only one store. The Socialist leaders of the TPL argued that this amounted to virtual slave labor and demanded that relief workers be paid in cash at existing union rates. The TPL also sought to protect the poor from the normal but seemingly unfair operation of the law by attempting to thwart eviction. When an eviction was scheduled, the TPL would call a demonstration at the site and virtually overrun the property involved. This technique was apparently successful because the TPL claimed to have prevented more than five hundred evictions within its first year of operation.<sup>8</sup>

In early 1933 the TPL submitted a list of demands to the poor board. They insisted that the poor be directly represented in the administration of relief, that all relief be paid in cash, that better housing be provided, that the distribution of second hand clothing be abandoned, that utilities not be shut off for inability to pay, that unemployed homeowners be relieved of interest payments on their mortgages, and that salaried relief administrators

<sup>6</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, January 8, 1932. Mark Brown believes that the TPL was a major force in attracting new members to the party. Quoted in Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 181.

<sup>7</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, October 7, November 18, 1932, June 9, 1933; *The Pioneer*, October 16, 1932.

<sup>8</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, November 2, 1932, June 2, November 17, 1933.

be dismissed. The reply of the poor board was generally unsatisfactory, and the TPL continued to exert pressure.<sup>9</sup> However, after March of 1933, the Socialists and their affiliated organizations began to shift the focus of their attention rather noticeably away from the local authorities and toward the New Deal.<sup>10</sup>

The Socialists opposed the establishment of C.C.C. camps in the Reading area as a step toward "forced labor." They were also mildly critical of the N.R.A., deriding it as an effort to "save the system," but they continued to save their heaviest blasts for the relief program. Their first target was the C.W.A. They charged that very few union men were offered C.W.A. jobs and issued a formal protest to the mayor. They also charged that discriminatory practices on the job were common and that those union men who were employed suffered as a result. They also demanded that Governor Pinchot dismiss Paul Kintzer, the local representative of the employment office.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the Socialist complaints about federally supported relief projects were based upon very real grievances. The fact was that gross favoritism did exist. It was also true that wages on relief jobs were low and were made even lower by the growing number of workers who were demanding positions. As a result, there was a constant battle between Louis H. Rathroff, Berks County C.W.A. administrator, and the leaders of the relief workers. The latter even went so far as to organize under the banner of the United CWA-PWA Workers of Pennsylvania in order to formalize their demands. The leaders of this organization included Socialists, many of whom had been active in the TPL. The evidence seems to indicate that this organizational effort had some effect. When the federal government abandoned the C.W.A. at the end of March, 1934, the organized relief workers succeeded in extracting a promise that wage rates would be maintained and that no one would be laid off unless absolutely necessary.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, February 3, 1933.

<sup>10</sup> The Socialists continued to exert pressure on the poor board, however, and in 1935 the state authorized hearings into its conduct which revealed the existence of numerous irregularities. It should be noted that the Berks County authorities were by no means the only ones to be investigated during this period. Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>11</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, May 26, 1933, January 19, 1934.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, January 26, February 2, 9, 23, March 16, 23, 30, April 16, 1934. Later the Socialists' attitude changed. After his re-election in 1935 Mayor

In the political arena the Socialists experienced mixed success during the period between 1932 and 1935. Their first contest, following defeat at the hands of the fusionists, was the legislative election of 1932. Here, Representatives Hoopes and Wilson were re-elected with nearly forty percent of the votes. In addition, Socialist candidates for state treasurer, Congress, and the state senate received a plurality within the city, and the national ticket of Norman Thomas and James H. Maurer won thirty percent of the local vote.<sup>13</sup> The Socialists interpreted their strong showing as an indication of growing appeal. With their membership increasing almost daily and with their impressive vote in the city, they looked forward eagerly to regaining control of the reins of municipal government. Their plans, however, received a rude if only temporary setback in 1933.

Two Socialists, Jesse George and William Hoverter, remained on the city council in 1933, and to defeat them, the Republicans and Democrats once again utilized fusion tactics. However, reports began to leak out that the fusionists were experiencing difficulty in maintaining their united front, and these rumors were confirmed by the primary elections of September 20, 1933. Emil L. Nuebling and Fred A. Muhlenburg won bipartisan nominations for city council, while Luther E. Schmidt and the Rev. O. O. Eshelman won fusionist nominations for the school board. For the third seat on the school board, however, the Democrats and Republicans failed to agree. Mrs. Oscar E. Fox got the Republican nomination and Robert M. Harbster the nod of the Democrats.<sup>14</sup>

After the primaries the fusionists did nothing for several weeks. On the other hand, the Socialists began an active street corner campaign. In addition, they undertook their usual massive distribution of campaign literature. In the campaign the Socialists attempted to emphasize two points, just as they had in 1931. They referred constantly to dissension in fusionist ranks, claim-

Stump worked hard to obtain as many federal relief projects as possible, particularly through the WPA.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, November 11, 1932; H. C. Stetler, *The Socialist Movement in Reading, Pennsylvania, 1896-1936* (Storrs, Conn., 1943), 169, 176-177. Hoopes received 11,828 votes, and Mrs. Wilson received 11,290. Raymond Hofses also received 11,288 votes in the race for Congress. He carried the city but was badly defeated in the rural areas.

<sup>14</sup> *Reading Times*, September 14, 20, October 14, 31, 1933.



ing that many loyal party workers on both sides had been sacrificed to the demands of the powerful local industrialists who controlled the fusionist movement. Secondly, they charged repeatedly that all of the mud which the fusionists threw at them was really a subterfuge to hide the real aim of the old party politicians: to keep control of the city government out of the hands of the Socialists, the only true representatives of the people, and in the hands of the politicians who represented business interests. At their last rally before election day, Socialist leaders summarized their case before a cheering crowd of several thousand voters. "The fusion leaders are scared," roared ex-Mayor Stump, "because two plumbers, two cigar makers and a piano tuner made good at City Hall." They had proved, he concluded, that the workers of Reading were fully capable of running city government. Jim Maurer gave a long speech in which he compared the city SP administration of 1928-1932 with the accomplishments of the Ermentrout administration and easily convinced his sympathetic audience that much was lost when Mayor Stump left office. Finally, Representatives Hoopes and Wilson appeared to review their efforts in Harrisburg and to defend the party against charges that Socialists were unpatriotic and unchristian. "The real fear of the old party leaders," Hoopes said, "is that children will be told the unvarnished truth about the system."<sup>15</sup>

The outcome of the campaign was similar to that of 1931. The fusionists carried the city, but the regular SP vote held up even though 6,000 fewer voters participated than in the previous year. Thus fusion alone defeated the Socialists, and even though they were disappointed, their position remained viable. It was only necessary for fusion to collapse before the party could again return to power. This process of disintegration began almost immediately.<sup>16</sup>

In the primary elections of 1934 the fusion committee selected Herbert M. Rapp and Darlington R. Kulp as candidates for the State Assembly. Not everyone went along with these selections, however, and Democrat Mark Powers insisted upon entering the primary as a representative of his party. Powers won and thereby threw a wrench into the fusionists' plans. They were

<sup>15</sup> Reading *Eagle*, August 18, 1933; Reading *Labor Advocate*, October 13, 1933; Reading *Times*, November 6, 1933.

