Louisiana Socialists in the Early Twentieth Century: A Study of Rustic Radicalism

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In November, 1912, one of every fourteen Louisiana voters cast a ballot for a party supposedly dedicated to destroying the southern way of life. Despite the fact that a native Southerner, Woodrow Wilson, was the presidential candidate of the Democratic party, 5,249 Louisianians voted for Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist candidate. Debs ran ahead of William H. Taft, the Republican candidate, by nearly 1,500 votes.[1] Louisiana ranked nineteenth in the nation in Socialist votes and gave Debs a higher percentage of votes than his home state of Indiana. At no other time in the history of the state was such a sizable Socialist vote polled.[2] Clearly, such a vote appears strange in Louisiana and suggests several questions. First of all, who were these supporters of Debs? In what sections of the state did they live? What did they do for a living? And, most important of all, why were they voting for the Socialist party?

[1] *Report of the Secretary of State to His Excellency the Governor of Louisiana, 1914* (Baton Rouge, 1914), unnumbered folded page opposite 226.

[2] It should be noted that Oklahoma gave the Socialists a higher percentage of votes than any other state in 1912; one of every five Oklahomans cast a ballot for Debs. Certain other southern states too, besides Louisiana, contributed a considerable number of Socialist votes: In Texas one vote in every 11 went to the Marxist; in Florida one in 10; and in Arkansas one in 14. (A study of the Socialist movement in each of these states might aid in a better understanding of not only the rise and ultimate decline of the party in the South but also of whatever legacy, if any, the movement left.) Most southern states, however, had relatively few Socialist voters. For example, only one voter in 30 was a Socialist in Mississippi; one in 70 in Tennessee; one in 117 in Georgia; one in 237 in North Carolina; and one in 306 in South Carolina. Alexander Trachtenberg (ed.), *The American Labor Year Book, 1917-1918* (New York, 1918), 338; William E. Walling and others (eds.), *The Socialism of To-day; a Source-book of the . . . Socialist and Labor Parties of all Countries* (New York, 1916), 194-95.

A few of Louisiana's geographic characteristics must be kept in mind when considering the Socialist vote. Lying entirely within the Gulf Coastal Plain and shaped like a boot, Louisiana has both very rich and very poor soil. Along the banks of the several rivers which flow through the state is found the alluvial plain, the most fertile soil in Louisiana. The widest strip of alluvial soil is, of course, along the Mississippi River. Entering from opposite directions at the northern top of the boot, the Red and Mississippi rivers join about halfway down the state and consequently extend the alluvial plain over a greater area in the southern part of Louisiana. Prairies and marshes are also found in the southern part of the state. The more elevated areas east and west of the alluvial plain are known as the Uplands and consist of three main divisions: the Uplands of the Florida parishes, north of Lake Pontchartrain and east of the Mississippi; the West Louisiana Uplands, west of the Red and Calcasieu rivers; and the North Louisiana Uplands, a wedge-shaped area lying roughly between the Red and Ouachita rivers. Rolling hill country, thick with pine forests, characterizes the upland areas, the land being far inferior to the rich soil of the alluvial plain.[3]

It was in these upland areas that the Socialist voters lived; nearly 70 per cent of the Socialist vote came from hill parishes in 1912.[4] Vernon Parish, in the heart of the yellow pine region, gave Debs 33.8 per cent of its total vote and nearly elected a Socialist school board.[5] In Winn Parish 35.4 per cent of the votes went to Debs, and the Socialists elected a school board member and a police juror, as well as the town of Winnfield's entire slate of municipal officials.[6] Twenty-nine per cent of the vote in Grant Parish was polled by the Socialist; La Salle, Caldwell, West Carroll, Bienville, Natchitoches, Red River, Franklin,

[3] Work Projects Administration, *Louisiana* (New York, 1945), 7-8.

[4] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1914,* opp. 226.

[5] Socialist candidates ran in three wards. In Ward 5 the Socialist lost by a vote of 150 to 134; in Ward 4, where two Socialists were candidates, they were defeated by votes of 136 to 104 and 134 to 102; in Ward 3 the Socialist lost 72 to 26. (The vote is given in Baton Rouge *New Advocate,* November 27, 1912, but without party designation. I am indebted to B. J. Glasscock, a former Socialist candidate for public office, of Leesville, Louisiana, who in a personal interview on November 25, 1950, matched the men with their party in this race.)

[6] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1914,* opp. 226; Girard (Kansas) *Appeal to Reason,* November 16, 1912; Baton Rouge *New Advocate,* November 27, 1912.

and Calcasieu parishes all contributed 14 per cent or more of their vote to Debs.[7]

The Socialists made their poorest showing in the southern part of the state and in the alluvial parishes. Debs did not receive a single vote in the parishes of Cameron, Madison, Tensas, West Baton Rouge, and West Feliciana and received less than 2 per cent of the total vote in Saint Mary, Saint Bernard, Saint James, Saint Helena, East Carroll, Pointe Coupee, Plaquemines, La-Fourche, East Feliciana, Iberville, and Assumption parishes.[8] Not even in New Orleans did the radicals do well. Debs received only 2.1 per cent of the total vote, and the Socialist candidate for mayor, George F. Weller, polled only 712 votes, losing to the Democrat Martin Behrman by over 26,000 votes.[9] The Socialist candidates for the New Orleans commission council were defeated by even greater majorities than Weller.[10]

None of the three Socialists who ran for Congress was elected. But in the upland eighth district J. R. Jones, a veteran Socialist campaigner, polled 1,734 votes; his Democratic opponent, J. B. Aswell, got 6,033.[11]

Actually, the Socialist strength was located in almost exactly the same parishes as was the Populist strength in the 1890's.[12] It was in Winn Parish that the Louisiana People's party was organized and had its greatest strength;[13] Vernon, Bienville, Grant, Caldwell, Natchitoches, Red River, and Calcasieu parishes were also strongholds of populism.[14] But even more significant is the fact that the Populists and Socialists both showed weakness in the same parishes. Tensas, Saint Bernard, Saint James, Saint Mary, Plaquemines, Assumption, Pointe Coupee, East Feliciana, and Iberville parishes all contributed but few votes to the Populists.[15] As was the case with socialism, "Populism never gained

[7] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1914,* opp. 226.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] New Orleans *Times-Democrat,* November 7, 1912; New Orleans *Picayune,* November 7, 1912.

