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How To Build A Socialist Government

Milwaukee and The Sewer Socialists

Nicholas Howland

Statement of Purpose

As someone who has grown up in Milwaukee, the history of the city has always been important to the story of my family. As a Socialist, historian, and avid urbanist, the topic of Sewer Socialism became an inevitable project for study. The purpose of this project is to highlight the history of change and liberation in the United States. I see the Milwaukee Socialists as a prime example of that history and what a truly representative coalition-based government can be. This paper aims to be an introductory overview to the study of the history of German immigration, the socialist press, socialism in Milwaukee, and more. The topics discussed in the paper are highlighted with the hope of possible inspiration for the modern socialist movement in building coalitions. In this current era of American life, there is currently the largest push for unionization in the last fifty years. As always true in the history of the United States there are large immigrant populations all over the country. The advent of social media has opened the door to the press being used to advance the socialist cause. Looking back upon the history of a movement like the Sewer Socialists can teach valuable lessons to the next generation of leaders.

Keywords: Socialism, Sewer Socialism, Milwaukee, German immigration, labor unions, The Milwaukee Leader, socialist press, municipal government.

I: Introduction

The Progressive Era created a new environment for American politics, but how the hell did Milwaukee end up the Socialist capital of the United States?¹ The city transformed from an agrarian territory to an industrial powerhouse through municipal government and dedication to the working class. With this strategy the Milwaukee Sewer socialists were able to cement the city as the socialist capital for more than fifty years.² Sewer Socialism, its roots in German migration, its relationship to Socialist Press, and its strong alliance with labor unions. Each of these three topics—German migration, Socialist Press, and Labor Unions—has its own complex history. For the purpose of this project and my focus on Sewer Socialism, I examine these three histories in conjunction with one another from 1863 to 1940.³ I argue that Sewer Socialism is the product of coalition building. In my argument, I identify three factors—German immigration, Socialist press, and labor unions—that made this widespread coalition building successful. I trace Sewer Socialists' victories from German immigration to accessible press and a healthy labor movement.

To discuss these complex histories in the development of socialism in Milwaukee I start with the immigration of Germans to the city. The mass immigration of Germans to Milwaukee started in the 1830s and has been a major component of the development of the city since that time period. The immigration brought over three-quarters of a million people to the city during the time period of examination. I focus on two specific time periods of migration that are connected to the political repression of socialists in Germany. These periods of migration are in 1848 and 1863 which lead to the development of a political ideology within these communities. The political motivations of these migrations are in direct relation to the development of socialism in Milwaukee. I

¹ The Progressive Era is the time period between the late 1890s and the late 1910s. It was a period of political reform focused on defeating corruption and monopoly.

² Municipal government meaning the local government of Milwaukee such as the Mayor's office, city council, city attorney and the school board. The socialists used all of these offices in different ways to advance their goals.

³ The dates of 1863 to 1940 are selected because they mark the founding of the Social Democratic Party in Germany and the end of Mayor Daniel Hoan's last term in office. Although I will reference the "Forty-Eighters" who migrated from Germany to Wisconsin in 1848 because of political repression as a background into the immigrants and their attitudes in 1863.

examine these connections and how these immigrants are both able and willing to create a relationship with the Sewer socialists.

The examination of the factors that contributed to the socialist movement in Milwaukee shifts to the role of the press. At the beginning of the analysis of the press, I focus on how German immigration had a major role in this development. I highlight the use of German-language newspapers in the city and state because of the large number of German-language newspapers and the connection to left-wing politics. From here I link the German influence on newspapers to the Wisconsin Vorwärts and The Milwaukee Leader. Both newspapers were run by Victor Berger, a renowned Milwaukee socialist and man of German socialist thought. After the connection between German immigration and the press, I examine the Milwaukee Leader and its role in the development of socialism in the city. The Leader is a socialist daily newspaper for the city of Milwaukee, with a dedication to the labor movement. This dedication is then linked to the role of the paper in connecting the labor unions with the socialists. I also examine how the press allows the general public to be informed about the socialist cause.

The examination then shifts to the way in which the immigration of Germans and socialists contributed to the development of the labor movement. I examine how these groups are linked to the unionists in the city. Within this connection of these groups, it becomes clear that the labor unions have a large population of both German immigrants and socialists in their ranks. After that exploration, I delve into the individual unions that were most prominent in these connections. The unions were the American Federation of Labor, the Knights of Labor, the Federated Trades Council, and the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor. Within this discussion, I highlight the number of trade unionists, the connection that the socialists made with them, and their opinions of the Socialist cause.

Finally, I finish my analysis with the victories of the Sewer Socialists in the city of Milwaukee. The analysis of the victories begins with the founding of the party and how the style of socialism was refined and implemented. Then I surmise the election victories of Victor Berger, Emil Seidel, and Daniel Hoan during this time period as a result of the coalition building described in the preceding paragraphs. For each of these

socialist leaders, I examine their individual political goals and the way they wanted to implement Sewer Socialism in the city.

Before beginning this paper, I find it necessary to define the exact ideology that the Sewer Socialists inhabit. As there are theoretical frameworks that surround migration and politics, the Milwaukee Socialists belong to a very specific form of political ideology that did not fit into the larger brands of Marxism, Communism, and Socialism.⁴ Although not self-described, Milwaukee Socialists went under the branch of the ideology called Sewer Socialism. The term Sewer was meant as a dig at the party by opponents but ultimately became synonymous with the Milwaukeeans and their methods. The ideology of Eduard Bernstein, a German political theorist, and politician who participated in the development of theory and philosophy surrounding socialism, became the favored form of Socialism for the Milwaukeeans. This philosophy was a departure from classical Marxism and inspired much of the work seen in Milwaukee. Weisberger breaks down this ideology in his work, *Utopia Deferred*, “Bernstein proposed a gradualist program of political and economic reform designed to achieve the peaceful transformation of capitalism into socialism. Trade union organization, parliamentary politics, electoral victory, and coalition building with the radical bourgeoisie stood at the disposal of Social Democracy to bring about a gradual, democratic transition to a socialist society.”⁵ This understanding of coalition building was central to the Milwaukee socialists staying in power and improving the city. There had been the development of the ideology that the socialists had used as they expanded their coalitions, when Socialism first started its career in Milwaukee in the Seventies (1870) of the past century, it was revolutionary and ‘German.’ Its leaders, like Paul Grottaku, were veterans of the socialist movement in Germany, and its rank and file were composed of German immigrants. There existed at first a perfect harmony between the feeling of these working men and the teaching of ‘German’ socialism.⁶ As the city diversified the coalition had to change from this

⁴ Marxism in this context with this paper is the socioeconomic theory of Karl Marx that discusses material needs and conditions in historical development to understand the relationship of class and social conflicts. Communism in this paper is defined as the political and economic theory that comes out of Marxism which is best defined by collective ownership of property and the means of production.

⁵ Adam Weisberger, “Utopia Deferred: Eduard Bernstein and the Messianic Idea,” *European Judaism: A Journal; for the New Europe* Vol. 27, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 33.

⁶ Selig Perlman, “History of Socialism in Milwaukee (1893-1910)” (Thesis (BA), University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1910), 1.

