

centralism" in practice. The Party newspaper was effectively closed to all but official views, and the members of the Debs Caucus were treated as non-persons.

In the 1972 Presidential election the division in the Socialist Party came to a head. In the Democratic primaries, the Shachtmanites supported Henry Jackson, a hawk and a strong supporter of Israel (the latter having become a litmus test for the Shachtmanites).

During the campaign itself, they took a neutral position between McGovern and Nixon, following the lead of the AFL-CIO. Harrington and his Coalition Caucus supported McGovern throughout. Most of the Debs Caucus members supported Benjamin Spock, candidate of the People's Party (Frank Zeidler was Spock's "shadow cabinet" Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare).

At the end of 1972, the Socialist Party, now completely under control of the right wing, changed its name to Social Democrats USA. This lit the fuse for the disaffiliation of many of the states and locals within the Debs Caucus, and for many resignations.

Early in 1973, the Socialist Party of Wisconsin, with the support of the California and Illinois Parties, called a "National Convention of the Socialist Party," to be held Memorial Day weekend in Milwaukee. *The resulting body voted to reconstitute the Socialist Party USA.*

SINCE 1973, the Socialist Party USA has focused its attention more on grassroots and local politics, and has dealt with the controversial issue of presidential politics on a case-by-case basis.

Due to America's restrictive and often undemocratic ballot access laws (which have made it almost impossible to break the two-party monopoly on national politics), the party views the races primarily as opportunities for educating the public about socialism and the need for electoral democracy in the U.S.

In 1976, the Socialist Party USA ran a presidential campaign for the first time in 20 years; the candidates were Frank P. Zeidler, former Mayor of Milwaukee, for President and J. Quinn Brisben, a Chicago school teacher, for Vice President. In 1980 the Socialist ticket was David McReynolds, a pacifist on the staff of the War Resisters League, and Sister Diane Drufenbrock of the Order of St. Francis.

One outcome of that campaign was the Party's recognition by the FEC as a political party nationwide in scope. In 1984 there was an ill-fated attempt to form a coalition with the Citizen's Party. In 1988, 1992, 1996 and 2000, the SP ran presidential candidates, the latest being David McReynolds, veteran antiwar activity.

Due in part to frustration with the free-trade and anti-

labor successes of Democratic President Bill Clinton (and his unelected successor, George W. Bush), the end of the Cold War and the advent of the Internet, *the last years of the 20th century saw an influx of newer, younger members. This wave of new activists brought the party to a size and level of activity not seen for decades.*

WE KNOW IT'S not easy, but it never has been. And just think, without us, things would only be worse. ***The struggle continues, and if you see yourself as part of that struggle, for socialism and democracy in our time, we invite you to join us!***

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A Century of Struggle
Socialist Party USA
1901-2001



THE SOCIALIST PARTY of the United States of America was formally organized at a unity convention in Indianapolis in 1901. The two merging groups were the Social Democratic Party of Eugene Victor Debs and the “Kangaroo” wing of the older Socialist Labor Party.

The SDP had been organized in 1898 by veterans of the Pullman strike of the American Railway Union, led by Debs, and was largely composed of American-born workers. The SLP had its roots in the American circles of Marx’s First International and the Workingmen’s Party of America, and was primarily composed of immigrants in big cities.

From the beginning the Socialist Party was the ecumenical organization for American radicals. Its membership included Marxists of various kinds, Christian socialists, Zionist and anti-Zionist Jewish socialists, foreign-language speaking sections, single-taxers and virtually every variety of American radical.

On the divisive issue of “reform vs. revolution,” the Socialist Party from the beginning adopted a compromise formula, producing platforms calling for revolutionary change but also making “immediate demands” of a reformist nature.

The Socialist Party became a major party in the years prior to World War I. It elected two Members of Congress, over 70 mayors, innumerable state legislators and city councilors. Its membership topped 100,000, and its Presidential candidate, Eugene Debs, received close to a million votes in 1912 and again in 1920. But as with any ideologically mixed organization, it was forever in internal disputes.

During the First World War, the American Socialist Party was one of the very few parties in the international socialist movement to maintain its opposition to the war, and many Socialists were imprisoned, including Debs himself. In 1919, there was a major split in the Party, when those who accepted the demand for allegiance to the Third (Communist) International formed the Communist Party (composed mostly of the foreign-language federations) and the Communist Labor Party (led by John Reed). Under pressure from the International, the two parties later merged.

Weakened by the loss of much of their left wing, the Socialist Party did not run a Presidential candidate in 1924, but joined the AFL and the railroad brotherhoods in support of the independent campaign of the progressive Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, hoping to build a permanent Farmer-Labor Party.