[10] Baton Rouge *New Advocate,* November 25, 1912.

[11] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1914,* pp. 196-204. The eighth district included the parishes of Avoyelles, Grant, Rapides, Natchitoches, Winn, Sabine, La Salle, and Vernon.

[12] *Ibid., 1902,* pp. 562, 564; *ibid., 1914,* pp. 162-63.

[13] Melvin Johnson White, "Populism in Louisiana During the Nineties," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids, 1914-), V (1918-1919), 5.

[14] *Ibid.,* 15.

[15] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1902,* pp. 562, 564; *ibid., 1914,* pp. 162-63.

much of a foothold in the cotton parishes of the delta, or in the sugar parishes."[16]

The Populist-Socialist strongholds, in comparison with the parishes where the Populist-Socialist vote was the lowest, had: (1) a smaller percentage of farms over one thousand acres and consequently fewer powerful landowners; (2) fewer Catholics (in some parishes there were none); (3) a smaller percentage of Negro population; (4) less illiteracy; and (5) lower value of farm property.[17]

Upland Parishes	Per cent of farms over 1,000 acres	Per cent of population Catholic	Average value of farm property	Per cent of population Negro	Per cent of voting age illiterate white	total
Vernon	0.1	0.0	$1,524	21.4	7.9	15.1
Winn	0.2	0.2	$1,253	21.4	9.7	17.3
Grant	0.2	0.8	$1,713	30.5	11.0	23.4
Caldwell	0.6	0.0	$1,685	40.3	6.3	17.7
Bienville	0.1	0.0	$1,381	43.5	4.1	22.8
Alluvial Parishes						
Tensas	1.8	1.3	$2,073	91.5	1.5	59.2
St. James	5.0	53.5	$15,530	57.2	21.3	40.4
St. Charles	5.3	37.4	$6,910	60.0	25.7	43.5
St. Bernard	3.4	26.1	$8,586	46.5	28.4	38.7
Plaquemines	3.2	39.1	$6,052	54.7	20.5	39.5

Because both the Populists' and Socialists' strength and weakness are found in virtually the same areas, it appears possible that socialism in Louisiana was merely a continuation of the Populist movement that allegedly died in 1900[18] and that the Socialist voters of 1912 were generally the same men who voted

[16] White, "Populism in Louisiana During the Nineties," 15.

[17] The parishes used for these generalizations are the five which, in three different elections, were among those with the largest percentages of both Populist and Socialist votes (Winn, Vernon, Grant, Caldwell, and Bienville) and are compared with the five which, in the same three elections, had the fewest Populist and Socialist votes (Tensas, Saint James, Saint Charles, Saint Bernard, and Plaquemines). The table above is computed from: *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Population* (4 vols., Washington, 1913), II, 778-89; *Thirteenth Census . . . Statistics for Louisiana,* 622-27; *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1902,* pp. 562, 564; *ibid., 1914,* pp. 162-63.

[18] White, "Populism in Louisiana During the Nineties," 19; Lucia E. Daniel, "The Louisiana People's Party," in *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* (Baton Rouge, 1917-), XXVI (1943), 1138.

the Populist ticket in 1892 and 1900. With a few important exceptions, this seems to be true. To be sure, the strength of populism and socialism came from rural people, although each appealed to both farmer and industrial laborer alike.[19] But the Socialists in Louisiana—at least—were neither led nor supported by successful farmers or planters (men of substantial landed property) as the Populists were,[20] and their appeal to the skilled workers of the American Federation of Labor went unheeded.[21] One will look in vain to find a man of the standing of Populist Donelson Caffery, Jr., among the Louisiana Socialists. It is also doubtful that the Socialists would have formed a fusion with the Republican party in Louisiana as the Populists did before they joined the Democrats in 1896.[22] After the Populist party broke on the silver issue in 1896 and ceased to exist in Louisiana after 1900, the only choice its rural supporters seemed to have was to follow their planter leaders back into either the Democratic or Republican parties. This, however, offered no relief.[23] Conservative governors and legislators controlled by businessmen

[19] C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 253-54; David A. Shannon, "The Socialist Party Before the First World War: An Analysis," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXVIII (1951-1952), 280.

[20] White ("Populism in Louisiana During the Nineties," 14) states that of the 18 Populists elected to the Louisiana legislature in 1892, 9 were planters, 7 were farmers, one was a lumber manufacturer, and one was a teacher. See also Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 245-46.

[21] It would have been strange indeed had the American Federation of Labor, at this time, supported the Socialists, for the A.F. of L. was bitterly opposed to the syndicalism of the I.W.W. and wanted nothing to do with socialism. During a period when the lumber workers of Louisiana were engaged in a desperate struggle with the lumber owners and the Socialists were appealing for united support, the A.F. of L. repudiated the lumber workers' cause and publicly thanked the Louisiana Senate for its alleged fair treatment of the laboring man and his welfare. See Baton Rouge *New Advocate*, July 11, 1912. For evidence that members of the A.F. of L. supported Populism, see Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 253-54.

[22] Caffery was the son of the conservative gold Democrat, Senator Donelson Caffery, a man of substantial social and economic standing. On the Populist-Republican fusion, see White, "Populism in Louisiana During the Nineties," 17.