'German' socialism to the Bernsteinian methodology but continued to hold onto the foundational population of German immigrants. The movement evolved into the Bernsteinian ideology in the time period that this paper is discussing. To bring in this ideology in conversation with the Milwaukee Socialists, the coalition-building structure of the Socialist party aimed to highlight the need for a political wing of the labor unions. These unions include the American Federation of Labor, the Federated Trades Council, and the Knights of Labor. The unions provided the voter base for the Socialist candidates since the Socialists were aligned with the unions and actively helped them become more powerful in the economic sphere. The socialists utilized this coalition to the best of their ability for fifty years. As in any coalition, when the unions were strong, the people voted for Socialists, and when the Socialists were in power the unions became the engine of industry and politics.

Milwaukee, the German Athens, is one of the most boldly German cities in the United States.⁷ There is a special social and cultural connection between Wisconsin and Germany because of the mass immigration of Germans to the state. Because there is a strong cultural and social link between the areas and the socialist ideology, it is difficult to define the exact moment where these processes begin and start to develop but there are overarching events that help clarify the historical timeline.⁸ The German immigration to Wisconsin was one of great intensity with a duration of over a century that is unparalleled in modern migration history. Migration is rarely a rapid and abrupt process; it is an undertaking that requires long periods for the development of trends and connections. The same can be said for political and social movements. There are moments of mass migration just as moments of immense political change, but they follow more general patterns and indications. The unique formation of the migratory patterns and development of Milwaukee lends well to the special case of socialism within the city.

⁷ Dirk Hilderbrandt, "They Brought Their Beer," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, AUTUMN 2018. German Athens is in reference to the German migration to Wisconsin and how the migration involved many intellectuals and political activists.

⁸ The use of the 1860s stems from the immigration of Germans fleeing from political repression in the German Empire. This is the first inkling of political motivation for the migration and the movement enmasse due to the connection to the Social Democratic Party in Germany.

Even with strong union membership, no single factor can account for Milwaukee's emergence as a Socialist stronghold. The character of the party, both in its leadership and in its rank and file, was important. The city's ethnic pattern and its low political estate provided the opportunity; national reform trends cooperated.⁹ This paper will explore the factors that contributed to the emergence of a Socialist stronghold in Milwaukee. These factors are the German migration to Milwaukee, the Socialist press, and labor unions. All of these factors will allow for a greater understanding of the complex web of relationships and coalitions that the Socialists tapped into to gain representation in the city and the House of Representatives. With the hope that the case study of Milwaukee will lead to further scholarship on the topic and other cities in the modern era for building coalitions on socialist principles. During the time of the Sewer Socialists, the organization drew the attention of many Socialists all over the country who were interested in the Milwaukee campaign, for it was the first appearance of the Social Democracy in Politics.¹⁰ This interest should be reignited to continue to learn about the success of Socialism and how to improve the material conditions of the working class.

II: The Foundations of the Sewers: German Migration, 1848-1930

Milwaukee is a German city without a shadow of a doubt due to the migration of Germans to Wisconsin. From the buildings to the names of the streets and the governmental history, there is no clearer example of German influence on a city and state than Milwaukee and Wisconsin in the United States. Milwaukee, affectionately known as the "German Athens", was and still is considered one of the most culturally German cities in the United States, and even anywhere outside of Germany.¹¹ But how many Germans were in Milwaukee and Wisconsin and why did they come?

Since the 1830s there has been a substantial number of German Americans in Wisconsin and Milwaukee. The first German immigrants settled in Wisconsin in the early to mid-1830s and from there, millions more decided to settle in the State. The

⁹ Frederick I. Olson, "The Socialist Party and the Union in Milwaukee, 1900-1912," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* Vol. 44, no. 2 (Winter 1960-1961): 111.

¹⁰ Bayrd Still, "The Play of Politics," in *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, Second Printing (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1965), 304.

¹¹ Hilderbrandt, "They Brought Their Beer."

greatest number of Germans arriving in Wisconsin was from 1845 to 1900, with different 'boom' periods of immigration.¹² There were distinct sections of this migration process from the area of origin and purpose of migration. Around five million Germans came to the United States from the 1830s to the 1920s with nearly one million settling in Wisconsin or the surrounding areas. These immigrants settled into all aspects of life and influenced the development of the State. The sheer number of Germans lends to the strength of German ties in the city of Milwaukee, from politics, labor, and city planning.

In 1890, 35 percent of people living in Wisconsin were born in Germany. Compared to the rest of the United States, this number is exceptionally high, especially considering that the largest migration of Germans to the United States only started in the 1850s. There continued to be a steady flow of German immigrants into Wisconsin as it grew. By 1890, there were a total of 2,300,000 German-born immigrants in the United States, and just over 30 percent of all German immigrants settled in Wisconsin. By 1900, out of Wisconsin's total population of slightly more than two million, some 710,000 (34 percent) of its citizens were of German background...¹³ Continuing into 1930 the federal census listed 40,787 German-born persons residing in Milwaukee out of a total population of 587,000.¹⁴ The number listed in 1930 only includes new German immigrants and excludes citizens who consider themselves as German Americans. Within the city of Milwaukee, it is likely that German American identifying individuals were over 50 percent of the population during that period.

So, what do these numbers mean in context with the development of Socialism in Milwaukee? German immigrant groups made up a significant portion of the voter block and socio-economic group for the socialist's appeal. The sheer quantity of Germans in the city allowed for major organizing to be possible based on shared identity and political ideology. As Olson states, "the most important single factor contributing to the growth of a strong socialist movement in the nineteenth century was the influx of

¹² These boom periods being 1848 and 1863 which were directly linked to political repression in Germany.

¹³ Richard Zeitlin, *Germans In Wisconsin*, 2nd Edition (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Dieter Berninger, "Milwaukee's German-American Community and the Nazi Challenge of the 1930's," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Winter, 1988 1987.

Germans beginning in 1835, the year before the incorporation of Milwaukee as a village in the newly created territory of Wisconsin.”¹⁵

Additionally, the year 1848 represents another important date which was the start of German migration that was directly linked to the political repression of Socialists in the German empire.¹⁶ A significant number of German immigrants counted themselves as “freethinkers”: intellectuals, radicals, religious dissidents, workers, advocates of ‘Free Thought’, and reformers of all kinds. Which spurred on the need and ability to create a city void of all the mistakes that they had encountered. Though they differed in many ways, these so-called ‘Forty-Eighters’ were, in effect, political refugees.¹⁷ These political refugees set the stage for the community and organization that allowed socialism to grow in Milwaukee unofficially.

The workers and socialist intellectuals that filled the immigrant population moving to Milwaukee from Germany, post-1863, were a foundational population for the advent of Socialism in Milwaukee. The year 1863 marks the beginning of one important factor for this examination of socialism in Milwaukee: the founding of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in Germany. These events created the push for migration into the United States and Milwaukee to avoid sanctions in Germany and to express their ideologies in new communities. These Forty-Eighters and following immigrants are directly linked to the election of Socialist leaders, according to the state census figures for 1905, the eight wards having the highest percentage of German-born (from 20 to 28%) gave the party 26 out of its 30 victories for Alderman.¹⁸ The wards that elected the socialists show the power of immigration and how these immigrants expressed their politics and the knowledge gained in Germany.

The German immigrants to Milwaukee brought with them the knowledge and ability to develop cities and create a style of governance that was not widespread in the United States. From understanding the challenges of overpopulation to political and religious persecution, these people were perfectly positioned to create a better city than

¹⁵ Frederick I. Olson, “The Milwaukee Socialists, 1897-1941” (PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 1952), 1.

¹⁶ Zeitlin, *Germans In Wisconsin*, 61.