<sup>16</sup> Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 10, 1933.

forced to spend a great deal of time and effort in an unsuccessful attempt to induce Powers to withdraw.<sup>17</sup> This affair heartened the Socialists. They also argued that the very low turnout in the primary was an indication of public disgust with the fusionists.<sup>18</sup>

The fusionists were further weakened by the death of Councilman Emil Neubling which necessitated the naming of a temporary replacement. The new councilman would be appointed by the remaining council members and would serve until the election of 1935.<sup>19</sup> The Democrats endorsed Daniel F. McKenna for the post. McKenna was an ex-federal revenue agent who had been accused of graft. Consequently, the Berks County bar refused to admit him because of his record, and the Republicans demanded that the fusion committee make some other choice for city council. Fusion chairman Wellington Bertolet acceded at length and nominated Dr. John H. Rorke who was duly appointed to the council. The Socialists, of course, sought to make as much of the fusionists' problems as possible. They styled the controversy as a prime example of the imminent breakdown of fusion. "Fusion appears to be becoming confusion," blared the *Advocate*. After McKenna was dropped and Rorke was approved, the *Advocate* argued that Bertolet was desperately trying to hold the fusionist movement together for his masters, the Wyomissing Industrialists. Fusion was weakening, declared the *Advocate*, and new victories for the Socialist party grew more likely every day.<sup>20</sup>

The Socialist candidates for assembly, of course, were incumbents Darlington Hoopes and Lilith Wilson who by this time had made national reputations fighting for more adequate relief and humanitarian legislation at Harrisburg. Hoopes and Wilson were popular in Reading among the general public, and they continued to enjoy the support of organized labor through the Federated Trades Council and certain specific unions such as the

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, June 29, 1934; *Reading Eagle*, July 1, 1934.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, May 18, 1934.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, June 22, 29, July 6, 1934.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, July 13, 1934. The Socialists were invariably critical of the owners and operators of the Berkshire Hosiery Mills and other local industries whom they were convinced were bent upon controlling the city. They referred to these businessmen collectively as "the Wyomissing Industrialists," calling them after the west Reading suburb where many of the plants were located. Wellington C. Bertolet, in addition to the fact that he was a prominent Republican party leader, was also attorney for the Berkshire Mills.

Hatters, the Hosiery Workers, the Printing Brotherhoods, and the Railroad Brotherhoods. The Socialist legislators also received the endorsement of the president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor.<sup>21</sup>

Hoopes and Wilson easily won the election of 1934. Hoopes received 15,029 votes or approximately 51 percent of the total cast, and Wilson received 14,261, or approximately 49 percent. In addition, the other Socialist candidates ran quite well. Jim Maurer, SP candidate for the senate, polled 11,835, and L. Birch Wilson, Jr., polled 12,294 as candidate for lieutenant governor. Also, Raymond Hofses of the *Labor Advocate* received 13,692 as a candidate for congress.<sup>22</sup> The Socialists were jubilant over the outcome of the election. Said the *Advocate*, "A growing number of people in Reading are now convinced of the economic principles of Socialism." This was undoubtedly an overstatement, but the Socialists were justifiably optimistic as they looked forward to the coming municipal election of 1935.<sup>23</sup>

Fusionist hopes received yet another blow during the next year when the state legislature passed a bill outlawing the practice of fusion in primary elections.<sup>24</sup> However, as a practical matter, the same effect could still be accomplished if the old parties worked closely together. What was necessary was for one candidate for each office to withdraw from the race after the primary leaving only one to represent both organizations. Such cooperation, however, was very difficult to achieve, and strained relations between Republicans and Democrats became evident. During the late summer of 1935 the old party leaders attempted to work out a coalition agreement, but they could not achieve a satisfactory settlement concerning the distribution of council seats and the negotiations collapsed.<sup>25</sup> The Socialists, of course, rejoiced. "Fusion discussions have broken down," declared the headlines of the *Advocate*. "The SP cannot lose in a three-way race."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, April 27, May 11, October 5, November 2, 1934.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, November 9, 1934; *Reading Eagle*, November 7, 1934.

<sup>23</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, November 9, 1934.

<sup>24</sup> Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 215.

<sup>25</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, September 27, October 11, 1935; *Reading Times*, September 20, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 1935. *Reading Eagle*, October 8-12, 1935; *The Pioneer*, October 17, 1935.

<sup>26</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, October 18, 1935.

The Democrats nominated Mayor Ermentrout to succeed himself along with Dr. John Rorke and Mark Powers as candidates for city council. The Republicans nominated former Mayor John K. Stauffer for the high post along with perennial candidates Charles Smith and George Yocum for council.<sup>27</sup> There was, in addition, one coalition candidate. Both the Republicans and the Democrats gave their support to incumbent county judge Paul N. Schaeffer.

The Socialists, who named their candidates at a party caucus in the spring, chose Stump as their candidate for mayor, Stewart Tomlinson of the Taxpayers' Protective League for one four-year council seat, and Howard McDonough, then a member of the school board, for the other. They also nominated Charles Sands for a two-year seat on the council.<sup>28</sup> Jim Maurer was not a candidate in 1935 because he was seriously ill, but nevertheless the party was in a strong position. Its membership was larger than it had ever been. It was well organized, as usual, and it benefitted from the inability of the old parties to form a coalition slate. The Socialists set out to take advantage of these conditions by conducting a vigorous campaign. They accused the Ermentrout administration of overspending and of undoing many of the accomplishments of the previous Socialist administration. They conducted numerous rallies, campaigned more actively than ever over the radio, and delivered thousands of pieces of literature to all the homes in Reading via the famous "Flying Squadron" technique.<sup>29</sup>

The Socialists also launched an all-out attack upon Hoopes's opponent in the judicial race, incumbent Judge Paul N. Schaeffer, whom they characterized as the candidate of the big business interests in Berks County. Behind him, they charged, were the owners of the Berkshire Mills, the steel interests, the public utilities, the banks, and "a certain group of lawyers." The Socialists produced a list purporting to contain the names of the largest contributors to Schaeffer's campaign fund in an effort to prove

<sup>27</sup> *Reading Times*, September 18, 1935.

<sup>28</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, May 31, 1935; Minutes of Local Berks County, May 26, 1935.