[23] There is evidence that the small farmers of Louisiana continued to suffer after the collapse of Populism. There were, for example, more rented dwellings in Louisiana than in her neighboring states; the average number of persons living in a house was even greater than in Mississippi, a state notorious for its rural slums. Also, the Louisiana cotton crop fell from 470,136 bales valued at $20,790,000 in 1908 to 245,646 bales valued at $17,180,000 in 1910, and corn production fell from 51,198,000 bushels in 1909 to 32,490,000 bushels three years later. *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1916* (Washington, 1917), 75, 76, 128, 140, 145. Naturally, the small farmers—hurt most by this loss in income—were resentful.

and lumber barons continued to rule the state.[24] Had there been a Jeff Davis, Tillman, or Vardaman in Louisiana in the first two decades of the twentieth century the discontented might have turned to him. But no spellbinding demagogue promising reforms appeared; twenty-eight years elapsed between the death of the Louisiana People's party and the election of a strong man. The discontented farmers did not wait. Without a leader and with their previous protest movement dead, some turned to socialism.[25]

In addition to this core of former Populist farmers there was another group who followed the Socialist banner in Louisiana—the unskilled lumber workers, unknown as followers of populism. There was also a small body of strictly Marxian Socialists (found almost entirely in New Orleans) who originally controlled the party in Louisiana, but they were more given to discussion than to action and by 1912 the farmers and lumber workers had taken over the party.[26] What success the Socialists had in Louisiana resulted from the temporary alliance between the oppressed farmers and the lumber workers.[27]

The oppressed farmers were the first important Socialist converts, but their support was not gained immediately. In fact, the first evidence of socialism in Louisiana—the 995 votes cast for Debs in 1904—showed the party to be strongest in the southern and alluvial parishes; Orleans Parish alone contributed 48.2 per cent of the total state Debs vote.[28]

[24] For an account of the strength of the lumber operators in Louisiana, see U. S. Department of Commerce, *The Lumber Industry* (Washington, 1913), Pt. 2, pp. 132-54.

[25] The large number of voters registered as "no party" or "independent" after 1900, coupled with the steady increase in Socialist votes in the upland parishes after 1904, tends to confirm this generalization. *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1910,* pp. 145-67; *ibid., 1912,* pp. 101-104; *ibid., 1914,* pp. 154-61. For a good account of Socialist-Populist relations on the national scene, see Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Columbia, S. C., 1953), 210-46.

[26] Personal interview with Covington Hall, New Orleans, January 29, 1951. Hall was at one time the leading radical writer and journalist in the South.

[27] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1914,* pp. 162-63, opp. 226; *The Lumber Industry,* Pt. 2, pp. 132-33.

[28] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1905,* unnumbered folded page opposite xvi. There had been isolated groups of radicals in Louisiana before 1904, but they had never asserted themselves. Robert Owen visited New Orleans in 1828, but devoted most of his time to "baiting the clergy" rather than setting up any more New Harmonies. Bernhard Mueller founded a communitarian settlement at Grand Ecore in Natchitoches Parish in 1834, and in 1850 Wilhelm Weitling, a

The New Orleans Socialists, however, lacked unity and were soon hopelessly divided. By 1906 the more radical element among the New Orleans Socialists championed the cause of the Industrial Workers of the World—a union which appealed to the unskilled worker and advocated direct economic action in preference to political action.[29] Contemptuous of the milder members of the party whom they called Yellows and said were "ballot-happy," the I.W.W. supporters (they were known as Reds) invited Daniel De Leon, the leader of the Socialist Labor party and a member of the I.W.W., to speak in New Orleans under the auspices of the Socialist local. The Yellows were enraged and cancelled De Leon's invitation. In the schism which followed the Reds quit the party to devote their time to I.W.W. activities, leaving the Yellows in control of the New Orleans local.[30]

Despite the setback in New Orleans, Socialist gains in the November election of 1908 were surprising. Besides contributing

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utopian communist, visited German friends in New Orleans and established a radical labor paper, which soon failed. Weitling also stopped over in Baton Rouge and learned that "a Hungarian society" was operating a communal boarding-house there. But if there was extreme radical activity in Louisiana between 1850 and 1904, it was either successfully submerged during that troubled period or found sufficient outlet in other movements. On Owen see New Orleans *Louisiana Advertiser*, January 29, 1828. Mueller's activities are covered in Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia, 1950), 35. On Weitling see Carl Wittke, *The Utopian Communist: A Biography of Wilhelm Weitling, Nineteenth-Century Reformer* (Baton Rouge, 1950), 181-82.

[29] The Socialist party (as an organization) and its membership contributed materially to I.W.W. strikes and defense funds, and as important a figure as Eugene V. Debs helped establish the union. But a serious factional fight involving the fundamental ideology of American socialism followed the formation of the I.W.W.; within the party conservative political-actionists were constantly at odds with the pro-Wobblie element led by William D. Haywood. For a recent account of this bitter struggle which resulted in the repudiation of most of the I.W.W. principles, see Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* (New York, 1953), especially Chaps. VII and XVIII. See also Stow Persons and Donald Drew Egbert (eds.), *Socialism and American Life* (2 vols., Princeton, 1952), I, and Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928* (New York, 1928) on the Socialists. Paul F. Brissenden, *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York, 1920) is still good on the Wobblies. On Debs see McAlister Coleman, *Eugene V. Debs, A Man Unafraid* (New York, 1930) and Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1949). Quint's *Forging of American Socialism* is excellent but does not go beyond 1901.

[30] Covington Hall, "Labor Struggles in the Deep South" (typescript in Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University), 54-55; hereafter cited as Hall MS.

2,538 ballots to Debs's total, Socialists cast many votes for minor offices. The Socialist strength, however, was shifting away from New Orleans and southern Louisiana. The hill parishes of the north central and western parts of the state were rapidly becoming the stronghold of socialism in Louisiana.[31]

As the movement spread into the uplands it began to assume many of the social aspects of populism. "Feeling it our duty to do something for the cause, the young people . . . have given a box supper . . . and made $12.50," wrote two girls from Bentley, Louisiana. Although they confessed that "none of us are members of the Socialist party . . . we believe and are doing all we can to keep the good work going on."[32] Encampments were numerous—some lasting for over a week at a time—and there was much enthusiasm. "Comrades at Verda, Lofton and Georgetown, Louisiana, will build brush arbors and have a speaker every week during the summer," it was reported. In one period of three months twenty locals, with a total membership of 361, were organized. Women took an active part and one, a Miss Nellie Zey, was added to the list of Socialist speakers.[33]