¹⁷ Zeitlin.

¹⁸ Olson, “The Milwaukee Socialists, 1897-1941.” 1.

was seen in their areas of origin.¹⁹ The immigrants coming from Germany due to political and social unrest were middle-class educated laborers and specialists.²⁰ As politically active middle-class educated immigrants, Germans were able to replicate and create these systems that could uplift and develop services for all of the population, as seen by many of the Socialists elected to be of German heritage. Milwaukee's German immigrant population was primed for socialist organization, and there needed to be a way to disseminate information to the masses, this came in the form of the Socialist Press.

III: The Connection of People: The Press and Socialism in Milwaukee

The dissemination of information is important for any society. The Founding Fathers of the United States often commented on the importance of newspapers and the press to keep the people informed of critical issues that face their communities.²¹ Without the press, there would not be a means to communicate with the community. This importance is not limited to just native-born English speakers but all people. When immigrants come to a destination, perhaps not knowing the local language, the ability to read the news in their native language is incredibly important for comfort and assimilation. This is where German-language newspapers come into the story of migration in Wisconsin.

Between 1844 and 1957, at least 220 different German-language papers were printed in the state of Wisconsin.²² The abundance of German-language newspapers only increased the ability to establish and maintain connections with these immigrants and the city of Milwaukee. The importance of language cannot be understated in its importance in creating connections and culture. The fact that many people, including non-Germans, in Milwaukee and Wisconsin were able to speak, read or understand

¹⁹ Zeitlin, *Germans In Wisconsin*. As noted in Zeitlin, one of the many causes of the revolution was overpopulation and the failure of the local governments with the revolutionaries proposing holistic changes to the governmental system.

²⁰ Heike Bungert, "Demonstrating the Values of 'Gemüthlichkeit' and 'Cultur': The Festivals of German Americans in Milwaukee, 1870-1910," in *Celebrating Ethnicity and Nation* (Berghahn Books, 2001). The social unrest that these immigrants were facing was from the failed German revolution in 1948. Many of the supporters, such as Eduard Bernstein, were exiled, many of whom immigrated to Milwaukee.

²¹ Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to James Currie, January 28, 1786," January 28, 1786.

²² Randi Julia Ramsden, "Shaping Identity: The History of German-Language Newspapers in Wisconsin," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Autumn 2016.

German allowed for further cross-cultural connections to be made.²³ In the years from 1909 to 1912 German American newspapers flourished in the state such as the *Vorwärts*, a socialist newspaper from Germany. Seventy-nine German journals were published in forty-one cities, towns, and villages across Wisconsin.²⁴ The strength of these publications is a testament to the strength of the community in Wisconsin and the influence it had over daily life in the state. This cross-cultural connection is key to the foundation of relationships between established organizers and new immigrants, with a mutual understanding the ability to garner the relationships becomes more effective.

The conversations that were in the papers and around the town were not just limited to the political thoughts of German Americans but extended to labor rights and industrial development. Additionally, the papers and gathering places were hotspots for union activities and economic theorization. They discussed hot-button issues of the time such as labor having the right to strike peacefully and that it is the duty of workers to exercise their rights as a step past theorization. They felt that civil courts did not adequately protect the rights of workers.²⁵ The editors insisted that criminal courts, where guilt had to be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, should have jurisdiction over acts of violence committed against striking workers. These workers and papers supported the eight-hour day for workers, child welfare laws, employer liability laws, and worker compensation laws. These beliefs echoed the views of the socialists and the socialist press.

IV: The Milwaukee Leader

The *Milwaukee Leader* was a socialist newspaper founded by Victor Berger and other socialists. It was born out of the *Social Democratic Herald* but focused more heavily on the City of Milwaukee. This was the premier socialist daily paper in the city and the United States as a whole. The paper was a key apparatus to disseminate information on the socialist cause, union meetings, and other working-class news. The paper became the mouthpiece of the Socialist Party and unions, which made it a very

²³ Ramsden.

²⁴ Korman Gerd, "Political Loyalties, Immigrant Traditions, and Reform: The Wisconsin German-American Press and Progressivism, 1909-1912," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Spring 1957.

²⁵ Gerd, "Political Loyalties, Immigrant Traditions, and Reform: The Wisconsin German-American Press and Progressivism, 1909-1912."

effective means of spreading the message of Socialism and its benefits to the general public. Even those who were not affiliated with the socialist or union causes were enticed by the paper. The paper ran from December 1911 to January 1939, spanning the most successful years of the Socialist movement in Milwaukee. It was not a niche source of news; the Leader was one of the highest-selling daily newspapers in the city.²⁶ Many prominent socialists spoke highly about the Leader such as Eugene V. Debs who wrote the column titled “The Leader Will be a Powerful Champion” in the first edition of the paper,

The building of a Socialist press is the most important factor in the building of the Socialist movement and the appearance of another daily to be published at Milwaukee is an event to be hailed with enthusiastic approval by the working class, whose cause is to have another powerful champion in the struggle to overthrow the capitalist system and destroy wage-slavery. I send these few words of greeting to the Milwaukee comrades together with my most earnest wishes for a triumphant career for the Milwaukee Leader.²⁷

He was clear on the usage of the Leader as a socialist newspaper that supported the working class and highlighted the issues that labor faces on a daily basis. Debs became a regular contributor to the paper by writing opinion pieces as well as state of the movement memos to the Socialist caucus in Milwaukee. With such eager attention on the state of Socialism in Milwaukee Debs even referred to the fact that the whole country and all socialists are looking upon Milwaukee as a bastion for what socialism can look like.²⁸

Other Socialist leaders such as writer and politician, Robert Hunter discussed the importance of the press and the workers' movement,

A great movement is a living thing with eyes, ears and voice. The body of our movement is the working class. The spirit of our movement is the aspiring soul of the working class. But the eyes, ears and voice of the movement must be our papers. The eyes must search the universe for everything that may harm or advance the movement. The ears must be

²⁶ “Leader Beats All!,” *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 15, 1911, 1st edition. The Milwaukee Leader had outsold all of the other daily newspapers on December 14th, 1911. A trend that would continue during the popularity of socialism in the city.

²⁷ Eugene V. Debs, “Will Be a Powerful Champion,” *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 7, 1911, 1st edition.

²⁸ Bayrd Still, “The Play of Politics,” in *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, Second Printing (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1965), 304.

ever alert to hear the approach of danger and to detect the schemes of the enemy. They must reach out everywhere; Look and Listen and whatever of importance they see or hear they must bring to us and then — The Voice— speaks so that every worker in the land may know. Such is the work of The Milwaukee Leader. The enemy owns a million voices that the workers must read because they have so few of their own. And that is what has so long led them astray. But now the workers begin to have their own leaders and calls and elections and that is what awakens them from their slumber. All hail, to the Milwaukee Leader! May the workers ever rally to its support and never allow its light to grow dim!²⁹

The words of Hunter stuck with the editors of the Leader who had a section in the daily newspaper dedicated to workers' issues and labor unions. The paper included meeting times for unions, strikes, workers' rights information, and general information on how to join. These appeared in every printing along with major labor stories on the front pages most days. Some stories include the headlines of, "Machinists Adopt Recall,"³⁰ "Capitalist Press Sandbags Labor,"³¹ and "Announcements for Union Activity."³² This exemplifies a clear link between the press and the successful labor movement, and the Milwaukee Leader is a prime example of the relationship.