<sup>29</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, September 15, 1935; *Reading Times*, November 4, 1935; *Reading Eagle*, October 17, 22, 1935. Between 1933 and 1935 James H. Maurer suffered a series of strokes and heart attacks which virtually immobilized him. He was never again able to participate actively in politics. However, he remained a prominent figurehead in the Socialist movement.

that most of his money came from the groups mentioned above. Hoopes also wrote and published a long "report" in which he declared that the judicial campaign was in reality nothing more than an effort to "buy a judge."<sup>30</sup>

The Socialists, of course, had no monopoly on smear tactics. Their opponents retaliated with accusations that they were "un-Christian, unpatriotic Communists." They used considerable space in the local papers to "warn" the people of Reading against the "insidious Socialist-Communist conspiracy" to destroy the church, downgrade democracy, and take over the schools. Late in the campaign they published a full page advertisement in the Reading *Eagle* signed by "the minute men" which declared that liberty was as much in danger in Reading in 1935, as it had been in the colonies in 1776, and that all who loved their churches, their schools, and their flag should arouse themselves to action.<sup>31</sup>

Red-baiting, while it certainly had some effect, was inadequate to defeat the Socialists in 1935. They had a large bloc of voters behind them, and it did not diminish during the course of the campaign. In fact, the campaign in general probably had little effect since the percentage of the total vote received by the Socialists remained very close to that of several previous elections. The party leadership, which entered this campaign confident of victory, remained confident throughout.<sup>32</sup>

The party swept the election, carrying every major office in the city. Stump led the ticket with 20,575 votes (49.6%), defeating Mayor Ermentrout by nearly 8,000. The only major defeat suffered by the Socialists was in the judicial race where Schaeffer beat Hoopes. Despite his intense campaign, Hoopes had not expected to win against a coalition candidate, but he was pleased that he had polled some 31,000 votes. This indicated that the party was making headway in the county as well as the city proper.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *The Pioneer*, October 15, 1935. Also see Hoopes's notes regarding the financing of the Schaeffer campaign and his essay on the same subject, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>31</sup> Reading *Eagle*, October 28, 31, November 2, 4, 1935.

<sup>32</sup> Hoopes to Clarence Senior, October 31, 1935, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>33</sup> Hoopes to Julius Gerber, November 7, 1935, *ibid.*; Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 8, 1935. Stewart Tomlinson, Howard McDonough, and Charles Sands were elected to the council. William C. Hoverter was

The victory was followed by a great celebration. Party dignitaries from all over the country, including Norman Thomas, James Oneal, Louis Waldman, and Leo Kryzcki, descended upon the city to wish the administration well. There were giant parades and speeches of tribute. Kryzcki's statement to the press accurately captured the emotion of the moment. ". . . I saw the power of the working class. The great parade lasted until 4 A.M. Jim Maurer was there risen from a sick bed with tears of joy upon his face."<sup>84</sup>

It was, indeed, an emotional time for the Socialists, and one of triumph as well. Yet, even as they rejoiced, they were aware that all was not well. Nationally, their party was beginning to split apart over questions of ideology and tactics. Even though the controversy had not yet affected Reading, within the year the party would collapse, ending forever its days of power in the city.

To recount the entire story of the split in the Socialist party in 1936 would require much more space than is available here. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the matter briefly so as to understand the context in which the Reading split developed. The factionalism which led ultimately to the debacle of 1936 can be traced to conditions which existed early in the 1930s. At that time the Socialist party was moribund; its membership infinitesimal. The depression, however, brought rapid changes. Thousands of new members, sickened by the apparent collapse of capitalism, flocked to the party. They were relatively young, mostly college educated, and frequently more radical than the older members of the party. This new generation of Socialists, known collectively as "the Militants," rallied behind the leadership of Norman Thomas.<sup>85</sup>

Thomas was by no means a newcomer to the party; he had been a member since 1917. But his rise to national prominence as a Socialist began in 1928 when he ran for the presidency. From that time on Thomas became increasingly more critical of the older party leaders. As the depression suddenly brought in thou-

elected city treasurer, and Walter Hollinger, controller. Three members were also elected to the school board, Amos Leshner was elected a county commissioner, and two Socialists were elected to the county prison board.

<sup>84</sup> Reading *Labor Advocate*, November 15, 22, 1935.

<sup>85</sup> David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America* (New York, 1955), 213.

sands of new members and the party seemed to come to life, he was already a leading party spokesman.<sup>36</sup> Thomas was well aware that all his young followers did not agree about the future posture of the party. Generally, however, they were all opposed to the party's old leadership, they believed in political activism, and they favored moving the party ideologically to the left. There was enough similarity in their views to encourage Thomas to call upon them to join hands along with all other radicals who might be interested to form a new and vigorous "all inclusive" Socialist party. The potential for conflict was maximized since the entrenched leaders of the party, the so-called "Old Guard," feared the influence of the radicals and desired to exclude them from positions of power, and from the party entirely, if necessary.<sup>37</sup>

Conflict within the party became apparent in some localities, most notably New York, as early as 1930.<sup>38</sup> However, it was not until the party convention of 1932 that the crisis surfaced in the national organization. There Thomas led a move to unseat Morris Hillquit of New York as national chairman. Even though the effort failed, the militants were by no means discouraged. During the succeeding months internal conflict occupied more of the Socialists' time than any other single matter.<sup>39</sup>

During 1933 the united front issue precipitated further controversy with the militants favoring a flexible attitude toward Communist overtures and the old guard arguing that any effort to cooperate with the Communists would be disastrous.<sup>40</sup> Then, in 1934, a direct confrontation between radical and conservative Socialists was precipitated when the national convention adopted a new Declaration of Principles which seemed to commit the party to a policy of revolution. There were two sections of the

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 215-218; Bernard K. Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress: Norman Thomas and the Decline of American Socialism* (Chicago, 1970), 50-82.

<sup>37</sup> Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress*, 82-86.

<sup>38</sup> *New Leader*, September 13, 1930. This is the first reference to the existence of an embryonic "Militant" faction to be found in this party publication.

<sup>39</sup> Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress*, 92-93. Morris Hillquit died in October, 1933, and was succeeded as party leader in New York by Louis Waldman. The latter and his associates were more inflexible in their anti-militant stance than Hillquit. Further, they laid partial blame for Hillquit's death at the doorstep of Thomas and his followers, claiming they had broken Hillquit's heart.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-116.

document which were particularly controversial. The first of these dealt with war and declared that the party would loyally support any comrade who came into conflict with the law or public opinion as a result of antiwar activities.<sup>41</sup> The second and most controversial section called for:

replacing the bogus democracy of capitalist parliamentarianism by a genuine workers' democracy. . . . If it can be superceded by majority vote, the Socialist party will rejoice. If the crisis comes through the denial of majority rights after the electorate has given us a mandate, we shall not hesitate to crush by our labor solidarity the reckless forces of reaction and to consolidate the Socialist state.<sup>42</sup>

To the old guard, it was unthinkable that such a statement should be adopted by their party.<sup>43</sup> In fact, it was adopted because the radicals controlled a majority at the convention and the old guard knew their leadership was in jeopardy. Their reaction was to threaten to leave the party unless the declaration was rejected by the membership at large. Their attack was led by Louis Waldman of New York, one of Hillquit's successors. He argued that the declaration was little more than a sellout to Communism, and he openly threatened to bolt the party if it were ratified by the rank and file. He argued that good Socialists could never agree to be bound by such an inflammatory document.<sup>44</sup> For the next two years party strife was almost constant and culminated with the withdrawal of the old guard subsequent to the national convention of 1936. With men such as Waldman as their leaders the conservatives formed the Social Democratic Federation, claiming that they were the only true Socialist organization. The party itself went on, but the internecine warfare did not end. The radicals fell out among themselves, and the party lost whatever opportunity it might have had to profit from the depression experience.<sup>45</sup>

The Reading Socialists were virtually unaffected by the earliest stages of the conflict. They were isolated and primarily con-

<sup>41</sup> *New Leader*, June 9, 1934.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, June 16, 1934.