An ever-increasing mass of Socialist literature aided the work of the organizers. Books, pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers devoted to expounding the virtues of the coming millenium were widely scattered. The most read publications, according to contemporary observers, were the *Appeal to Reason*, the *National Rip-Saw*, and the *International Socialist Review*.[34] Two Socialist journals were published in Louisiana: The *Forum* was started at Dodson, Winn Parish, in 1909, and the *Toiler* was begun at Leesville in Vernon Parish about the same time.[35]

While the Yellows continued to dominate the New Orleans branch of the party and advocated only political action, the upland Socialists, who were gradually taking over the party outside New Orleans, tended to blend the radicalism of the Reds with their ruralism—sometimes advocating direct economic ac-

[31] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1910*, p. 147. For the shift of Socialist strength, see *ibid., 1905*, opp. xvi; *ibid., 1910*, opp. 136; *ibid., 1914*, opp. 226.

[32] Myrtle and Eune Pollard to Editor, in *Appeal to Reason*, January 4, 1913.

[33] *Ibid.*, April 23, June 11, July 9, 1910; August 28, December 25, 1909; Hall MS., 175.

[34] Glasscock interview; Hall interview.

[35] *Appeal to Reason*, December 25, 1909; Glasscock interview.

tion, sometimes advocating political action as well.[36] By 1910 J. W. Barnes, Louisiana's representative at the Socialist Congress in Chicago, reflected the Reds' influence by concluding that industrial unionism "is the only thing that will solve the race problem of the South."[37] In November J. R. Jones (a Red) challenged Congressman A. P. Pujo for his seat, but only in the upland and timber areas of the seventh district did he show strength, receiving but 706 votes to his opponent's 7,393. Other Socialist candidates in the fourth and fifth congressional districts did even worse, getting votes only in upland and lumbering parishes.[38] When Debs stopped in Louisiana in 1911 on his nation-wide speaking tour, 3,500 people heard him in New Orleans—even the Reds turned out although they took no part in the program.[39]

The dissension between the rural Reds and the Yellows was revealed in the April, 1912, election. The Socialist ticket did not receive a single vote in New Orleans although the city had the largest Socialist local in the state. Being predominantly Yellows, the New Orleans Socialists refused to support the Red ticket headed by the candidate for governor, J. R. Jones, a card-carrying member of the I.W.W. (At this time the Reds in New Orleans were having nothing to do with political action.) In the entire state Jones received only 984 votes. L. E. Hall, the Democrat, got 50,581, and even the Republican candidate got five times as many votes as did the Socialist. Only in Vernon and Winn parishes did Jones demonstrate strength.[40] For the state legislature, Socialist candidate J. J. Cryer of Vernon Parish was defeated 1,147 to 369, and in Winn Parish H. T. Nichols, another Socialist, lost 880 to 385 for the same office.[41]

The upland farmers were largely responsible for what votes the Socialists received in April; indeed, the New Orleans Yellows had deserted the state party, and as yet the lumber workers had not contributed in any sizable degree to the Socialist vote.[42]

[36] Hall interview.

[37] "Sparks from the National Convention," in *International Socialist Review* (Chicago, 1900-1918), X (1909-1910), 1128.

[38] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1912*, pp. 101-102, 104.

[39] George D. Brewer, "Awakening of Dixie," in *Appeal to Reason*, March 18, 1911.

[40] In Winn Parish Jones got 143 votes, or 12.5 per cent of the total; in Vernon he got 252 votes, or 17.0 per cent. Baton Rouge *New Advocate*, May 21, 1912.

[41] *Ibid.*, May 4, 1912.

[42] Hall interview. This is substantiated by the fact that the lumbering par-

When, in May, 1912, the Socialist national convention met to choose a candidate for President, there was much tension among the delegates. The sharp dissension between Reds and Yellows which had been mounting throughout the country since the formation of the I.W.W. now threatened to divide the party just as it had in Louisiana. On the fifth day, the report of the Committee on Labor Organizations and their relations to the Socialist party was read before the convention. "Astonishment showed on every face and then followed a tumultuous yell as the convention woke up to the fact that a bitter fight had been diverted," for the report proved to be a compromise. The committee suggested that "all labor organizations . . . throw their doors wide open to the workers" and emphasized the "vital importance of the task of organizing the unorganized, especially the immigrants and the unskilled laborers." Tom Hickey, a Red from Texas, got the floor and declared that "the impossible has happened. . . . the entire labor movement, economic and political, will stand together unified."[43]

The Yellows, however, were not entirely satisfied. When the Constitutional Committee read the Socialist platform a Yellow moved that section six be amended to read: "Any member of the party who opposes political action or advocates sabotage or other methods of violence . . . shall be expelled from the party." This was an open attack upon the I.W.W. policy of direct economic action and a fight was on. For hours the amendment was debated—sometimes with logic and calm but mostly with passion and malice. At last, Victor L. Berger, a Yellow, got the floor and announced: "We have a number of men who use our political organization . . . as a cloak for what they call direct action, for I.W.W.-ism, sabotage and syndicalism." Expressing his opposition to "the bomb, the dagger and every other form of violence," Berger suggested that those who sang " 'Hallelujah, I'm a Bum' . . . start a 'Bum' Organization of their own. . . . I am ready to split right here." The split, however, did not occur. In the roll

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ishes showed the greatest increase in Socialist vote between the April and November, 1912, elections. See *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1914,* pp. 162-63, opp. 226; *The Lumber Industry,* Pt. 2, pp. 132-33.