To be clear, the Leader was directly responsible for the spread of information on socialism and labor in the United States but specifically in Milwaukee. One column in particular highlights this relationship the best and is aptly named "Labor Unions and the Journal." This article covers the press and its role in the exposure of Socialism both negatively and positively. The article points out that the Milwaukee Journal and other capitalist newspapers compare the number of union members (1,744,444) to the total population (90 million) in 1910 to discredit the strength of the labor unions.³³ The Leader argues that this comparison is misleading and does not fully understand the strength of a union where they say, "the strength of the labor union is not to be judged by their membership relative to the population, but by their membership compared with the mass of wage-earners in industries wherein organization is possible."³⁴ The Leader

²⁹ Robert Hunter, "Workers Must Support the Leader," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 7, 1911, 1st edition.

³⁰ Victor Berger, "Machinists Adopt Recall," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 8, 1911, 1st edition.

³¹ Max Hayes, "Capitalist Press Sandbags Labor," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 8, 1911, 1st edition.

³² Staff, "Announcements for Union Activity," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 9, 1911, 1st edition.

³³ "Labor Unions and the Journal," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 15, 1911, Vol. 1 edition.

³⁴ "Labor Unions and the Journal."

dedicated its column inches to exposing the capitalist press lies and this is exemplified by the routine use of the opinion section to battle back. The Leader is one of the only newspapers that fights for socialism and therefore is a major driver of Socialist thought and development. Other articles like "No Other Newspaper Can Satisfy Like The Milwaukee Leader" made similar statements throughout the paper's history. It is centered around the labor union by both protecting and advancing the cause.³⁵ No topic goes undiscussed in the Leader when it comes to the idea of socialism and labor. "Ballots or Brick Bats?",³⁶ "Work and Workers",³⁷ "Where Socialism Prevails",³⁸ "Unions and the Sherman Law",³⁹ and "The Great Day Approaches"⁴⁰ all examine different aspects of the relationship between labor and the Socialist party in electoral politics.

The Leader served as the newspaper for the workers and people, especially to rally around the tenets of Socialism. This best served the public as a connection for outreach to the leaders of Milwaukee and the unions. Emil Seidel would regularly write columns in the paper such as, "Officials See Hope of City in New Paper" where he explains the need for a paper like the leader and how it will be a great benefit to the city,

There has been a long felt need of a paper in Milwaukee that will give the public the news, without bluepenciling, which it pays for. I wish and hope that The Leader may fill the need. If so, I can predict for it unqualified success. The Leader can be Milwaukee's paper standing for Milwaukee and its population as against the interests first, last and all the time. If it does this will be the first patriotic paper this city has ever had. Just as the advent of Socialists into politics has given Milwaukee a clean city

³⁵ "No Other Paper Can Satisfy Like The Milwaukee Leader," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 15, 1911, 1st edition.

³⁶ Victor L. Berger, "Ballots or Brick Bats?," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 16, 1911, 1st edition.

³⁷ Carl Sandburg, "Work and Workers," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 21, 1911, 1st edition. This article explains the connection between the value created by the workers and how they are entitled to all its value. This is a core tenant of the Milwaukee Sewer Socialism.

³⁸ "Where Socialism Prevails," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 8, 1911, 1st edition. The article links the location of socialist hotspots to cities with large immigrant and factory worker populations but also highlights the success of socialist candidates where sixty percent of elected socialist officials are in small towns of 5,000 or less people.

³⁹ Algernon Lee, "Unions and the Sherman Law," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 23, 1912, 2nd edition. The Sherman Law was an anti-trust bill to reduce monopolies and cut back on corruption. While it was successful in breaking some monopolies, the article points out that this was just a slight hindrance to many of these corporations, where many were given payouts by the government in subsidies that outweighed the losses. Ultimately this law did not benefit the unions and cost them thousands of dollars.

⁴⁰ Victor L. Berger, "The Great Day Approaches," *The Milwaukee Leader*, November 1, 1924, 13th edition. Berger's article is an overview of the election of 1924 and who the readers of the paper should vote for. As the editor of the paper Berger is making a de facto endorsement of the socialist and progressive candidates on behalf of the paper.

government, so the advent of a Socialist daily must tend to clean the daily press. May the Leader succeed.⁴¹

The connection between the city and the paper cannot be understated, without a reliable socialist press the movement could not be sustained but the paper must keep in connection with the people it tries to serve. This is exemplified by the leader being one of the most popular daily newspapers in the city.⁴² The community rallied behind the paper; from assemblymen, business owners, union members, and everyday citizens. They all referred to the paper in glowing remarks.⁴³ The paper worked as an expression of the working class and was uncompromising in its mission. That mission was welcomed by the city where Milwaukeeans flocked to the paper as a source of information for elections, the issues of the day, and how to participate in democracy.

As a service to the public and in the interests of the paper, every election the Leader put out a few pages on the election including who was running, how to properly fill out your ballot, who to vote for, and how to be safe at the polls. The paper had an exact copy of the ballot for the election copied into the paper with detailed instructions on how to vote and who to vote for.⁴⁴ These sections of the paper are key to the continued success of socialism because of the broad audience that the paper serves. This is not just an instruction for the labor unions and socialists but also for the average layperson in the city to give them facts on the candidates and what each represents. They valued democratic participation because they saw the link between increased participation with higher rates of voting for the Socialist ticket.⁴⁵ This was a public service but also served as a way to promote the Socialists, which is the object of the paper.

⁴¹ Emil Seidel, "Officials See Hope of City in New Paper," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 7, 1911, 1st edition. Emil Seidel was the first Socialist Mayor of Milwaukee from 1910-1912.

⁴² "Leader Beats All!"

⁴³ "The Leader Greeted with Enthusiasm by Milwaukee," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 8, 1911, 1st edition.

⁴⁴ "Notice of General Election: Information to Voter," *The Milwaukee Leader*, November 3, 1924, 13th edition.

⁴⁵ "The Socialist 'Defeat,'" *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 22, 1911, 1st edition. This article covers the consistent increase of votes that the socialists received over the course of elections. These increases represent the California gubernatorial election of 1911 which is the same period as the Milwaukee Socialists starting winning seats in the municipal government.

To pull all of this together, it is appropriate to use the founder and editor of the Leader, Victor Berger's own words to describe the mission of the paper:

The rank and file of the Milwaukee Social Democracy got tired of the hateful misrepresentations of the Socialist administration, and of Socialism generally, made by the capitalist press and particularly by The Milwaukee Journal. The rank and file thereupon issued the mandate that the weekly Social-Democratic Herald be turned into a daily. And the leadership of the party and the management of the paper obeyed the real leader, the rank and file— and the result is THE MILWAUKEE LEADER. And a leader it will be, THE MILWAUKEE LEADER— undoubtedly the best equipped and foremost labor paper in the English-speaking world. There is nothing in the country, and there is nothing like it in Canada, England or Australia... Because the most important fact in Milwaukee at the present time is not the Socialist administration— is not the work the comrades are doing in the county, in the municipality and in the school board. The most important fact in Milwaukee is the resolute men and women who are determined to lead the world into new channels. While we know that the world cannot be changed in a day or even a year, we also know that the trend of the time toward Socialism, and we are willing to work for our ideals everyday of the year. It is, of course, mainly to the discontented that THE MILWAUKEE LEADER will address itself. THE LEADER expects nothing from such as think that the capitalist system is good enough for them and should not be changed.⁴⁶

The paper is oriented toward the people that are dedicated to positive change in society through the socialist ideology. This selection of his article is an important link to Milwaukee Socialism and the ideology that inspired the movement. The idea of rank-and-file organizational structure is key to the decentralization of power, a type of organization that is also commonly seen in labor unions. Rank and file allow for a clear message to be sent: people who make up the organization will be the ones who make the decision and leaders will just be the mouthpiece just like the Leader would be to the people of Milwaukee.

