

When America's Red States Were Red

This month marks 120 years since the founding of the Socialist Party of America. The party was especially strong in rural areas like Oklahoma — success that the socialist movement could actually replicate today.



Eugene Debs in 1912. (Library of Congress)

Markwayne Mullin is an ultraconservative Republican congressperson from eastern Oklahoma. He hates socialism and isn't afraid to [tell you about it](#).

"Socialism is nothing but a disguised free democracy, meaning that they make you think you have a choice, but you really don't," he warned his constituents in 2019. The Green New Deal "has nothing to do with eliminating my cows from farting," he insisted. "It has to do with that farm being deemed a hazard to the public health" so the federal government can claim "eminent domain and take over our farms." And if the socialists and bureaucrats in New York and Washington, DC can use farting cows as an excuse to take over farms, what's next?

Donald Trump skillfully tapped into fears of "socialism" to run up huge margins in places like Mullin's congressional district, which went for Trump in 2020 by the largest margin in the state (76 to 22 percent).

But this largely rural area wasn't always a hotbed of reaction. A century ago, socialist firebrands like [Kate Richards O'Hare](#) found receptive audiences in eastern Oklahoma, and the state boasted the largest per capita Socialist Party (SP) membership in the country. Five-time Socialist presidential candidate [Eugene Debs](#) considered southwestern farmers "real Socialists . . . ready for action, and if the time comes when men are needed at the front to fight and die for the cause the farmers of Texas and Oklahoma will be found there."



Kate Richards O'Hare speaks in front of the St Louis courthouse on May 2, 1914. (Wikimedia Commons)

Today, Debs's words sound like a broadcast from another dimension. While socialists, radicals, and progressives are doing important work across the country, left politics are — [at least for now](#) — largely synonymous with the most urban and cosmopolitan precincts in the United States.

The New York City chapter of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) claims roughly 10 percent of the organization's entire membership. The crop of democratic socialists recently elected to Congress hail from places like the Bronx and Queens (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez), New York's northern suburbs (Jamaal Bowman), Detroit (Rashida Tlaib), and St Louis (Cori Bush). Electoral breakthroughs at the state legislative level have come so far only in New York, and all of those legislators represent districts in the Big Apple. Chicago boasts a socialist caucus on its city council, but no other town or city can say the same.

This year marks the 120th anniversary of the SP's founding. And during its heyday, many of the movement's biggest strongholds were found in the country's most rural areas. As James Weinstein observes in *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925*, until 1918 "the greatest relative voting strength of the movement lay west of the Mississippi River, in the states where mining, lumbering, and tenant farming prevailed."

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In addition to Oklahoma, the states with the highest proportions of SP voters were Nevada, Montana, Washington, California, Idaho, Florida, Arizona, and Wisconsin. Butte, Montana — which elected a Socialist government led by Mayor Lewis Duncan in 1911 — features one of the last public remnants of the old SP: [Socialist Hall](#). Even in states like New York, the party tended to do just as well in smaller upstate towns like Schenectady, where Socialist mayor [George Lunn](#) was elected to two terms

in the 1910s, as it did in New York City.

Big-city socialists today still have [a lot of work to do](#) in our neighborhoods and workplaces. But if we want to become a truly popular movement, we need to find ways to grow beyond our metropolitan footholds. Revisiting the SP's record of building power in rural and small-town America — including a frank assessment of its failures and shortcomings — can give us a sense of how that legacy might be rebuilt today.