[43] John Spargo (ed.), *Proceedings of the National Convention of the Socialist Party, 1912* (Chicago, 1912), 100, 195; "The National Socialist Convention of 1912," in *International Socialist Review,* XII (1911-1912), 822.

call that followed, Louisiana's lone delegate to the convention, J. R. Jones, cast his vote (along with the other Reds) against inserting the word sabotage, but the amendment carried.[44]

The final order of business was the nomination for President. The Reds for the most part backed Debs, and, though the Yellows tried hard to prevent it, he was nominated.[45]

Despite their bitterness over the sabotage clause, the Reds were delighted that the Socialist party had officially recognized labor organizations. They could now, as their leader, "Big Bill" Haywood, remarked, "go to the working class . . . to the black men . . . to the disfranchised white men . . . the striking lumber workers . . . and carry them the message of Socialism . . . from the Socialist platform." There was still some unity within the party; indeed, Haywood believed the recognition of labor organizations to be "the greatest step that has been taken by the Socialist party . . . it unites every worker."[46] But would this unity withstand a practical test? Could the lumber workers in Louisiana be allied with the Socialists?

To some extent, the Louisiana lumber workers were temporarily allied with the Socialists. But the alliance was uncertain—the policy of the lumber operators and the position of the workers did much to prevent unity. The congressional policy of opening to speculators the public lands in the southern states during the Redeemer period resulted in wholesale exploitation of natural resources; not the least ravaged were the vast virgin forests of Louisiana.[47] Along with the immense power and exhaustive methods of these exploiters came the wretched existence of the lumber workers.

Although lumbering in the South was not as important a source of employment as agriculture, in many states such as Louisiana, where 60 per cent of all industrial wage earners were lumbermen,[48] it was the only important industry. Because the lumber industry offered a source of income—when sometimes the farms did not—there was often a shifting back and forth between work-

[44] Spargo (ed.), *Proceedings of the Socialist Party, 1912*, pp. 122-37.
[45] *Ibid.*, 137-43; "The National Socialist Convention of 1912," 828.
[46] Spargo (ed.), *Proceedings of the Socialist Party, 1912*, p. 100.
[47] Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 114-20. See also *The Lumber Industry*, Pt. 2, pp. 132-54.
[48] *Thirteenth Census . . . Statistics for Louisiana*, 654.

ers on the farms and workers in the forests or sawmills.[49] Indeed, lumber workers might be sons or relatives of farm owners or even the hard-pressed farm owner himself who was forced to supplement his income by working in the lumber industry.[50] There were, however, many lumber workers who knew no other occupation and who constantly moved about, living in lumber camps and having little contact with the farms.

Living conditions at the lumber camps were described by union agitators as deplorable.[51] Even an official spokesman for the lumber operators admitted: "It is the rule, not the exception, to employ practically anyone who applies for work. . . . the working force was usually honeycombed with loafers, floaters, worthless relatives, favorites, diseased men, the wornout and decrepit, inexperienced men in advanced age, etc."[52]

The workers, it was charged, were not paid in cash, but in scrip which was negotiable only at the company store. Here prices were from 20 to 50 per cent higher than at the independent stores, sometimes from 77 to 100 per cent above wholesale cost, according to a contemporary worker.[53] It was alleged that certain mill owners deliberately cultivated the "narcotic drug habit among the workers," selling cocaine, morphine, and heroin at the company store. "These workers," stated one observer, "moved about from camp to camp" but, since only the mill owners would supply them with drugs, "never got away from the district."[54]

Claims were also made that disease and vice flourished in the lumber camps. Bill Haywood, after visiting Louisiana, wrote that "the companies had women who lived in the camps. . . . the men moved from camp to camp, staying perhaps a few months, perhaps a couple of years, but the women stayed in the shacks and took the newcomers as husbands for the duration of their stay in that camp."[55]

[49] Vernon H. Jensen, *Lumber and Labor* (New York, 1945), 5.

[50] Glasscock interview. Glasscock was one of the hard-pressed farm owners who worked in the lumber industry.

[51] William D. Haywood, "Timber Workers and Timber Wolves," in *International Socialist Review*, XIII (1912-1913), 105-10.

[52] D. T. Hulse, "Employing and Handling Men in the Logging and Lumber Manufacturing Industry," in *Bulletin of the Southern Logging Association* (New Orleans, 1925), 37.

[53] Bob Shadrick, "Growing Worse in Dixie," in *Appeal to Reason*, January 25, 1913.

[54] William D. Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood* (New York, 1929), 244.

[55] *Ibid.*, 243.

Living conditions, pay, and hours were the greatest causes of complaint, but rarely, if ever, were these grievances openly expressed. Minor strikes and unorganized walkouts, lasting only a few hours or a few days, were the only overt expressions of discontent before union activity began. On June 14, 1902, six hundred employees of the Ruddock and Louisiana Cypress Saw Mill Company in Calcasieu Parish demanded a reduction of the working day from eleven to ten hours. The company refused and the mill hands united and walked out. A few days later the workers of the Lutcher[56] Sawmill Company, about forty miles north of New Orleans, presented the same demands and got the same answer. Both companies, however, gave in five days later and the laborers went back to work.[57]

Again in 1907 there was a mild strike in western Louisiana and eastern Texas, centering around Lake Charles, but the manifestation of discontent lacked leadership and organization—despite the contention that it was I.W.W. inspired.[58] The strike accomplished nothing,[59] and at this time the Southern Lumber Operators Association was formed.[60] This organization was destined to deal the workers' union heavy blows in the years to follow.

The union movement began in earnest in 1910 when Arthur Lee Emerson formed the Brotherhood of Timber Workers.[61] Emerson and a fellow organizer, Jay Smith, traveled through the timber region, securing a few days' work in each camp, enlisting black as well as white members. Although a native of Tennes-

[56] The town of Lutcher had the only Negro Socialist party local in Louisiana in 1905. Eraste Vidrine, "Negro Locals," in *International Socialist Review,* V (1904-1905), 389.

[57] *Second Biennial Report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor for the State of Louisiana, 1902-1903* (Baton Rouge, 1903), 40.

[58] Industrial Workers of the World, *The Lumber Industry and Its Workers* (Chicago, n.d.), 76.

[59] Covington Hall, "Revolt of the Southern Timber Workers," in *International Socialist Review,* XIII (1912-1913), 52.

[60] New Orleans *Times-Democrat,* July 20, 1911.