Continuing into the quote, just as the paper is the best equipped for this job it serves as an apt comparison to the Milwaukee Sewer Socialists, who were the most prepared to take on the challenges that were ahead of them. The Milwaukee socialists were one of a kind in the English-speaking world. They ran their cities like no other in the United States, letting the leaders be mouthpieces for the people and taking instructions from their constituents. The Leader wanted to be representative of that

⁴⁶ Victor L. Berger, "The Milwaukee Leader," *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 7, 1911, 1st edition.

ideology and strategy. This want is exemplified by Berger writing, “The most important fact in Milwaukee is the resolute men and women who are determined to lead the world into new channels.”⁴⁷ The socialists put an emphasis on the ordinary men and women who make up the working class as the people who should be at the forefront of change. Berger notes that this transition cannot be completed in a day or even a year, but it is the duty of the press and the Socialist party to advance the needs and wants of the people against the capitalist system. These changes take time just like building a city, Rome was not built in a day, and the socialists certainly did not gain power overnight. Progress has always been a gradual process and it relied on the press to highlight it. The press would discuss these issues but at the heart of the movement are the working-class people that decided things need to change.

V: The People Who Built the Sewers: The Labor Unions During the Rise of Socialism

The heart of the industrial movement in the city was the hard-working labor unionists, who were made up of German immigrants and socialists.⁴⁸ The ideology of the workers varied quite intensely but what brought them together was the need for a better work environment. This striving for betterment lined up well with the socialists' economic principles. These workers supported key socialist ideals of the time period such as the eight-hour workday, child welfare, employer's liability, and worker compensation laws. A key demographic that linked the unionists and the socialists was the German immigrants. By the end of the 19th century, German immigrants dominated the flour mills, breweries, tanneries, and printing and engraving industries. German immigrants' left-leaning politics contributed to the strength of the unions. This strength was key to the political status of the Socialists. This is all about power and who wields it and the coalition of unions, the German immigrant workers, and socialists created a strong claim to power in the city.

Historically, when there are strong unions, there is a major Socialist presence in municipal government.⁴⁹ This is exactly the case during Milwaukee's era of Sewer

⁴⁷ Berger.

⁴⁸ These groups are not mutually exclusive and have significant overlap.

⁴⁹ Sandburg, “Work and Workers.”

Socialists. The connections made by prominent Socialists such as Victor Berger, Emil Seidl, and Daniel Hoan made the party stronger. They focused on the labor movement and the struggle against the capitalist, ruling class, and strong unions were the stable ground for the socialist movement to flourish. Unions played two major roles in the election of Socialist politicians. First, they created a reliable voter base for Socialist candidates, since the unions were voting as a block. Secondly, the Socialist Party acted as the political wing of the unions in Milwaukee. As such, there was a give-and-take relationship between the unions and Socialists in Milwaukee which became mutually beneficial. In accordance with the Socialist Party planks, Milwaukee followed it to the letter where the national party states, “the Socialist Party will continue to give its aid and assistance to the economic struggles of organized labor regardless of the affiliation of the trade unions engaged in the struggle, and will take no sides in any dissensions or strifes within the trade union movement.”⁵⁰ The Socialists were responsive to almost all Unions, but the ones that played the largest role in the party were the American Federation of Labor, the Knights of Labor, the Federated Trades Council, and the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor. These unions made up a majority of the Unionized workers in the state and helped represent and better the positions of all working-class Milwaukeeans and Wisconsinites.

The Milwaukee socialists had a very direct relationship with the unions and worked to help the unions grow and gain power. Victor Berger, as the editor of the Milwaukee Leader and contributor to numerous newspapers such as the Social Democratic Herald, would regularly write on the labor unions and how they must adapt to the current circumstances. In a column in the Social-Democratic Herland, Berger wrote, “... just so the workingmen organized by trades must learn, for the sake of self-preservation, to recognize unskilled workmen and draw them into the circle of organization. The wonderfully rapid concentration of capital in this country compels the workingmen to draw closer together and to organize more compactly, if their fight is not to be absolutely hopeless.”⁵¹ This clear messaging by Berger highlights the socialists'

⁵⁰ “What We Social Democrats Are After (Adopted by the Socialist Party in National Convention at Indianapolis Ind., July 31, 1901.)” *Social Democratic Herald*, April 18, 1903.

⁵¹ Victor Berger, “Modern Workingmen’s Organizations.,” *Social Democratic Herald*, April 18, 1903, Vol. 5 edition.

protection and aid that they are willing to give the labor unions. The socialists recognized the importance of unions in coalition building and electoral success. Berger continued by stating, “the wage-workers, whose success in the economic field has now become much more difficult, must call politics to their aid, for there their numbers are an advantage. The labor movement therefore cannot be maintained on an economic basis; it must take a political turn.”⁵² Linking the trade unions to economic success as a core value of socialism and asserting that the unions must keep their focus on the economic area while handing the political forum to the Socialist party is a clever move to bolster the relationship between the unions and the Socialist party. The socialists continued to advocate for labor and unions. As unions were also rank-and-file organizations, it was very much up to each union to decide whether to back the socialists to represent them in the political arena.

VI: The Unions

The American Federation of Labor (A. F. of L.) was one of the largest labor unions in the country and was key to the socialist's successful strategy in the political arena. In 1910 the union had 1,562,113 card-carrying members which were one of the most significant voter blocks in the United States at the time.⁵³ As an organization of its size, the A. F. of L. had recognized the importance of a political party that would work for the advancement of the worker. This led to connections between the Social Democratic Party, later the Socialist Party, and the unions as a way to have a political wing to an economic movement. The organization did not always align but overall, there was an understanding of the mutual benefits of a coalition. Milwaukee made perfect sense as the perfect place for the A. F. of L. since the socialist movement was not equal in all places, Milwaukee was much further ahead of many of the other cities in governmental organization and activism to make an economic change towards socialism. Socialist politician and union leader Frederick Brockhausen noted the strength of the A. F. of L. and socialists in the state,

As this state [Wisconsin], in the political and the economic labor movement, always has been several paces ahead of the movements in the sister states, this declaration on your part perfectly covered and

⁵² Berger.

⁵³ “Trade Union Membership,” *The Milwaukee Leader*, December 15, 1911.

adhered to by the political labor movement in Wisconsin thus far, all the candidates elected by the bonafide political labor movement —the Social Democratic Party—have proven absolutely loyal to the cause of labor, in other words, true to the party platform, which contains all that a progressive union man can hope for at the present time.⁵⁴

The discussion of voting within the unions was focused on the advancement of union goals by politicians and no one exemplified this better than the socialists. Loyalty does not go unnoticed in voting and activism for both the unions and the socialist politicians.

The Knights of Labor are one of the lesser-known labor organizations. It served as a brotherhood of workers that many Milwaukee laborers had been affiliated with since the late 1870s. By 1886, the organization had fifty lodges and a membership of at least 16,000 in the city.⁵⁵ These members represented a significant number of the workers in the city who could be aligned with the sewer socialists.