<sup>43</sup> *New York Times*, June 5, 1934.

<sup>44</sup> *New Leader*, June 9, 1934.

<sup>45</sup> Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress*, 170-177.



cerned with local affairs. By 1934, however, their involvement began. Pennsylvania was represented at the 1934 convention by nine delegates, eight of whom came from Reading. When the vote on the Declaration was taken, they split; Lilith Wilson, Raymond Hofses, Leo Minker, and Mark Seltzer voted against it, while Darlington Hoopes and Larry Rogin voted for it. Ralph Bigony and George Rhodes abstained. Two of the Readingites, Hoopes and Mrs. Wilson, were members of the National Executive Committee, and their votes reflected the conflict within the body. The vote of the delegation, in turn, suggested a lack of unanimity at home. Indeed, when the delegates returned to Reading, they found themselves embroiled in controversy.<sup>46</sup>

On June 21, 1934, a special meeting of the local was convened to discuss the declaration. Here, the party leaders offered their views. Birch Wilson, the acknowledged theoretician of the conservatives in Reading, led off with a blistering attack reminiscent of Louis Waldman's position. He declared that the declaration was "vague, indefinite, and ambiguous," that it "implies the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," and that it was foolish for Socialists to pledge themselves to action which they could not carry out. He concluded by warning that the advocates of direct action within the party were precipitating a split. In a similar vein Jim Maurer argued that advocacy of a general strike without the power to call one would make the party look foolish in the eyes of labor. Further, to permit the rank and file to be "lorded over" by intellectuals would be fatal. He argued fervently that to survive and flourish Socialism had to make itself "one with labor," and he concluded by branding the Detroit convention "a disgrace to the movement." Raymond Hofses, speaking with less emotion and more realism, decried the declaration as bad politics. He argued that the document contained statements which simply should not be put into print. "We can do the right thing without this Declaration," he concluded. "We did so during the last war."

The major advocates of the declaration present at this meeting were Larry Rogin, Charles Sands, and Darlington Hoopes. Rogin argued that the declaration was important for its emotional appeal and also for its propaganda value. ". . . It will prevent comrades from becoming confused," he declared. "They will know

<sup>46</sup> Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 248.

where they stand." Sands made the most radical statement. "They can't put anything too drastic for me in this Declaration," he said, "because the capitalist system deserves it. . . . If the workers are going to win freedom, they can win it only through fighting; in time of war any Socialist who stays out of jail isn't worth his salt." Hoopes was the last important speaker, and while he favored the declaration, his viewpoint was much more conciliatory than any of the others. He argued that the real issue was not the declaration but rather party unity. He was obviously fearful that the debate might degenerate into an all-out struggle, and he desired to eliminate the declaration as a party issue rather than seek victory for either side.<sup>47</sup> As it happened, his fears were justified, and Hoopes found himself fighting a losing battle to save his party from catastrophe, first at the national level and then at home.

During the weeks immediately following the Detroit convention, discussion of the declaration continued in Reading, but it did not reach the same fever pitch that prevailed in other areas, especially New York. Even though almost everyone in local Berks had an opinion, debate was played down and Hoopes's conciliatory tactics predominated. In the end he even convinced the local comrades to insist that the entire matter be ignored at the state convention which met in July.<sup>48</sup>

Hoopes's success, however, was not complete. To be sure, debate was low key, but it went on in Reading. Generally, the local was split approximately 1.5:1 against the declaration with the younger members and especially the Yipsels for the most part favorably inclined.<sup>49</sup> In the autumn when the national party referendum on the declaration was taken, it was approved. However, Pennsylvania and several other states with large party organizations voted against it.<sup>50</sup> Local Berks voted against the declaration by 341 to 155, and Hoopes recorded with pleasure that the "no" vote had been so small.<sup>51</sup> After that, local interest in the controversy declined precipitously as the Socialists prepared for the important election of 1935, which, as discussed previously, brought victory.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Minutes of Local Berks County, June 21, 1934.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, July 7, 1934.

<sup>49</sup> Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 253.

<sup>50</sup> *New York Times*, October 18, 1934.

<sup>51</sup> Hoopes to Clarence Senior, October 4, 1934, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>52</sup> *New York Times*, December 1, 1934.

At the national level, however, the controversy continued, and indeed, grew more serious. In some states, such as New York, it appeared quite likely that a split was rapidly approaching. At the end of 1934, the old guard-dominated organizations of ten states, including Pennsylvania, formed the so-called Interstate Conference in order to coordinate their efforts against the militant N.E.C. Pennsylvania was represented in this group by the conservative state secretary, Sarah Limbach of Pittsburgh, but the major spokesman for the conference was Louis Waldman of New York. Through him the conference demanded that the N.E.C. denounce all united front proposals, agree that the declaration should bind only those states whose membership approved it, and add four more conservatives to its membership. In response to these demands the N.E.C. at first hesitated and then declared a moratorium on united front negotiations for eighteen months. This action did not entirely satisfy the old guard, however, and the impasse continued.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, inside the New York party the deterioration continued. The old guard still maintained control of the party organization there and resorted to extreme measures in order to protect its position. Old guard leaders refused full party membership to Yipsels between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one even though under the party constitution any person over the age of eighteen was entitled to join. In New York City they gerrymandered branch boundaries in order to minimize the number of branches which the radicals might control; and finally, of course, they kept up a constant barrage of abusive propaganda aimed at Norman Thomas and those who associated with him.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, the inevitable split occurred. In December, 1935, the militants set up their own New York City Central Committee and claimed that they, not the old guard, had the allegiance of the majority of New York Socialists. The incident which precipitated the split was Norman Thomas's famous debate with Earl Browder, leader of the American Communist party. The old guard used this event as a pretext to denounce Thomas and call for his expulsion from the party for violating the N.E.C. moratorium on united front activities. Although Thomas denied that the debate

<sup>53</sup> Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress*, 142; *New Leader*, December 8, 1934; *New York Times*, December 8, 10, 1934.

