

The Socialist Party in New Deal–Era America

Dwarfed by the Communist Party, the 1930s Socialist Party is often seen as a marginal force. But its successes laid the groundwork for the next generation of organizing — and its politics help us understand Bernie Sanders's campaign today.



UAW strikers guarding window entrance to Fisher body plant number three in Flint, Michigan in 1937. (Sheldon Dick / Library of Congress)

Asked to describe his vision of democratic socialism, Bernie Sanders has often pointed to the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt’s [“economic bill of rights.”](#) “Today, in the second decade of the twenty-first century,” Sanders [declared in a June speech](#), “we must take up the unfinished business of the New Deal and carry it to completion.” The invocation [has stumped some people](#). Wasn’t Roosevelt one of America’s great liberals? Why is Sanders, a longtime independent, cribbing from a totem of the Democratic Party? Jake Altman’s new book, [Socialism before Sanders: The 1930s Moment from Romance to Revisionism](#), gives us a better understanding of why Sanders — [who was politicized](#) as a college student in the 1960s by the Socialist Party — would latch onto FDR’s fabled program.

Catalyzed by mass strikes and worker unrest, the New Deal ushered in a rash of reforms that many in the Socialist Party (SP) felt shot a dose of socialism into

American capitalism. No longer was the state simply the handmaiden of business, the breaker of strikes — now it would actually encourage unionizing. Changing with the times, many SP members recast themselves as the left wing of the New Deal coalition, often through trade union work. While Sanders, to his great credit, never joined the Democratic Party, his insistence that “[economic rights are human rights](#)” is a clear reverberation from the New Deal–era Socialist Party.

Another lasting effect, as Altman notes in the following interview with *Jacobin* editor Shawn Gude, were the institutions socialists built, particularly the Highlander Folk School. Originally conceived as a prefigurative model of socialism, Highlander gradually blossomed into a [crucial organizing community](#) that saw Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr, Ella Baker, and many other unsung leftists pass through its doors. Though the Communist Party dwarfed its size through the 1930s, Altman insists that we shouldn’t lose sight of the SP’s accomplishments in this crucial decade — and the role of women in seeing them through.

Shawn Gude

In many ways, the 1930s was a decade of disappointment for the Socialist Party. Despite the horrors of the Great Depression, which caused many people to question capitalism, the party was still significantly smaller than in its [Debsian heyday](#). But you argue this was far from a lost decade. Why were the thirties an important period for the SP?

Jake Altman

At the start of the economic crisis, the political establishment didn’t understand what was happening with the economy. There were clearly economic disruptions in ordinary people’s lives. And socialists were seeing these problems and laying them at capitalism’s feet. This is why young people were drawn to socialism. It was another moment of political and economic rupture.

In [the book](#), I write about New York City: you have this metropolis that stands as a monument to collective human achievement. It’s an incredible demonstration of the wealth that humanity can create. This was particularly true for young people coming from small-town Missouri or Tennessee. And, at the same time, there are more and more unemployed people in the city. There’s real poverty and it’s growing, more and more people are struggling. And the private charities and the politicians don’t really understand what is happening or why. So it was a real opportunity for socialists to step in and propose an alternative. And they did.

Socialists built important institutions in the 1930s. One that I spend a lot of time on in the book is Highlander Folk School — which I don’t think has really been seen as a socialist institution, or if it has, it has been identified with a very tame Christian socialism that downplays how the staff at Highlander thought of themselves and their project near its beginnings. It was an explicitly socialist project. They wanted to set up a model of a socialist society. So I see the 1930s as this period when socialists are building for the next thirty years and also starting experiments that will evolve and go on to do great work in the service of democracy.

You also have socialist leaders and organizers in a number of unions, and they achieve a lot in terms of building a robust labor movement in the United States. They didn't do it on their own, but through coalitions they were able to build some really impressive institutions like the United Auto Workers (UAW). It helped that they had allies in unions that were already led by social democrats, including the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). The ACWA poached promising organizers from the Socialist Party for union work, and some of these socialists went on to hold important positions in the labor movement for decades. The most well known are the [Reuther brothers](#). There was a robust middle rank, too.

A lot of the energy of the socialist movement in the 1930s ultimately goes into a coalition with the New Deal and with the Democratic Party. While the Socialist Party's revival fades, the energy enters the labor movement and the Democratic Party and it remains, I argue, a distinctive force. Over time, their power within that coalition was eroded more and more, until there's not much of a social-democratic presence in the Democratic Party's coalition. But it lasts a long time. You have [Emil Mazey](#), a socialist, serving as secretary-treasurer of the UAW from 1947 until 1980.

Shawn Gude

The most prominent socialist in this period was Socialist Party leader [Norman Thomas](#). Can you talk about him and his politics?

Jake Altman

[Norman Thomas](#) was a former Presbyterian minister who became leader of the Socialist Party in the late 1920s and then led it through the 1930s and into the 1940s. He was long identified with the socialist movement in the United States. He was different than Eugene Debs in quite a few ways. He's been called patrician. His family was comfortable but not wealthy. He was a student of Woodrow Wilson at Princeton, and that helped keep him out of prison for antiwar speeches during World War I, [when Debs went to prison](#).

Nonetheless, he took many personal risks during his career. Principle dictated action for Thomas. He fought against racial discrimination and corruption in government and in the labor movement. He took positions that were not always politically convenient for allies in the labor movement. He took many positions that were out of step with contemporary public opinion but which put him on the right side of history. His opposition to US intervention in World War II was an exception, and it cost the Socialist Party valuable members.