The aims of the Knights of Labor go hand in hand with the goals of the Bernsteinian Milwaukee Socialists. Among the aims of the organization was the desire to secure toilers a 'proper share of the wealth they create' as well as more leisure and social advantages for the working class.⁵⁶ This is a core tenet of Bernsteinian socialism and the pragmatic approach of the Sewer Socialists. To achieve this end they proposed the establishment of bureaus of labor statistics and institutions for cooperative production and distribution; equality of pay regardless of sex; the abolition of the contract system on public works, child labor under fourteen, and convict labor contracts; the eight hour work day; and such correlative demands as the preservation of the public lands for actual settlers and the establishment of a national circulating medium without the intervention of banking corporations.⁵⁷ These policies and administrative processes would allow for the growth of labor unions and the societal benefits that they were fighting for. A major goal of the Knights of Labor was to create a bureau of labor statistics so there would be an accurate measure of the economic value that the workers produced. This would allow for better negotiation positions for the unions and

⁵⁴ Frederick Brockhausen, "Labor Politics Must Be Right Politics: Wisconsin Labor's Reply (Slightly Abbreviated) to the Request of the A. F. of L. to Take a Hand in the Selection of Congressmen," *Social Democratic Herald*, August 18, 1906.

⁵⁵ Bayrd Still, "The Play of Politics," in *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, Second Printing (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1965), 288.

⁵⁶ Still, 288.

⁵⁷ Still, 288-289.

workers in general. The establishment of all of these organizations was within Daniel Hoan's mayoral campaign planks. Hoan aimed to create each of these bureaus to ultimately reach these standards laid out by the Knights of Labor.⁵⁸ This interaction of the socialist leadership and the unions endeared the socialists and created a shared goal of the future that the union could show its members so they could vote for the socialists. These connections between the unions and the leaders are the building blocks to a strong socialist voting bloc.

One of the best examples of this relationship and connection between the labor unions and the socialists was the Federated Trades Council (F.T.C.). The F.T.C., like the A. F. of L., is a large labor union council and is made up of numerous smaller unions, of which Berger was part. Berger was a representative of the Typographical union which was party to both the F.T.C. and A. F. of L. Berger went to many of the F.T.C. meetings to give the case of the socialist party and the union was receptive to many of his ideas. It was one of the most reliable voter blocks that the socialists had at their disposal.⁵⁹ Many other socialists in Milwaukee were part of the ranks of the F.T.C., which allowed them to use that power to influence the voting patterns of the workers. This was more closely related to the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor (W.S.F.L.). The W.S.F.L. was a branch of both the A. F. of L. and F.T.C. It operated as the local governing body of the unions and housed many socialists in its ranks.⁶⁰ These unions were heavily influenced by the Milwaukee Socialists and were considered a key part of their development as a party by Berger and other leaders in the party. The relationship was interconnected, and the socialists realized the power that came with the union's approval. Even though the socialist party members did not make up a majority of the working class or the city's population, the labor union was able to muster the votes to push the socialists in the right direction.

The unions were an integral part of the Milwaukee Socialist movement. It was one part of their broad coalition that focused on the common person in the city. The

⁵⁸ Daniel W. Hoan, "Progressive Political Organization," in *City Government: The Record of the Milwaukee Experiment*, 1st ed. (Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1936), 65–86.

⁵⁹ Olson, "The Socialist Party and the Union in Milwaukee, 1900-1912." The F.T.C.s leadership was filled with socialists which made it easy to interact with and instruct members to vote for the socialists ticket.

⁶⁰ Olson.

coalition that included the German immigrants, the socialist press readers, and the labor unions was also heavily involved with each other. Many German immigrants were readers of the press and members of their local labor union.⁶¹ Not only were the labor unions responsible for the sheer number of voters that they could bring to the polls, but they also drove policy decisions that helped the socialists stay in power.⁶² All of these factors are the result of cultivated relationships, but what were the results of all of this work? The socialists could do as much organizing as they wished but they needed to gain power in some respect in order to better the material conditions of workers. The coalition they built with the German immigrants, the socialist press, and labor unions put them in power for over 50 years.

VII: The Success of the Sewers: Milwaukee Socialists Victories, 1863-1940

The Progressive Era brought monumental change to the political landscape, but nowhere did it last like Milwaukee. There has been a socialist or social democratic wing in Milwaukee since the arrival of German immigrants after 1848 when the official SDP was founded in Leipzig Germany. In Milwaukee, like in Germany, the precursor to the Socialist Party was the Social Democratic Party. This party housed notable socialists such as Eugene V. Debs and Victor Berger. Berger worked with the party for almost 20 years before leaving to found the Socialist Party of America. Debs, arguably the most well-known Socialist in American history, was the founder of the Socialist Party of America. Both Debs and Berger were involved in the Social Democratic Party which is the departure point for this paper and is key to understanding the evolution of socialism in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Social Democrats published their platform for the party in 1895. This was the start of the organized movement for socialism in the city but there had been a leftist and socialist faction unofficially for a number of years beforehand. These dates provide the context for where many of these intertwined processes start to converge. It provided a clear objective for the future of Milwaukee and who would become a socialist or be involved in the coalition. With the party platform came stability but also the politics of change.

⁶¹ Still, "The Play of Politics."

⁶² Brockhausen, "Labor Politics Must Be Right Politics: Wisconsin Labor's Reply (Slightly Abbreviated) to the Request of the A. F. of L. to Take a Hand in the Selection of Congressmen."

The establishment of the party and platform created constant strife for power between the Socialists, Republicans, and Democrats. There was much debate on how to govern the city and how socialism would be implemented on a municipal level. When socialism first started its career in Milwaukee in the Seventies (1870) of the past century, it was revolutionary and 'German.' Its leaders, like Paul Grottaku, were veterans of the socialist movement in Germany, and its rank and file were composed of German immigrants. There existed, at first, a perfect harmony between the feeling of these working men and the teaching of 'German' socialism.⁶³ This harmony worked well for the German immigrants, but what made the Milwaukee Socialists so popular with the average worker? Milwaukee Sewer Socialists were pragmatic in their approach to governing in lockstep with the ideology of Eduard Bernstein. They sought to fix the issue that the common person faced, not the issue of the rich and powerful, which earned them the respect of the layperson. This was in direct opposition to previous administrations where Milwaukeeans had complained about corruption and greed.⁶⁴ Berger wanted to be clear on the aims of the Socialist Party stating "...it was a platform 'built on the basis of modern international socialism, but localized to meet the needs of Milwaukee and the conditions under which we are now living.'"⁶⁵ Berger and other socialists saw this platform as the basis for the future of politics in the city and wanted to seize an opportunity to take control. This opportunity came in the form of the campaign of 1898 where leaders saw the emergence of a labor-oriented party capable of recruiting the numbers as well as maintaining the continuity necessary for effective political action."⁶⁶ After this election, the socialists seized the opportunity to work as the political arm of the labor unions to assure larger voting blocks for future elections. The Milwaukee socialists would need candidates and leaders to step into the political arena to battle back against the established parties.

One of the most notable Socialists in American politics, Victor Berger, was a founding member of the Socialist cause in Milwaukee. He cemented his legacy in the

⁶³ Selig Perlman, "History of Socialism in Milwaukee (1893-1910)" (Thesis (BA), University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1910), 1.

⁶⁴ Still, "The Play of Politics", 284-285.