[61] There is a difference of opinion as to the exact date of the founding of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers. Covington Hall (in Hall MS., 124) says it was in June, 1910, that Emerson and Jay Smith gathered twenty-five lumberjacks and established the union; but in an article ("I Am Here for Labor," in *International Socialist Review,* XIII [1912-1913], 223) he states that the Brotherhood was founded by Emerson and Smith at Carson, Louisiana, on December 3, 1910. Haywood ("Timber Workers and Timber Wolves," 107) says that Emerson founded the Brotherhood alone at Fullerton, Louisiana, in 1910, and later Smith joined him. B. J. Glasscock only remembers the union starting in 1910.

see,[62] Emerson had made trips to the west coast where, working as a lumberjack, he perceived the difference in the wage scale and living standard of the organized western workers and the unorganized laborers of the South. Immediately upon his return to Louisiana he began to organize the workers, and—according to a contemporary account—the union soon grew to thirty thousand members.[63]

What one observer called the "Louisiana Lumber War" began on May 17, 1911, when the lumber operators decided they could force the dissolution of the union by cutting down mill operations to four days a week.[64] Eleven Louisiana mills employing three thousand men were closed immediately. At Carson, states a biased account, the mills were shut down and some four hundred families were ordered to vacate the company houses.[65] At all mills members of the union were discharged as fast as they were discovered.[66]

Ironclad oaths and "yellow dog" contracts were a prerequisite to employment everywhere.[67] These highhanded tactics of the lumber operators were not popular even with the nonunion men, and many workers refused to sign. One rustic Louisianian said in regard to signing the oath, "only a low-life lickskillet would do such a thing. . . . I would live on wild plants that grow in the hills before I would sign."[68]

The attempt to crush the union backfired on the operators, for the Brotherhood emerged from the first struggle of the lumber war considerably strengthened. The union men mapped out a series of demands which included a minimum wage of two dollars for a ten-hour day; bimonthly payment in lawful United States currency; freedom to trade in independent stores; reasonable rents; revision of doctors' and hospital fees; improvements in camps and towns; disarming and discharge of company guards; and the right of free speech and assembly.[69]

[62] Hall MS., 187.

[63] Haywood, "Timber Workers and Timber Wolves," 107-108; Hall, "I Am Here for Labor," 223.

[64] Hall MS., 131; New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, May 17, 1911.

[65] Haywood, "Timber Workers and Timber Wolves," 108; Hall, "I Am Here for Labor," 223.

[66] New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, July 20, 1911.

[67] Hall MS., 133.

[68] Glasscock interview.

[69] New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, July 20, 1911.

On October 31, 1911, the Southern Lumber Operators Association met in New Orleans to discuss reopening the mills.[70] Some mills were subsequently opened with slightly higher wages and a ten-hour day granted, but the lockout at many mills continued until February, 1912.[71] This prolonged lockout caused many unemployed workers to turn to the union for relief, and a contemporary claims that the wife of one idle lumberjack told her husband: "Get out of this house and join the union, or I'll leave it, and try to find a man to live with."[72]

It was during this period that the Brotherhood sent three delegates to the convention of the Industrial Workers of the World. "For the first time in an I.W.W. convention there were fraternal delegates from the South," remarked B. H. Williams in reporting on the convention. "These were the representatives of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers, who," he continued, "in only a few short months of experience in unionism have developed splendid fighting qualities in their combat with the lumber trust in Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas."[73]

Despite the sending of delegates to the convention, the Brotherhood of Timber Workers had not yet joined the I.W.W. Desiring to effect consolidation, "Big Bill" Haywood, recognized leader of the Wobblies, journeyed to Alexandria, Louisiana, for the Brotherhood's second annual convention on May 6, 1912. Haywood met privately with Arthur Emerson before the convention and, with the help of Covington Hall, a native Louisianian who was already a member of the I.W.W., convinced Emerson that his union should join the direct actionists.[74]

Emerson had no trouble convincing his men, who, besides voting to join the I.W.W., evidenced other signs of radicalism. Negro union men had been segregated in another building when the convention began, but after appeals by both Haywood and Hall the white delegates allowed the blacks to assemble in the same building, although the Negroes were compelled to sit at the opposite side of the room. Granting to women the right to hold membership in the Brotherhood was a more radical move.

[70] *Ibid.*, November 1, 1911.

[71] I.W.W., *The Lumber Industry and Its Workers*, 77.

[72] Hall MS., 139.

[73] Brissenden, *The I.W.W.*, 267, citing Minutes of the Sixth I.W.W. Convention held in Chicago, September 18 to 28, 1911; B. H. Williams, "Sixth I.W.W. Convention," in *International Socialist Review*, XII, (1911-1912), 302.

[74] Hall, "Revolt of the Southern Timber Workers," 51; Hall MS., 135.

With their membership went the right to vote on any decision concerning the union.[75] The convention ended with great hopes for the future, and agitation following the Alexandria meeting was vigorous. Strikes were planned on a scale never before dreamed of in the South, while renewed effort was made to enlist farmers in the union cause.[76]

Haywood returned to Louisiana on July 1 to persuade the lumber workers to vote for Debs. Since as early as 1909 local Reds like J. R. Jones had tried to convert the lumber workers to socialism without much success. After hearing Jones speak to a group of lumber workers a small capitalist wrote, "those who work hard and get little are too ignorant to understand Socialism and are violently opposed to it. . . . Jones gave them an intelligent lecture but the boss told them it was all foolishness and they believed the boss."[77] Now, "Big Bill" was trying to accomplish what Jones had failed to do: make Socialist voters out of the lumber workers. Haywood and Emerson spoke at mass meetings throughout the timber district, endorsing both the I.W.W. and the Socialist party, but confining themselves mostly to tirades against the lumber industry and its owners.[78]

The rapidly mounting tension between the union and the owners reached the explosive point on Sunday, July 7, 1912, when Emerson led a crowd of union men and women to the sawmill town of Grabow to hold a "speaking." A few weeks before, the union men at Grabow had gone out on strike. The town, owned by the Galloway Lumber Company and protected by armed guards, was believed by the union men to be an excellent place for a group of discontented radicals to meet. Most of the residents were strike breakers, and Emerson hoped to persuade these newly arrived workers to join the union and aid the strike. Emerson had hardly begun to speak when a shot was fired. A battle followed in which three men—two union members and a Burns detective—were killed and forty-eight persons were wounded.[79]

[75] Hall MS., 136-38; Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book*, 241-42.