<sup>54</sup> *New Leader*, June 15, July 13, 1935.

suggested a united front, the utter rigidity and implacable hostility of the old guard position convinced him that a split could no longer be avoided. Not only did he and his followers set up their own central committee in New York City, they also held a militant state convention near the end of the year and requested that the N.E.C. recognize them as the legitimate New York State Socialist organization.<sup>55</sup>

Early in January, 1936, the N.E.C. suspended the New York charter by a vote of eight to two and established a temporary committee of fifteen to handle party affairs in the state until a reorganization could be carried out.<sup>56</sup> Since the N.E.C. was dominated by the militants and was thought to be thoroughly under the influence of Norman Thomas, this action was loudly denounced by conservative Socialists all over the country. Led by Waldman and Oneal of New York, the old guard demanded that the N.E.C. rescind its action. The Interstate Conference also reacted by adopting a resolution of condemnation.<sup>57</sup>

This was the state of affairs, then, which existed within the Socialist party at the time of the great triumph in the Reading municipal election in 1935. Thus, when Thomas, James Oneal, and the other party leaders journeyed to Reading to attend the inauguration of Mayor Stump, the facade of happiness and unity which they presented to the public hid a wall of bitterness and hate. Jim Maurer would not even speak to Thomas and told Oneal that Thomas was a "traitor" and a "fascist."<sup>58</sup>

There were many in Reading, of course, who agreed with old Jim, and an equal if not larger number who were adherents of Thomas. But the clash of views had not yet become irreversible, and Darlington Hoopes still clung to the hope that Reading

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, December 7, 1935; *New York Times*, November 28, 29, December 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 22, 29, 30, 1935. This debate occurred on November 28, 1935, in Madison Square Garden before more than 20,000 people. Prior to the event Louis Waldman and other old guard leaders implored and cajoled Thomas not to go through with it, but he persisted. The NEC ruled that the debate was legal, but the New York City committee never accepted that ruling. In fact Browder did use the occasion to politic for a united front, so there was really no debate at all. The fees paid by the audience did provide thousands of dollars of income for empty Socialist party coffers. Unfortunately, the more significant effect was to aggravate the already serious party schism.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, January 17, 20, 1936; *New Leader*, January 25, 1936.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, January 25, 1936.

<sup>58</sup> Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 263-264.

would be spared a repetition of the events in New York. He had voted with the majority of the N.E.C. during the New York crisis, yet he continued to regard himself as an objective observer of the embroglio. He saw it as a power struggle, and little more, with only minimal ideological differences between the contending factions. While this was, perhaps, something of an oversimplification of the situation, Hoopes was certainly correct when he asserted that both groups were guilty of unconscionable acts. He had voted for the suspension of the New York charter with misgivings, yet in the hope that reorganization might cool the situation down and help to restore party harmony. Most of all, he desired to prevent the cleavage from spreading into the Reading party, but unfortunately there were already powerful forces at work which indicated that he should fail.<sup>59</sup>

By 1935 there were three major sources of conflict within the Reading local. The first of these was the fact that the organization continued to be dominated by the old regulars who had guided the fortunes of the Socialist party locally for more than a quarter of a century. Jim Maurer, J. Henry Stump, Raymond Hofses, Birch Wilson, and George Rhodes had been at the helm from almost the beginning, and their leadership was responsible for whatever success the party had achieved. They had no intention of relinquishing power. Control of the local had become, for them, a personal thing, and they resented competition.

There were other loyal party men in Reading, however, who felt that their contributions had been as great as those of the well-known leaders, and who also felt they had been denied appropriate recognition. In this group were such people as Charles Sands and Fred Merkel. Sands was to play an especially important role in the split. By the mid-thirties he had become embittered and estranged from the old leaders, and he began to rally opposition. At first, the controversy had nothing to do with the split which was developing in the party at the national level. But from the time of the Detroit convention, Reading moved ever closer to involvement, and Sands became the acknowledged leader of the so-called Reading "Militants."

A second problem which developed within the Reading local

<sup>59</sup> Hoopes to Alfred Baker Lewis, July 8, 1935, January 25, 1936; Hoopes to Sarah Limbach, July 8, 1935; Hoopes to Maynard Krueger, December 10, 1935; Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

during the thirties was a direct outgrowth of expanding membership. As the depression deepened and it became clear that the party might return to power, large numbers of people flocked to join the party. Those who were old enough, of course, joined the party itself, but many others became members of the Yipsels. The young people, whether in the party or the Yipsels, tended to be impatient with the old leadership, much as were the young radicals in other sections of the country. This circumstance led directly to conflict, for as the youth movement in the party grew, so did the intensity of disagreement.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the rapid growth of party membership had still another effect. By 1935 there was a veritable torrent of applications for membership, many of them from people who knew little or nothing of socialism, but who were attracted primarily by the possibility of obtaining jobs with the city once the party regained power. Indeed, the question of jobs was perhaps the most important element in the debacle which followed.<sup>61</sup>

The actual split began to develop at about the time of the election of 1935. Since it was obvious that a Socialist victory would mean an immediate avalanche of job applications, and since the party usually made its patronage decisions through the recommendations of the local advisory committee, both factions desired to control that committee. When nominations were made at the first meeting of the local following the election, it became clear that both sides had compiled slates of candidates in advance through whom they hoped to exercise control.<sup>62</sup>

At the December meeting of the local, when new members of the advisory committee were to be elected, Mayor-elect Stump was granted permission to address the assemblage. Although he noted that the local was presently split by factionalism, he made an eloquent plea for harmony. He promised to clean city hall of its old party officeholders and make room for as many comrades as possible. He concluded with a reference to the advisory committee election: "We should pick out those best qualified to repre-

<sup>60</sup> Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 265, 269-271; personal interview with Mark Brown, June 17, 1968. Brown was one of the young radicals. At the time of the split in 1936 he was nineteen years of age.

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview with Darlington Hoopes, June 17, 1968. Brown concurred with this assessment.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Brown to Jack Altman, October 4, 1935, Socialist Party Collection, Duke University Library; Minutes of Local Berks County, November 7, 1935.

sent us” and not simply rely on “those from a handmade slate.”<sup>63</sup>

The election followed, and the militants controlled a majority of the seventeen open places. However, the old guard retained overall control. Subsequently, members of both factions received jobs, but of course many were disappointed because there were not nearly enough positions to go around. Since many others were not satisfied with the positions they did receive, the over-all result was resentment.<sup>64</sup>

The leaders of the Reading local now rightly suspected that the militants intended to seize control of the party organization. The effort began in earnest at the regular March meeting of the local when organizer Ralph Bigony, an adherent of the left, announced that delegates to the forthcoming national convention were to be elected that night. The old guard was obviously caught unprepared and protested, but the election was conducted anyway and the militants won a majority.<sup>65</sup> Immediately thereafter the old guard sought a ruling on the election from the county committee and was rewarded when the committee declared the election null and void.<sup>66</sup> The local was then required to hold another election by referendum. The militants were disappointed, but still optimistic, for they believed that the results of the original election would be approved by the rank and file. They also believed that their chances for gaining control of the local were still quite good.<sup>67</sup>

While both factions prepared for the referendum, the local held a special meeting to discuss the deteriorating situation within the national party. That the leaders of the local militants were coming more and more into the orbit of the New York left is indicated by the fact that Ralph Bigony asked the New Yorkers for both procedural and substantive advice prior to the meeting.<sup>68</sup> The meeting took place on the night of April 9, 1936, and here the factions ended all pretense of a search for harmony. It was now an outright war for control. Harry Gross, a militant, was

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, December 5, 1935.