⁶⁵ Bayrd Still, "The Play of Politics," in *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, Second Printing (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1965), 317.

⁶⁶ Still, 303.

city, as an avowed socialist. Berger was the figurehead of the Milwaukee Socialist movement during this period. His career in the official party movement began with his work in founding the Social Democratic Party in 1898, where he promoted organized labor in the political arena making the Social Democratic Party, and socialism more generally, the party of the labor movement in the city. The SDP became the starting point for socialism in Milwaukee, but it also had its divisions between the other national socialist parties. Due to the splits between other socialist-oriented parties, the newly founded SDP merged with the Socialist Labor Party which became the Socialist Party of America. The party was the brainchild of Victor Berger and Eugene V. Debs in 1901 where they aimed to solve the problem of the previous parties where “its platform identified it with the trade unionism and populism; and its ranks were soon augmented by a dissident group from the ever-volatile Socialist Labor Party.”⁶⁷ The combination of the explicitly labor-focused party and the social democrats allowed for the furtherment of relations between the labor unions and socialists in Milwaukee. Their platform reflected the pragmatism of Berger’s politics; it was compounded by the demands by which the labor parties of the preceding generation had marked out a program congenial to the needs of the urban common man.⁶⁸ Furthermore, he was the founder of many socialist newspapers such as the Wisconsin Vorwärts and the Milwaukee Leader, which served as an educational tool for the party to reach a larger audience. He also contributed to the Social Democratic Herald, where he wrote columns advocating for socialism, and labor unions, as well as generally updating the general public on the issues that socialists were taking on. He is the figurehead of the Socialist movement as it came to fruition in Milwaukee. He is especially important for the national attention to socialism in Milwaukee as he served as the Representative in the House of Representatives for Milwaukee for four terms from 1910 to 1912, and 1924 to 1928. He was the first Socialist elected to the House of Representatives. Berger played an overwhelming role in the connection between all of the sections of the coalition that the Socialists built. He was a socialist politician, union member, and founded the socialist press in Milwaukee.

⁶⁷ Bayrd Still, “The Play of Politics,” in *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, Second Printing (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1965), 304.

⁶⁸ Still, 305

He was there at every step of the movement until his death in 1929. He oversaw the pouring of the foundation for a successful movement.

The official founding of the Socialist Party of America in 1901 brought in a new era of electoral politics for the labor movement. After the founding in 1901, there had been some moderate success with a number of socialists elected to the school boards in Milwaukee, from Victor and Meta Burger as leaders in this arena. However, the 1904 elections were where the real power of labor organizations came into play. Emil Seidel, Fredric Heath, and seven others were elected to be city Alderman, and members of the city council, all running under the Socialist ticket. Consequently, there was a consistent development of electoral wins, where in 1908 there were eleven Socialists elected to be city Aldermen, most notably Victor Berger. This was increasingly important because the two major parties in the city had consolidated the number of seats in the council so that it would keep socialists off of the council.⁶⁹ The ultimate goal of the Socialists was to control the City Council and the Mayor's office. This goal was realized in 1910 when Emil Seidel won the mayoral election and the socialists were able to take control of the city government. The control allowed the Socialists to have complete control of the direction of the city. Within the 1910 elections, Daniel Hoan became the city attorney marking his official career in public office. Along with the victories in the municipal government, Victor Berger won a seat in the House of Representatives for the Milwaukee area. This would only be a brief win for the socialists, who lost the next election in 1912 when Seidel was defeated by the coalition Democrat and Republican candidate. Although this did launch Seidel to be a Vice Presidential Nominee on the Socialist Ticket with Eugene Debs, this election was the end of Seidel's reign. No matter how short that term was, it was a foundational building block for the socialists and put the party on the map for further elections. Seidel within those two years made a vast impact on the city and its politics.

Seidel was one of the lesser-known figures of Milwaukee history, but he was an important piece to the socialist developments of the city. His bullish attitude against corruption made him immensely popular with the general public. The politicians in the city up to 1910 were immensely corrupt and were using their position of power to

⁶⁹ Still. 315.

advantage their friends at the cost of the common person in the city.⁷⁰ The corrupt politicians often referred to Seidel as a Sewer Socialist, to invoke the dirty sewers and the underclass of the city. This did very little to his image because his dedication to the cause of trust-busting and anti-corruption endeared him to the working class of Milwaukee. Seidel's opponent J.M. Beffel, the Republican choice for mayor, said about Seidel and Berger's ideology and relationship, "... that 'Socialists Carry Milwaukee' would do more mischief in a day than our associations to promote and advance the city industrially could undo in a year."⁷¹ Beffel described Sidel as a "nice gentleman,' coming before the people 'in a peaceful, purring way like a cat, but beneath are the sharp claws [of] Victor L. Berger,' the real candidate behind Sidel, hulking, to choose another figure, 'like a leviathan beside a sprat.'"⁷² Even with attacks such as Beffel's, Seidel's work made major inroads with the general population on how it viewed the socialists. Additionally, his membership in the Pattern Makers Union was an added advantage for the coalition between the Unions and socialists. He was part of the founding of the Socialist party and was a compatriot of Berger. The period was highly influential to the image of socialists and what they could accomplish, even if it was short-lived. Seidel was an important link between the era of pre-socialism to the consistent socialist presence in the municipal government.

The 1916 election ushered in a new era of Socialist power in the city. Daniel Hoan emerged victorious in the election and to add to their good fortune the city council was now majority socialist. This gave the socialists their first real ability to govern, unencumbered by the resistance of other parties. This would only last for one term, after which the socialists would never regain a majority in the city council. Still, Daniel Hoan was the most successful Socialist in Milwaukee. He served six consecutive terms from 1916 to 1940. He was the city attorney for Milwaukee for the six years prior to his election as mayor, and he rose through the ranks of the Socialist Party after being eyed up by Berger and other socialists to run in Milwaukee for the municipal government. His dedication to public service was not the only thing that made him a local star. He

⁷⁰ Still, 310.

⁷¹ Bayrd Still, "The Play of Politics," in *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, Second Printing (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1965), 317-18.

⁷² Still, 318.

continually made it clear that the socialist party was the only party that cared about the common people.⁷³ He set himself apart from the other politicians of the era by being openly socialist and clear about his resentment towards the major parties. Over the 24 years of his term, Hoan focused on developing the city into a cutting-edge model for American urban life. These socialists used their power to effect change for the ordinary people of Milwaukee. Under his leadership, the city developed a wastewater and sewer system to improve the living conditions in the city, hence the nickname 'the Sewer Socialists'. They created standardized health codes for the city, as well as creating a parks system that would allow the ordinary person to be in nature in order to improve the quality of their daily life.⁷⁴ All of this was done with massive resistance from the Democrats and Republicans, however even their most adamant determination could not stop the socialists from implementing important reforms to the city that still exist today.

Over his years as Mayor, his priorities shifted from one aspect of development to another, but he always stayed true to the needs of the common person in Milwaukee. His administration focused on the main planks of the Socialist ticket, which were developing the city to benefit its citizens. This was done by implementing wastewater treatment, standardizing the health code standards, raising the level of acceptable health codes, implementing a minimum wage, and work hour restrictions. He inspired the people by proposing common good initiatives to better the lives of all people in the city.