[76] Hall MS., 149; Haywood, "Timber Workers and Timber Wolves," 107. Later the I.W.W. would denounce the farmers as exploiters of labor. See Hall MS., 219.

[77] P. Wagner to Editor, in *Appeal to Reason*, January 16, 1909.

[78] Hall MS., 150-51.

[79] *Ibid.*, 152-53; Baton Rouge *New Advocate*, July 8, 10, September 27, 1912. Exactly what happened during the battle is not clear.

That night over a thousand men gathered in the town of DeRidder, where Emerson and his followers had gone after the encounter. Many demanded that Emerson lead them in an attack on surrounding towns, and, although he refused, "at midnight . . . the streets were filled with people and . . . serious trouble was likely to break out at any minute."[80] State troops were ordered to the area; the next day Emerson was arrested for murder, and two weeks after the incident twenty-three union men were in jail at Lake Charles.[81]

The timber workers and many of the farmers of the area were disgruntled over Emerson's arrest, for the Grabow affair looked to them like an attack upon the union men. Their attitude was not changed when, on July 23, a grand jury indicted Emerson and eight other members of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers for murder, but released John and Paul Galloway, owners of the mills at Grabow, without charges.[82] Repercussions followed. The mill workers at Bon Ami, heretofore nonunion in sentiment, threatened a general walkout unless Emerson was released. Mass meetings were held in New Orleans and Leesville. In New Orleans a crowd of 2,500 assembled in Lafayette Square. For the first time in years Socialist Yellows and Reds put aside their differences and protested against the treatment of the union men.[83] In the western and central upland parishes Reds worked hard to consolidate the farmers and laborers of all races and national origins. Covington Hall tells of the bravest man he ever met—a lumberjack with nine children—who was willing to strike in an attempt to effect Emerson's release if the union would only guarantee food for his children. If Hall is to be believed, some degree of class solidarity was awakened by the arrest of the union men. "We farmers and workers will have to stick together," said one Negro farmer. And he pledged that "so long as I have a pound of meat or a peck of corn, no man, white or colored, who goes out in this strike will starve, nor will his children."[84]

Hall also saw a great opportunity for the Socialist party in the

[80] Baton Rouge *New Advocate,* July 8, 1912; Hall MS., 153.
[81] Baton Rouge *New Advocate,* July 11, 24, 1912.
[82] *Ibid.,* July 24, 1912.
[83] *Ibid.,* July 11, 1912; *Appeal to Reason,* July 20, 1912; Hall MS., 156.
[84] Hall MS., 149.

coming election. He implored the party to take advantage of the unity between the farmers and workers of western Louisiana. "The Socialist Party has a splendid chance, I think, to carry the seventh and perhaps one other congressional district of Louisiana in the coming election, if speakers, backing the timber workers, are thrown in here at once and the union aided in its fight," wrote Hall.[85]

"Goaded into action by Haywood," the national Socialist party's executive committee did appeal for funds to assist the timber workers. But that was all. Even though the party had officially recognized labor organizations at the national convention, the Yellows, who controlled the party, saw little advantage in supporting a group of ignorant, lawless lumberjacks at the expense of possibly losing votes among the respectable elements of the country in the November election.[86] Hall asked for speakers, but none were sent. Passing through Lake Charles on his way to a Yellow reception in New Orleans, Eugene V. Debs did not even so much as get off the train, much less endorse the lumberjacks' stand or visit their jailed comrades.[87] The I.W.W., however, was quite willing to aid the Brotherhood.[88]

The trial of the nine union men charged with murder began on October 8, 1912.[89] Three days before, in a drastic effort to "knock all of the fight" out of the union, the lumber operators closed the American Lumber Mill at Merryville in Calcasieu Parish, leaving one thousand union men out of work.[90] Possibly this act would have defeated the Brotherhood, but, with the I.W.W. on the scene, a bevy of agitators from all over the country flocking to the area, and a defense fund of $10,000, this action did little more than increase the workers' hatred. It was rumored that the laborers of western Louisiana had stated that if Emerson

[85] Covington Hall, "The Great Contest in Dixie," in *Appeal to Reason*, July 20, 1912.

[86] Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 411; Hall interview.

[87] New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, September 14, 1912.

[88] In September, 1912, the Brotherhood of Timber Workers became part of the I.W.W. See J. P. Cannon, "The Seventh I.W.W. Convention," in *International Socialist Review*, XIII (1912-1913), 424. As an indication of just how radical a group of workers in the deep South had become, Covington Hall, the leader of the Louisiana lumberjacks, proposed that the Wobblies "recognize no title to machinery except that which rests its ownership in the users." See Brissenden, *The I.W.W.*, 296.

[89] New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, October 9, 1912.

[90] *Ibid.*, October 6, 1912.

and the other men were convicted, "We are marching on Lake Charles, and burning sawmills and lumber piles as we come . . . God Almighty will see more sawmill managers, gunmen-deputy sheriffs and Burns detectives hanging to trees in western Louisiana and eastern Texas than He saw in one place in His life!"[91]

The trial ended on October 31 with a verdict of not guilty, and despite the national party's general coolness to the efforts of the union, socialism was temporarily strengthened by the union victory. Mrs. Ira Dunn of Aloha, Louisiana, reported just before the election that "people are interested in Socialism more than ever, and I have great hopes for our local now."[92] One of the union men who got out of jail in time to vote reported that many workers and farmers were casting their ballots for the Socialists because of the solidarity caused by the Grabow incident.[93]

On November 4, 1912, the lumber workers and their farmer friends went to the polls and gave Debs the largest vote a Socialist was ever to receive in Louisiana.[94] But the 5,249 votes the Louisianians had given Debs, although noteworthy, represented only a small percentage of the potential Socialist vote. The migratory workers, the lowly rednecks who constantly moved from lumber camp to lumber camp and were thus disfranchised by the very nature of their work, were the untapped reservoir of any future radical success. But these men were in search of immediate gains—their faith lay only in more pay, shorter hours, and better working conditions. And the militant economic actions of the Industrial Workers of the World appealed more to these simple men than did the political action preached by the Socialists.