In 1928, the Socialist Party revived as an independent electoral entity under the leadership of Norman Thomas, an opponent of World War I and a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union.

In 1932, the impact of the Great Depression resulted in revived support for the Socialist Party, and 896,000 votes were cast for the Party’s Presidential candidate, Norman Thomas.

But, by 1936, the left-liberal policies of the New Deal took a severe toll. In that year, David Dubinsky and other socialist union leaders in New York called on their membership to vote for Roosevelt. The Socialist Party’s vote in 1936 dropped to 185,000, little more than 20 percent of that of 1932. The outbreak of the war against fascism (the Second World War) and the wartime prosperity further weakened all parties on the left.

WHILE IT WAS THE Communist Party USA that suffered the most from the McCarthy period, *all the left was seriously impaired, and by the mid-fifties little remained of organized radical politics. The Socialist Party was down to about 2,000 members, and had more or less withdrawn from electoral action in the face of the increasingly restrictive ballot-access laws passed by state legislatures around the country.*

By this time, the Communist Party had lost a number of members over its uncritical allegiance to the Soviet government, and these comrades were among those the Party actively attempted to recruit. In addition, unity discussions were launched with two groups believed to be friendly: the Jewish Labor Bund and the Independent Socialist League.

The Bund is an international organization of anti-Zionist, non-religious, democratic socialist Jews. The ISL was a Trotskyist splinter group founded and led by Max Shachtman, with about 400 members.

In 1958 the ISL dissolved, and its members joined the SP-SDF. This ended any hope of further mergers, since Shachtman’s intention was to take control of the Socialist Party. Almost at once, a faction fight erupted over the concept of “Realignment.” Shachtman and his lieutenant, Michael Harrington, argued that what America needed wasn’t a third party, but a meaningful second party.

The Realignment supporters said that in sixty years the Socialist Party had failed to bring labor into the Party, and in fact kept losing their labor sympathizers (such as the Reuther brothers) because they saw they could do more within the Democratic Party.

Many of those who later would form the Debs Caucus initially bought this reasoning, but they understood it to mean that, when becoming active in the Democratic Party, one should do so openly as a Socialist. *The suppression of Socialist identity was no part of the thinking of the bulk of the membership. From its inception, the Socialist Party had opposed anything that smacked of manipulative politics, seeing it as directly contradictory to the goal of raising the consciousness and self-confidence of the working class.*

There is no doubt that the realignment strategy was successful within its own terms. Former SP labor people like A. Philip Randolph rejoined the Party, but to many Socialists, Realignment in practice turned out to be something they

could not stomach. The result of the strategy was often to tone down everything that distinguished Socialists from liberals, and “where labor is” turned out to be not at the left of the Democratic Party but at the center, in alliance with the big city machines.

The Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL) had always been to the left of the Party as a whole; after the ISL merger, which also brought in the ISL’s youth section, the YSL, the same conflicts developed in YPSL as in the Party. *In the early 1960s, a group of left YPSLs obtained control of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).*

At the 1963 YPSL Convention, the left held an overwhelming majority. They held views that were intolerable to the SP leadership, in particular the perspective that the CP had broken up into competing sects and was no longer a monolithic enemy, and that Leninist groups could be worked with. That convention formally dissolved the YPSL. SDS became a major organization of the “New Left” only to make a series of errors and later disintegrate in 1969.

AT THE 1968 Socialist Party National Convention, the Shachtman-Harrington Caucus held a clear majority, though a slim one, and voted down resolutions demanding American withdrawal from Vietnam and urging independent political action.

They passed a resolution endorsing Hubert Humphrey — a resolution which Norman Thomas, who had less than six months to live, opposed as best he could from his hospital bed, pleading in vain with the membership to reject it. They elected a clear majority of the Party’s National Committee, and installed their own supporters as National Secretary and Editor of the Party paper.

During the Convention itself, knowing themselves defeated, the left wing organized itself as a caucus and proceeded to hire a secretary, start a newspaper, and make plans to hold conferences. At its first conference, it took the name Debs Caucus, and continued to function under that name for nearly five years.

The Debs Caucus had a valid claim to recognition as a voice of Socialism, for it included the former National Chairman, Darlington Hoopes, the Socialist ex-Mayor of Milwaukee, Frank Zeidler, and many of the state and local SP organizations.

At the infamous Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, *Realignment Socialists were present as delegates, and Bayard Rustin, having lost his old pacifist and radical orientation, effectively served as a Black floor manager for Humphrey. At the same time, many Debs Caucus members were in the streets with the demonstrators.*

By 1970, with Michael Harrington as National Chairman, under Max Shachtman’s leadership, the Socialist Party was showing a growing tendency toward a Stalinist “democratic