The SLP of America: a Premature Obituary?

By some accounts the Socialist Labor Party of America has ceased to function. It has lost its premises and its paper, The People, has not appeared for many months. Some of its locals are still meeting and its ideas live on in its offshoots and breakaways but that's all.

Founded in 1876, for the first twenty or so years it was a reformist organisation – at least, it advocated reforms of capitalism as well as its concept of socialism – not unlike the German Social Democratic Party of which many of its founding and later members had been members before emigrating to America. Things began to change with the entry into its ranks of Daniel De Leon and his election as editor of The People in 1892. De Leon campaigned for the SLP to drop its reform programme; which it did in 1900 (which led to a split and the formation of the reformist Socialist Party of America of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas).

The SLP of America, and its translations by De Leon of Marx's writings, was one of the inspirations of the ‘impossibilist revolt’ within the Social Democratic Federation in Britain against the opportunism and undemocratic practices of its leaders, a revolt which led to two breakaways, the first, in 1903, to found the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain, the second, in 1904, to found us, the Socialist Party of Great Britain.

During this period De Leon's position on the relative importance of political and industrial action changed. At first he insisted that political action – as action aimed at getting control of political power – was paramount, with industrial organisation as supportive, to back up if need be the verdict of the ballot box as well as to take over and run production immediately after the capture of state power. Later, as the agitation built up that eventually led to the foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905 (in which he played a prominent part), he changed the emphasis, arguing that it was organisation on the industrial field – to 'take and hold' the means of production – that was the more important, with political action relegated to the role of supporting the take-over of industry by neutralising and disbanding the state.

The SPGB in effect adopted De Leon's original position while the SLPGB embraced his later 'socialist industrial unionism'. Even though a casual observer might struggle to detect the subtlety of the difference but would see rather the points of similarity between the two parties, ideological battle raged over this issue for decades between us and them until the demise of the SLPGB in the 1970s.

In the meantime other, perhaps more important, differences emerged. Like us the SLP of America recognised that socialism was out of the question in Russia in 1917 (though most of the SLP in Britain went over to the Communist Party when it was formed in 1921, providing some of its early leaders). When, however, it was reported that Lenin had made a passing favourable comment on De Leon's 'socialist industrial unionism' blueprint as a way to run industry, the SLP took a more favourable view of Bolshevik Russia. In fact, until the Russian invasion of Finland in 1939, the SLP held that Russia was some sort of 'proletarian regime' even if its politics were wrong (a bit like the Trotskyist position). Even after 1939 it didn't recognise Russia as state capitalist, preferring to call it 'industrial feudalism' or, later, ‘bureaucratic collectivism’.

Another difference to emerge was over ‘socialism in one country’, especially America. De Leon had always tried to project the SLP as in the American revolutionary tradition (partly to dissipate its early German-American character), for instance praising the founding fathers of the US and criticising schoolchildren who refused to salute the American flag. His successors continued this and in its publications reference to a ‘socialist America’ and a ‘socialist Britain’ could be found. Even so, the SLP continued to publish material for pre-1914 immigrants in non-English languages (Hungarian, Bulgarian, South Slavonian) until the 1960s.
Then there was the question of ‘labour time vouchers’. Marx had mentioned these as one possible way of distributing consumer goods and services in the very early days of socialism had it been established in 1875. De Leon and, after his death in 1914, his successors turned this into a dogma, insisting that these vouchers had to be introduced and maintained for a number of years as the method of distribution, despite the fact that the development of the productive forces since 1875 had made it possible to introduce free access more or less immediately after the establishment of socialism. Believe it or not, this is still a burning issue between us and some DeLeonists on internet discussion forums.

There were similarities too. The SLP had the same definition of working class as us (despite its logo being a working man with bulging muscles wielding a big hammer). It contested elections – every US presidential election between 1892 and 1976 – on a programme offering no reforms of capitalism. It defended Marx’s view against the Leninists about the possibility of a peaceful establishment of socialism. Most SLP members eventually came to see Russia as state capitalist and that free access was the socialist method of distribution to be reached as soon as practicable. The SLP also abandoned its policy of setting up rival socialist unions and, like us, joined the existing unions for all their faults.

The SLP has its place in the history of working class ideas and organisation in the English-speaking world. ‘Names’ such as Jack London and James Connolly passed through it. It made some important mistakes, but was not fundamentally anti-working class like Leninism and its offshoots. Unfortunately, they still survive.

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