<sup>64</sup> Pratt, “Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists,” 288.

<sup>65</sup> Minutes of Local Berks County, March 5, 1936.

<sup>66</sup> Minutes of the County Committee of the Socialist Party of Berks County, March 19, 1936.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Brown to Hal Siegel, March 21, 1936, Socialist Party Collection, Duke.

<sup>68</sup> Ralph Bigony to Jack Altman, March 23, 1936, *ibid.*

elected chairman of the session, and a special set of rules was adopted for debate. According to the rules, the speakers were required to announce their positions in advance. Then, each was to be allowed ten minutes, and representatives of each position were to speak alternately. As it turned out, the militants had prepared more speakers than the old guard, and when all the spokesmen for the latter had finished, the left still had three to be heard.

Darlington Hoopes, still attempting to play the role of mediator, requested permission to speak without declaring for or against either side, but he was rebuffed by the chair. Said Gross, "As long as there are comrades in this room who have courage enough to take one side or the other, they, according to the rules, must be given preference, and you must wait." Hoopes appealed the ruling of the chair but was defeated, and the left wingers were elated. "Hoopes got the worst trimming he ever got. . . ." wrote Mark Brown.<sup>69</sup>

The controversy over the delegation to the national convention was further intensified by the publication of a four-page pamphlet entitled *Rule or Ruin*. Although the old guard leaders did not know it at the time, the authors of the pamphlet were Fred Merkel, Max Putney, and Leon Minker. Merkel and Minker were embittered leftists who believed their talents had gone unappreciated. Putney was a Communist.<sup>70</sup> The pamphlet accused the old guard of attempting to maintain oligarchic control of the local, violating the party constitution, and "party wrecking" tactics. It ended with an exhortation to the rank and file that to vote for the militant slate of delegates would be to vote for a more aggressive and more democratic socialist movement.<sup>71</sup>

The pamphlet caused much discussion among the comrades. The old guard, of course, was enraged, set out to learn the identity of the authors, and bring them to task. Once the necessary information was obtained by threatening the printer of the pamphlet with a lawsuit, formal charges for expulsion were brought against the trio by old guard leaders Stump, Hofses, and

<sup>69</sup> Minutes of Local Berks County, April 9, 1936; Max Putney to Hal Siegel, April 10, 1936; Mark Brown to Siegel, April 10, 1936, Socialist Party Collection, Duke.

<sup>70</sup> Fred Merkel to Hal Siegel, April 1, May 11, 1936, Socialist Party Collection, Duke; Hoopes to Clarence Senior, September 28, 1935, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>71</sup> *Rule or Ruin*, Socialist Party Collection, Duke.



Rhodes. At length they were acquitted, much to the glee of the militants who thought the outcome demonstrated their growing power. But the main result was that the controversy became more bitter.<sup>72</sup>

When the referendum was finally completed, the militants were defeated. Mark Brown declared that the *Rule or Ruin* affair was the single most important element in the consolidation of the right wing against the left in Reading and led directly to the ultimate defeat of the latter. He also believed that the old guard “cheated” in the election of delegates by “packing” the branch meetings with inactive members.<sup>73</sup> Fred Merkel believed the defeat resulted from three major factors: first, the circulation of “malicious” propaganda against the leftists, accusing them of being Communists; second, the tactical blunders of leftists in allowing themselves to be divided by right wing propaganda; and third, the fear on the part of the left wing with city jobs that they might be fired if the right lost.<sup>74</sup> In any case, the defeat was overwhelming. Only three leftists, Ralph Bigony, Harry Gross, and V. James Roslyn, were elected out of a seventeen-man delegation.<sup>75</sup>

During this period, the spring of 1936, the factions became more polarized on both the local and national levels. The old guard in Reading strengthened its ties with the Interstate Conference and the militants did likewise with the New York leftists. At the same time, Darlington Hoopes was still attempting to mediate but with little success. He called upon Norman Thomas to demonstrate more flexibility on the united front issue but privately conceded that he did not expect Thomas to yield.<sup>76</sup> At home, however, Hoopes had no standing with the left, and their constant harassment was more than a little annoying.<sup>77</sup> He was in constant contact with Sarah Limbach, the old guard state secretary, and soon became more nearly identified with the old guard than any other group.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Max Putney to Hal Siegel, April 27, 1936; Fred Merkel to Siegel, June 2, 1936, *ibid.*; Reading *Labor Advocate*, August 21, 1936.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Pratt, “Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists,” 301-302.

<sup>74</sup> Merkel to Siegel, April 25, 1936, Socialist Party Collection, Duke.

<sup>75</sup> Merkel to Siegel, April 27, 1936, *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Hoopes to Thomas, April 8, 1936; Hoopes to James Graham, April 9, 1936, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>77</sup> Brown to Siegel, April 5, 1936, Socialist Party Collection, Duke.

<sup>78</sup> Hoopes to Sarah Limbach, April 10, 1936, Hoopes Papers, Penn State. Personal interview with Hoopes, June 17, 1968.

By the time of the May meeting of the Reading local a further split was imminent, but the results of the meeting seemed to indicate uncertainty. The northeast branch, an old guard stronghold, introduced a resolution instructing the Reading delegation to the national convention to oppose all united front activities. The militants then offered an amendment to prohibit united front activities with the Republicans and Democrats as well as Communists, and in this form the resolution passed by a vote of 110 to 85. Subsequently, the party voted to instruct all the delegates to remain at the convention until it adjourned and to vote to seat an equal number of delegates from each faction in New York.<sup>79</sup> The militants were satisfied with the outcome, feeling they had accomplished as much as could be expected under the circumstances, and Mark Brown, at least, was convinced that, as long as the old guard continued to seek unity through compromise, the left still had a chance to win out.<sup>80</sup>

Speaking of the Socialist party generally, the old guard position going into the national convention of 1936 was represented by the Interstate Conference. This conference was resolved to work for the repeal of the 1934 Declaration of Principles, the creation of a "non-factional NEC," exclusion of all "Communists and splinter group elements" from the party, and the prevention of all united front activities.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the old guard made it clear that the failure of the party to adopt its position would result in a split. In Reading old guard members were not quite ready to go that far, but events at the convention and immediately thereafter were to push them over the brink.

At the very beginning of the national convention in Cleveland the official Reading delegation was challenged by a group of militants who claimed that the procedures used in the election were illegal. The NEC, however, seated the entire delegation as selected by the referendum.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, the NEC also voted to seat the entire militant delegation from New York despite compromise settlements offered by both the Reading and Milwaukee organizations. Immediately thereafter, the New York old guard members left the convention and, along with their

<sup>79</sup> Minutes of Local Berks County, May 7, 1936.