After 1912 socialism rapidly declined in Louisiana. The vote dropped from 5,249 in 1912 to 292 in 1916.[95] Subscriptions to the *Appeal to Reason* in Louisiana fell from 6,500 in 1912 to 3,000 less than a year later.[96]

[91] Hall MS., 169-73.

[92] Mrs. Ira Dunn to Editor, in *International Socialist Review*, XIII (1912-1913), 439.

[93] J. H. Helton to Editor, *ibid.*, 571.

[94] For evidence that the lumber workers supported the Socialists in November, see *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1914*, pp. 162-63, opp. 226; *The Lumber Industry*, Pt. 2, pp. 132-33.

[95] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1917*, unnumbered folded page.

[96] *Appeal to Reason*, August 9, 1912; June 8, 1913.

There are several explanations for this decline. Possibly the unwillingness of the Socialist party and the I.W.W. to co-operate after 1912 is foremost. But the prosperity produced by World War I also contributed to the decline of socialism in Louisiana—as it did throughout the country—and the obscurity of the Socialist candidate for President in 1916, Allan Benson, certainly did not aid the party. Moreover, the impermanency of anything radical in the South must be considered. Rarely has social change been effected rapidly in a section with such strong racial and sectional prejudices. The failure of the Socialist party and especially the failure of the Industrial Workers of the World to recognize this axiom is no less an important factor. Covington Hall believed that when the I.W.W. refused to incorporate the sharecroppers into its organization it was doomed to failure in the South. He knew that industrial organization could not take place in an agrarian society where I.W.W. organizers were likely to denounce a union man's "parents and kinsmen as exploiters of labor" simply because they owned small farms and had a hired hand or two.[97]

For a brief time the aggressive tactics of the I.W.W. appealed to the Louisiana lumber workers, and after 1912 political action and the Socialist party were pushed into obscurity. But an organization built on undisciplined "I'm-a-Bum-ism," as the Wobblies were, had little chance of long-range success. They were able to create enthusiasm for a short time, but the average worker, no matter how inspired by agitation or how impassioned by hatred of existing conditions, did not want to be a "bum." As soon as his conditions began to improve, the southern laborer—like all American laborers—aspired to new heights; he took up the customs, manners, and dress of his reputed betters and set out to become a member of the now-cherished plutocracy he once so violently hated.

The combination of prosperity and witch-hunting brought about by World War I was devastating to radicalism in Louisiana. In addition to this, there was dissension already within the Socialist ranks, and also the determined effort of the lumber industry to crush unionism.

The lumber operators completely destroyed the union just be-

[97] Hall MS., 219.

fore the outbreak of World War I[98] by their tactics of blacklisting, lockouts, ironclad oaths, and the importation of Negroes from plantation areas to act as strike breakers. The use of strike breakers was quite effective because few of these Negroes knew what a union was, and any thought they might have entertained about joining was weighed heavily against the constant surveillance of "nigger-killing" deputy sheriffs.

A thorough analysis of the Negro's role in the radical movement would be desirable but is almost impossible because of the absence of reliable evidence. In passing, however, it might be mentioned that the Socialist party (in Louisiana as elsewhere) was not as enthusiastic about having Negro comrades as was the I.W.W.[99] Indeed, "a permanent colored organizer" was employed in the South by the I.W.W.,[100] and when over a thousand lumber workers struck at Merryville, Louisiana, in 1912 because fifteen employees of the American Lumber Company had been "blacklisted . . . for testifying for the defense in the famous Grabow trial," Negroes were among the strikers. An agitator reported that "although not one of these fifteen [blacklisted workers] was a Negro, our colored fellow-workers showed their solidarity by walking out with their white comrades." Despite the fact that this writer believed "a better understanding exists now between the white and black . . . than I thought possible in such a comparatively short time," he was forced to admit that most of the scabs were Negroes.[101] Hall was willing to admit, too, that the lumber operators discredited the union by charging them with trying to organize the Negroes against the whites. In any case, the Merryville strike was a failure. And after the defeat of this last large-scale concerted effort of the Louisiana lumber workers the union rapidly disintegrated.[102]

[98] Jensen, *Lumber and Labor*, 91, citing Alexandria (La.) *Voice of the People*, January 1, 29, March 5, 1914.

[99] Vidrine, "Negro Locals," 389; Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 130 ff.

[100] Ewald Koeltgen, "I.W.W. Convention," in *International Socialist Review*, XIV (1913-1914), 275.

[101] Phineas Eastman, "The Southern Negro and One Big Union," *ibid.*, XIII (1912-1913), 890-91.

[102] Covington Hall, "Negroes Against Whites," *ibid.*, 349. Union men claimed that the strike breakers were aided by so-called "Good Citizen Leagues." Such a group attacked and destroyed a strikers' tent camp at Merryville on February 16, 1913, says Hall ("With the Southern Timber Workers," *ibid.*, 805); Hall interview.

With the return of prosperity and the taming of the organized lumber worker, the Louisiana Socialist party died a natural death. Ample proof that socialism was finished in Louisiana came in 1917 when the once-popular J. R. Jones ran for district attorney in the seventh judicial district and got two votes.[103] This was formerly a strong Socialist area.

The rustic radicals of the forest and the redneck pea pickers of the hill country rose again to follow protest programs; but these programs—heavily veiled with demagoguery—claimed no Socialist backing, for, just as one New Orleans paper accurately predicted, the Louisiana Socialists' objectives would never be attained unless the party came out "under another name, and with different captains in the vanguard."[104] Was "share-the-wealth-ism" that other name and Huey Long the "different captain"?

[103] *Report of the Secretary of State . . . 1917*, p. 340.
[104] New Orleans *Picayune*, November 7, 1912.