Hoan had a clear vision for the city and how to improve the lives of all people which made him immensely popular. Hoan, upon reflection on his time as mayor, pointed out the importance of his era in politics and the values he and the socialist party had. In his work *City Government*, Hoan offers some words on this political narrative in comparison with other socialist hotspots,

“Milwaukee and Cincinnati offer the most striking examples of proper rehabilitation of municipal policy and operation. Both prove the virtue of the political organization method. Both cities were boss-ridden, corruptly controlled, vice-ridden, public utility, and banker-dominated examples of

⁷³ Michael Stevens, “‘Give’em Hell, Dan!’: How Daniel Webster Hoan Changed Wisconsin Politics,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* Vol. 98, no. No. 1 (Autumn 2014): 16–27.

⁷⁴ Todd Fulda, “Daniel Hoan and the Golden Age of Socialist Government in Milwaukee,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, The Politics of Urban Reform in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1870-1920, Vol. 75, no. No. 1 (January 2016): 246–60.

everything that a municipal government should not be. Both cities are determined to clean up their municipal administrations. The Milwaukee government sought to clean itself of corruption but chose to build its political force through a nationally recognized party to cement power.”⁷⁵

This assessment of the city and political strategy is one that many Milwaukeeans and laborites found compelling. A population can find a politician compelling but that does not mean that they will vote for them. Hoan had an ear to the ground and a finger on the pulse of the city. He endeared himself to the people by gaining the reputation of being “cantankerous but charismatic” while the crowds would shout, “Give’em hell, Dan!” during his raucous speeches.⁷⁶ Even with the excitement and continuous support of the working class, eventually, the opposition parties were able to end this era of socialism in 1940, when Hoan was defeated. This era of Milwaukee socialists was the high point of the movement in Milwaukee, but it was not the last time the city would have a socialist in charge.

This first explosion of Socialist wins surrounding Daniel Hoan’s mayoral term could only be described as one of the most dominant eras of socialist government in U.S. history. Not only was he the longest serving Socialist Mayor of a major U.S. city in the history of the country, during this run, Victory Berger won reelection to the House of Representatives again in 1918 but due to his anti-war stances he was prohibited from joining but from 1923 to 1929 (the 66th to 70th U.S. Congresses) he represented the City of Milwaukee.⁷⁷ These electoral victories highlight the strength of the socialist ticket and the power of the coalition that they formed. Without the German immigrants, Socialist press, and Labor Unions this would not have been possible. This strategy used by the Milwaukee Sewer Socialists may have been a unique emergence of factors, but this strategy can be expanded upon to highlight the necessary conditions for a socialist government to exist in the United States.

⁷⁵ Hoan, “Progressive Political Organization.” 67-68.

⁷⁶ William Fletcher Thompson, *The History of Wisconsin: Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, vol. VI, VI vols. (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1988).

⁷⁷ This was not the end of Socialist success in the city with Frank Zeidler winning the Mayoralty from 1948 to 1960 but that falls outside of the scope of this paper. Further scholarship is needed to discuss the circumstances of Zeidler's election victories.

VIII: Conclusion

The Sewer Socialists were people of great ambition but were grounded in reality. They imagined great change and wonderful projects but enacted realistic steps in order to carry out their vision. They knew that the power of socialism would lead to a better future but were aware that the strategy used must be one of pragmatism. The term 'Sewer Socialists' is one born out of mockery but really drives at the heart of their mission. The Sewer Socialists were willing to get down and dirty in order to improve the material conditions of the working class and to create steady change in order to provide the average citizen with all the possibilities of a rich man. They focused on the bottom-up approach and developed the rank and file of the city to build upon their goals, just as a city is built upon its sewer system.

Rank-and-file organization has been ingrained in the Milwaukee Socialists' activities. The people involved in the rank and file of the movement have been linked to all groups of people explored in this paper from the German immigrants to the socialist press, to labor unions. The German immigrants to Milwaukee were the largest base of the Socialists in the city since they have consistently made up a major part of the Milwaukee community and a section of leftist thought through the 'Forty-Eighters.' These immigrants are the basis of the exploration of the development of Socialist thought and power which supplanted the dominant parties of the era. The German immigrants could not have done this by themselves; they needed a place to express their politics and thoughts. The press was the mouthpiece of the Socialist movement and banded together the German immigrants and the labor unions. The Milwaukee Leader was dedicated to the struggles of the working-class people of the city, a large portion of the people being German immigrants. The paper was clear on its mission and its founder Victor Berger, who transitioned from writing the leftwing German language paper *Vorwärts*. The English language version *Wisconsin Vorwärts* made clear the connections between the paper and the working class. He brought the German readers into the American conversation about left-wing and Socialist ideas as they started to speak English more heavily. The German immigrants were not the only group targeted by the messaging within the paper.

As discussed, the labor unions were a key demographic of the paper and the Socialist movement. The labor unions are the backbone of the Socialist coalition. They provided the consistent voter blocks that were needed to win elections in the city. These unions are populated with German immigrants and the press continuously supported the goals and ambitions of the unions. The Socialists made clear advancements with the unions as their political wing or the labor movement. There was a detailed relationship between the papers, socialists, and the labor unions. Many of the leaders in the unions were socialist, German, or dedicated to the political power of labor unions. This lent perfectly to the strategy of the socialists. To create a coalition that is filled by different socio-economic members all focused on advancing the principles of Socialism in Milwaukee. This strategy was, without a shadow of a doubt, a positive factor in the building of the socialist movement in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Socialists were the most successful electoral movement in the United States. The Sewer Socialists were elected to the mayor's office for over 50 years of the city's history and have had an Alderman in the city council during those Mayoral terms. Within the municipal government there was a historic success. Additionally, the Sewer Socialist Victor Berger held the seat in the House of Representatives for 4 terms. There is no other city in the United States that had the coalition that the Milwaukee Socialists were able to cultivate and bring to action. Political parties cannot survive just on their namesake; they must take action and cultivate relationships in the arenas in which they participate. Without the coalition and relationships that were formed over this 60-year period, there would be no socialist movement in Milwaukee.

The Milwaukee experiment with socialism was successful because of unique circumstances, this does not mean that it is not repeatable in other cities and across time periods. This paper aims to point out the factors that lead to a successful socialist movement by using Milwaukee as a case study. There is clear evidence that it is possible to have a socialist government for long periods of time. The three factors mentioned in this paper are some of the characteristics of the movement and other movements in the future should not be bound by just what is seen in Milwaukee.

Milwaukee provides the clearest historical example of how to run a successful Socialist party and movement within a city. I reiterate that these characteristics of the

Milwaukee experiment are key to any successful socialist movement, but others should not be limited to them. The use of immigrants and their community as a way to build relationships with the working class is incredibly important for any political party and using the Socialist ideology to persuade these immigrants that socialism will provide for their needs and make a clear improvement to their material conditions. The use of the socialist press or press of any kind is key to movement building for any topic and in this modern era with social media, the capabilities of communication are nearly endless. Spreading the message of socialism in an approachable and concise manner is how the Milwaukee Leader approached the topic and would be easily translated to the modern age. The connection between the ideas of socialism and labor unions is another continual relationship that has not completely disappeared in the age of restricting labor unions. As I write this, there is a strike of New York Times writers looking for union recognition and there are countless other groups forming unions such as the Starbucks workers. This new enthusiasm and dedication to labor unions make the current era the perfect time for Socialists to establish themselves as the party for the unions just as the Sewer Socialists did in their time. History does not always repeat itself, but it rhymes with itself. The Milwaukee Socialists are the perfect example of using an existing strategy and making it rhyme with the conditions of the modern era.

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