<sup>80</sup> Brown to Siegel, May 8, 1936, Socialist Party Collection, Duke.

<sup>81</sup> *New Leader*, April 4, 18, May 16, 23, 1936.

<sup>82</sup> Reading *Labor Advocate*, May 29, 1936.

allies from several other states, indicated an intention to form a new Socialist organization called the Social Democratic Federation.<sup>83</sup> The Reading delegation, under instructions to stay in the convention until adjournment, did not go out, but there was little doubt as to where their sympathies lay. The SDF leaders, recognizing the uncertainty of the Readingites, attempted to pressure them by naming Jim Maurer as titular chairman of the new organization, but Maurer later declined.<sup>84</sup>

After the bolt Norman Thomas was nominated for president for the second time with most of the old guard delegates, including those from Reading, voting against him. Realizing that some effort must be made to appease the right wing if the party were not to fly completely apart, Thomas then attempted to direct the convention toward a compromise proposal on the united front issue. He suggested the delay of its final disposition until it could be submitted to a referendum. In the meantime, locals were to be allowed to enter specific united front activities provided they had the consent of their state organizations.<sup>85</sup> Such a resolution was adopted, but it did not assuage the right wing in general and was certainly not pleasing to the Reading old guard which favored outright repudiation of the whole united front idea. Even Hoopes, who favored compromise as much as anyone, declared that this settlement was unsatisfactory.<sup>86</sup>

Also in line with his efforts at appeasement, Thomas supported the election of George Rhodes to the NEC.<sup>87</sup> Rhodes, of course, was a major figure in the Reading old guard leadership. His election was obviously calculated to spread oil upon turbulent waters, but the ploy did not succeed. The Reading leaders were primarily concerned with the united front issue, and since it had not been settled in a manner satisfactory to them, they could not be satisfied with other measures. They left the convention with feelings of anger and dismay; undoubtedly more nearly ready to leave the party than they had been before the convention began.

At the June 4, 1936, meeting of the Reading local, several of the branches submitted resolutions declaring that the local should sanction the national convention for its actions but at the same

<sup>83</sup> *New Leader*, June 6, 13, 20, 1936.

<sup>84</sup> *New York Times*, May 26, 1936.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, May 26, 27, 1936.

<sup>86</sup> Hoopes to Harry Laidler, May 15, 1936, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>87</sup> *Reading Eagle*, May 26, 27, 1936.

time pledge full support to the Socialist party. The local adopted these resolutions, thus reflecting the continued uncertainty which prevailed in the Reading organization.<sup>88</sup> The local old guard leaders were apparently still unprepared to follow the lead of Sarah Limbach and the other state Socialist officials who desired to leave the party and join with the SDF.

In such an atmosphere the question of who should control the Reading delegation to the state convention became all important. The convention would decide whether Pennsylvania, and thus Reading, would stay in the party. The state leaders campaigned vigorously for the support of the Reading old guard, and their efforts brought the conflict within the local to a head.<sup>89</sup>

The militants in Reading initiated a referendum which would instruct the delegates to the state convention to vote against any proposal which would take Pennsylvania out of the party. All their hopes were pinned on this maneuver. They were confident of success. They assumed that the old guard would not dare oppose the referendum openly because of the deep emotional attachment for the party which prevailed among the rank and file, and they further believed that they could deal adequately with any covert efforts.<sup>90</sup> Their optimism, however, proved to be illusory. On June 14, 1936, at a secret meeting held in Reading, the state and local old guard leaders agreed to leave the party regardless of the outcome of the state convention. Further, they obtained Jim Maurer's promise to go with them. Whether they would leave as the Socialist party of Pennsylvania or simply as a minority group, such as had occurred in New York, now depended entirely upon the outcome of the state convention. That convention, in turn, depended upon control of the Reading delegation, for the Reading group would constitute the majority at the Harrisburg meeting.<sup>91</sup>

In the meantime, the referendum on instructions was approved by the rank and file, and the results were received by the Berks County Committee.<sup>92</sup> But even before that event could

<sup>88</sup> Minutes of Local Berks County, June 4, 1936.

<sup>89</sup> Pratt, "Reading, Pennsylvania Socialists," 329.

<sup>90</sup> Fred Merkel to Editor, *Socialist Call*, June 4, 1936; Mark Brown to Jack Altman, June 2, 1936, Socialist Party Collection, Duke.

<sup>91</sup> Sarah Limbach to Sonia Teitleman, June 18, 1936, *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Minutes of the County Committee of the Socialist Party of Berks County, July 16, 1936.

take place, the old guard moved to take Reading out of the national party. On July 7 Jim Maurer resigned from the party, saying that he could no longer abide the “trend toward Communism.”<sup>93</sup> This event stunned many for Maurer had been the symbol of socialism in Reading for many years and despite his illness was still considered the nucleus of the movement. His resignation was symptomatic of the problem which now existed in Reading. There was no hope for a settlement acceptable to both factions; no hope for compromise. Even Darlington Hoopes was discouraged. “I know that the local situation is entirely impossible,” he wrote, “. . . they can’t go on the way it is.”<sup>94</sup>

The Reading delegation to the state convention was chosen at branch meetings of the local, and it appears that slightly less than half the delegates represented the right wing.<sup>95</sup> The militants, therefore, remained confident. However, when the state executive committee met just prior to the opening of the convention, it unseated twenty-six delegates including nineteen left wingers from Reading for alleged “Constitutional irregularities.”<sup>96</sup> The militants were stunned, and their surprise was mirrored in the reaction of Charles Sands who fell heavily into a chair muttering, “It’s all over.”<sup>97</sup>

The expulsion of the militant delegates opened the way for a resolution of disaffiliation with the national party. Mayor Stump, as state chairman, urged that such action be taken, and the convention responded positively by a vote of fifty-five to thirty-one. At the same time, however, Stump urged all Socialists to support the candidacy of Norman Thomas.<sup>98</sup> Following this, the left wing minority bolted the convention and held their own meeting where they reaffirmed their loyalty to the national party.<sup>99</sup>

For a period of several weeks after the convention the operation of the party in Reading was almost totally disrupted as each faction attempted to establish control. Both claimed the allegiance of the majority of Socialists in the city and control of

<sup>93</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, July 10, 1936; *Reading Eagle*, July 7, 1936; *New Leader*, July 11, 1936.

<sup>94</sup> Hoopes to Clarence Senior, August 5, 1936, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

<sup>95</sup> *Reading Eagle*, August 16, 1936.

<sup>96</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, August 21, 1936.

<sup>97</sup> Personal interview with Mark Brown, June 17, 1968.

<sup>98</sup> *Reading Labor Advocate*, August 31, 1936.