In the book I write about [Reinhold Niebuhr](#) and Norman Thomas and their differences, and how that shaped the outlook of the younger people who were getting involved in socialism in New York City at this time. Niebuhr concentrated on larger social and economic forces that were shaping society. He gave them an apocalyptic vision of a doomed capitalism. Thomas understood, importantly, that social movements had to be built — capitalism was not going to be displaced by abstract forces. They each provided something important to younger socialists.

Niebuhr once wrote, "Next to the futility of liberalism we may set down the inevitability of fascism as a practical certainty in every Western nation." Thomas's hope for humanity was an important counter to Niebuhr's deep pessimism.

Shawn Gude

Part of the transformation in the party, as you alluded to, came with the advent of the [New Deal](#). What was the party's relationship to Roosevelt's program?

Jake Altman

One way to understand this is to look at the labor movement's relationship to the New Deal. Talented young socialists were picked up by the labor movement and hired on staff, or went in to organize locals and then were hired on staff later. They were confronted with a choice between the Socialist Party and the New Deal.

To many of them, it was a difficult choice. But the New Deal offered so much for labor in the United States. The [National Industrial Recovery Act](#) and then the [Wagner Act](#) helped to transform and broaden the labor movement. And so it was very hard to scoff at what had been accomplished — Roosevelt and a bunch of other New Dealers, and these young labor leaders, [and workers themselves](#), had opened up this door that they could organize incredible power for people. The legal protections and the political power behind them really mattered.

Instead of having the National Guard called out on you to break your strike, you have a Democratic governor in Michigan, for instance, who doesn't do that. Ultimately, the power of the state is used to mediate conflict and protect workers. This incredibly powerful corporation, the same one that is resisting the UAW members' [fight for a fair economy today](#), was made to come to the table and recognize a free and independent union.

Shawn Gude

You write that SP leaders in the early 1930s “set out to attract professional, college-educated young people to radical politics, as part of an explicit plan to establish a new generation of leadership for the SP specifically, and the radical movement in the United States more generally.” One of those people was [Myles Horton](#). Can you talk about him and the Highlander Folk School?

Jake Altman

Horton goes off with some of his socialist comrades and starts Highlander. At first, they thought of Highlander as a way to model a socialist society. So part school, but also part social experiment. I focus on the early years, the rough years, when they were sorting out what they were to become.

Some of these socialists who came from pretty affluent backgrounds had a romanticized view of the working class. That caused some issues. But they continued to experiment, and eventually they refined their work and helped many activists who would go on to build impressive social movements. The fact that Highlander [has survived](#) is a testament to the vision of its early founders and the good work its staff has done across almost ninety years. It's amazing.

Highlander had this radical vision of going to the people and trying to organize from the grassroots, a socialist uprising. In the early days, they talked in those explicitly revolutionary terms. Working in the community, they saw both the violence of capitalism and the violence needed to maintain capitalism. They weren't romantic for very long.

Even though they had this revolutionary rhetoric, they continued to operate within a

traditional Socialist Party framework — focusing on political action, labor organizing, and education. They tried to create these very democratic institutions at the school where they would bring students together with teachers and try to run things in an egalitarian fashion. They had meetings every day, multiple meetings to try to govern the school, to try to empower people in their own lives to make decisions. In some ways they were successful, and in some ways they were not. But that was the basic model: you bring people in, you empower them, help them build democracy in action. In the book, I write about another institution that some of the other young socialists founded in Philadelphia — and the groups overlapped to some degree — called Soviet House. Soviet House proved, in terms of day-to-day living, a more successful experiment, because it was limited in scope. It was cooperative housing, socialists pooling their resources, and it was a place to organize out of, a sort of socialist way station.

Shawn Gude

I wanted to ask you about Zilla Hawes, who is one of the SP members you focus on in the book. Why was Hawes significant, and what does she tell us about where the party was at in the Depression-era United States?

Jake Altman

Elizabeth “Zilla” Hawes comes from a middle-class background, goes to a good college, and then is radicalized and goes into a factory to try to organize folks. Like other socialists during this time, she finds organizing work with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. She goes south and is really involved in the Highlander Folk School effort. She and her husband help keep Highlander connected to the broader labor movement in the south during this period.

She is also fighting sexism. There are arguments and animosities about work expectations and who is assigned what tasks. Hawes did not want to see Highlander replicate a conventional domesticity in this socialist commune, and it’s something she was pushing back against — who’s going to do the dishes and cook meals, and what the role of women and their work will be in the movement.

Hawes gets pretty fed up with Highlander at a certain point. Some of this has to do with increased tensions inside a fracturing socialist movement, and some of it has to do with the fact that she and her husband disagreed with others at Highlander about the nature of their work.

Shawn Gude

Can you talk more about the role of women in the Socialist Party at this time? Zilla Hawes certainly wasn’t the only important leader and organizer.

Jake Altman

In most writing about Norman Thomas, readers don’t get a sense for his wife, Frances Violet. But it’s hard to imagine him as leader of the socialist movement for decades without her substantial support and work. She was making money through business ventures to keep the family’s finances in order.

There’s a whole host of other women leaders in the party, like Sarah Limbach, who became a prominent New Dealer in Pittsburgh, and Gertrude Weil Klein, who was a columnist for the *New Leader*, a socialist paper, and later served on the New York’s

City Council. In reading through her columns, I tried to understand the sexism in the socialist movement and responses to it during this period. We see it at Highlander from some of Zilla Hawes's male comrades, we see it in the pages of *New Leader* from some of Gertrude Weil Klein's male comrades.

Socialist women were contesting sexism within the socialist movement and putting forward their own visions of socialism. They were pushing back against their male comrades' conceptions about women and what women could or should do in the socialist movement and in society. It conveys one way that socialism was an evolving, disputed, and changing set of ideas. Ultimately, I hope that's what the book conveys to people.