<sup>99</sup> *Reading Eagle*, August 15, 16, 1936.

the party's property and bank account. However, the claims of the left were tenuous since the state organization was in the hands of the old guard more firmly than ever before. Almost immediately the right wing moved to settle the Reading affair to its liking. On August 23, 1936, an "investigation" of the Reading situation was conducted before the SEC, where Darlington Hoopes, now identifying himself openly with the old guard, questioned some twenty "witnesses" who revealed the existence of a "Militant-Communist plot" to take over the local. Since no leftists appeared before the committee to argue their side of the issue, one might question the objectivity of the findings. But the result was just what the old guard desired: revocation of the charter of local Berks.<sup>100</sup>

Following the revocation, the SEC placed control of the property of the local in the hands of a committee of eighteen presided over by old guard leaders, Birch Wilson, George Rhodes, and Raymond Hofses, and issued a new charter to the right wing.<sup>101</sup> The left was effectively isolated.

The next move of the old guard was directed against the left wing. Charles Sands, the only left wing member of the city council, was divested of control of the water and street cleaning departments, and fourteen of his employes were dismissed for "disruptive tactics." Sands led a demonstration at city hall in behalf of the left, but it did not attract much attention. And the *Advocate* predicted gleefully that the "leftist elements" would soon "fade away." By mid-September the old guard seemed to have the situation well under control. Ten branches in the city had been reorganized, and they claimed the allegiance of the vast majority of active Socialists. Except for the bank account which was tied up by litigation, the old guard also controlled the property of the local, including the *Advocate*, the party's building (the Labor Lyceum), and Socialist park. The crisis appeared to be over at last, and the party free to proceed with its business: the administration of the city and preparations for the forthcoming elections.<sup>102</sup>

Unfortunately, the elections demonstrated a fact which the

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, August 18, 24, 1936.

<sup>101</sup> Reading *Labor Advocate*, August 28, 1936.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, September 11, 18, 25, 1936; Hoopes to Sarah Limbach, September 17, 1936, Hoopes Papers, Penn State.

Socialists should have already realized; their organization was in disarray. They were defeated overwhelmingly. Hoopes finished fifth in the race for the state legislature, polling only 9,080 votes as compared to 15,029 in 1934. Norman Thomas received only 1,762 votes for president, compared with his total of 9,533 in 1932, while President Roosevelt received 24,208, or sixty-one percent. Clearly, the portents for the future were grim.<sup>103</sup>

Two factors account for the Socialist defeat in Reading in 1936. The first of these, of course, was the split. The Socialists were forced, as a result of press coverage, to air their dirty linen in public. Particularly during August and September the people were treated to a virtual "blow by blow" account of the in-fighting through the pages of the local papers, especially the *Reading Eagle*. There can be no question that this airing shook the confidence of the people in the party and the municipal government. Then, too, the Socialists found it almost impossible to conduct an effective campaign and cope with the split at the same time.<sup>104</sup>

On the other hand, the appeal of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal certainly played a part in the debacle. Labor deserted the Socialist party throughout the country and contributed to Thomas's failure in the presidential campaign. Of course, he suffered from the national split also, just as the Reading comrades did.<sup>105</sup> Locally, a Berks County Roosevelt for President Non-Partisan League was organized in September under the leadership of Earl White, an ex-Socialist labor organizer.<sup>106</sup> It seems apparent that this group actively pressured the Federated Trades Council, long a Socialist preserve, to endorse Roosevelt. The endorsement was granted in October although the FTC also endorsed the local Socialist candidates.<sup>107</sup> There was no objection by old guard leaders to this unusual turn of events, thus suggesting that, despite their protestations to the contrary, the right wing was not vitally interested in the candidacy of Norman Thomas. This action also encouraged the defection of the labor vote in Reading.

The 1936 election, of course, did not bring an end to the Social-

<sup>103</sup> Stetler, *Socialist Movement*, 174, 177; *Reading Eagle*, November 4, 1936; *Reading Times*, November 4, 1936.

<sup>104</sup> *Reading Eagle*, August-September, 1936.

<sup>106</sup> Shannon, *Socialist Party*, 245-248.

<sup>106</sup> *Reading Times*, September 23, 1936.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, October 26, 1936.

ist administration in Reading since Mayor Stump and his colleagues were elected to a four-year term in 1935. However, it was clearly recognized by all that the split caused irreversible damage to the Socialists' public image, and the party leaders were therefore hard pressed to re-establish public confidence. In 1937 they returned to tactics which had succeeded previously; the appeal to the pocket book. Mayor Stump introduced an ordinance calling for a \$4,500,000 bond issue to finance construction of a municipal power plant in the obvious hope that it would rekindle the kind of enthusiasm which brought victory a decade before.<sup>108</sup>

The Socialists predicted that municipal power would be opposed vigorously by "the interests," and thus the question would become the major issue of the 1937 campaign. This prediction, of course, came true. Led by "MECO," the local private power company, the opponents of public power worked assiduously throughout October, 1937, to defeat the proposal. The people were threatened with higher taxes, loss of other needed public improvements, and, of course, the project was condemned as "socialistic."<sup>109</sup>

The administration attempted to counter these arguments by showing that rates would be reduced, that taxes would not be increased, and that the city itself would save some \$50,000 per year on its electric bill. The effort failed. The voters rejected the bond issue by a wide margin. They also rejected the Socialist candidates for public office in the most lopsided defeat suffered by the party since 1931.<sup>110</sup> This defeat left the Socialists with a bare three to two majority in the city council. Mayor Stump, Howard McDonough, and Stewart Tomlinson remained in office but would be required to stand for election in 1939. Meanwhile, they and the party would be obliged to expend much effort in a continuing attempt to bolster images and regain public confidence. This was done, as previously, through appeals to the

<sup>108</sup> Reading *Labor Advocate*, September 24, 1937.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, October 8, 15, 1937.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, April 8, 1937; Reading *Eagle*, November 3, 1937. Paul Wenrich and Charles Hofses, both Democrats, were elected to the city council defeating former Republican Councilman Frederick Muhlenburg by a narrow margin and Socialists George Rhodes and George Snyder by a wide margin. Wenrich polled 11,931 votes and Hofses, 11,912. Muhlenburg received 10,298 votes while Snyder polled 9,349 and Rhodes, 9,261. Charles Sands, the left-wing Socialist incumbent, was not renominated.



workers. The administration actively sought financial support from the federal government, particularly in the form of WPA projects, and steadfastly opposed the desires of the government to cut back in this area. The Taxpayers' Protective League was particularly active in this regard, organizing demonstrations and issuing statements almost constantly.<sup>111</sup> However, such tactics failed to rally either labor or the general public, and the party was badly defeated again in 1938. As the year 1939 opened, it was clear that Socialist chances for a comeback in Reading were poor. Despite continued efforts, they were once more defeated.<sup>112</sup>

Thus ended the era of Socialist power in Reading. The Socialist party remained in existence for many years thereafter, but never again would it exert much political influence. Mayor Stump was re-elected once more in 1943, but this resulted from his personal popularity, not a resurgence of party influence.

<sup>111</sup> Reading *Labor Advocate*, June 3, 24, August 12, 19, 26, September 9, 16, 23, 30, October 14, 21, 1938.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, November 11, 1938; November 3, 10, 1939.