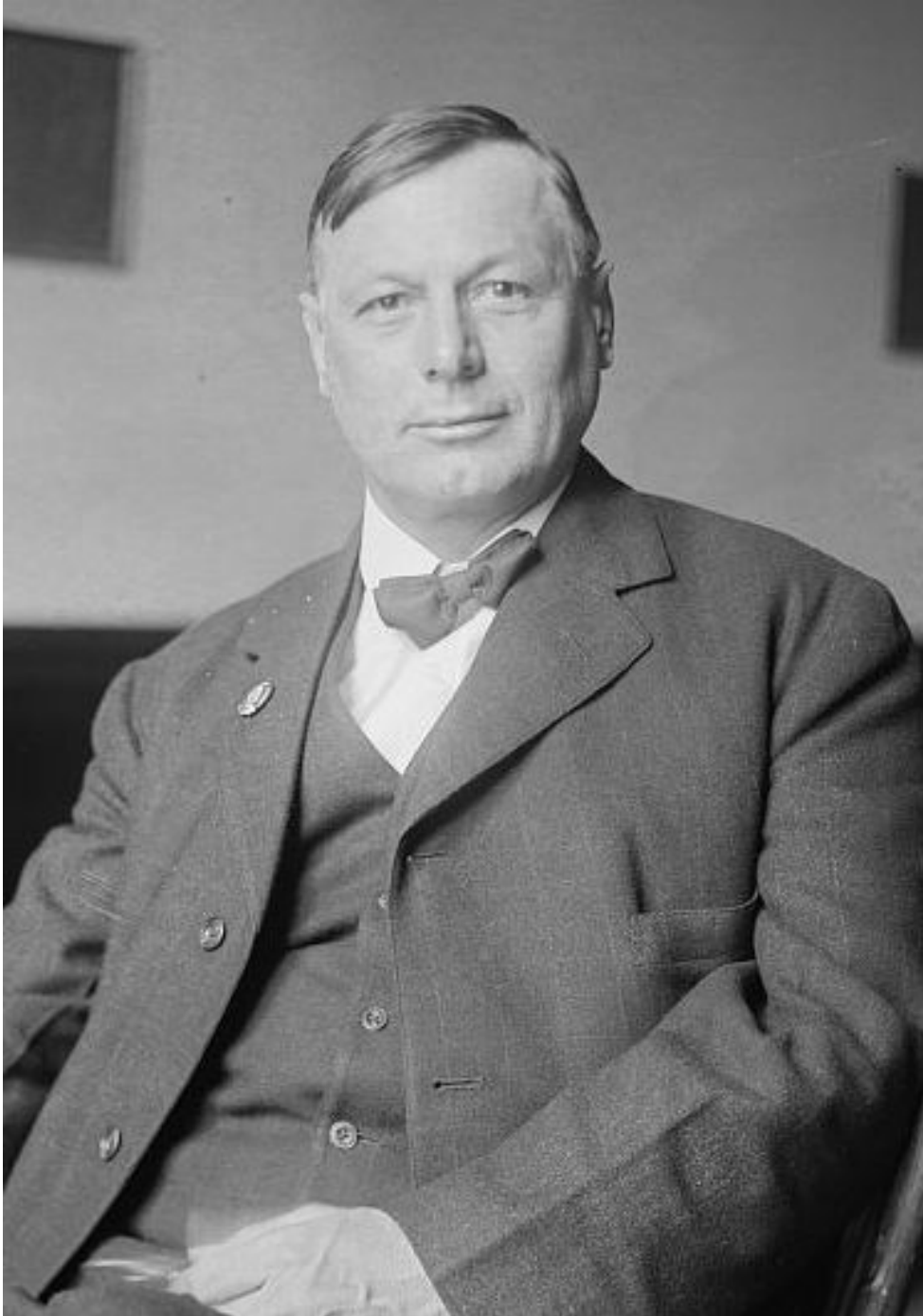
Class Struggle in the Old Southwest

The SP was far from the first organization to make a radical appeal to the nation's hinterlands. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Knights of Labor, the People's (Populist) Party, and other organizations rallied workers and farmers against the growing power of bankers, railroad barons, and land speculators.

But when the Socialist Party formed in 1901, it wasn't simply as a reincarnation of Populism. As James Green observes in [Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943](#), while many of the early SP leaders were former Populists, the Socialists' main areas of support in the region were outside the old Populist strongholds, among the growing ranks of tenant farmers and industrial workers in cotton farming and coal mining areas.

In addition to former "Pops," the movement drew on an experienced cadre of labor organizers like the old Knights of Labor militant [Martin Irons](#), a grizzled Scotsman who had led a massive railroad strike in 1886 against the robber baron Jay Gould.

Radicals and Socialists in the region drew much of their support from migrants who had fled their homes in search of land. Instead of a frontier idyll, these migrants found that many of the best lands had been claimed by railroads, speculators, and cattle ranchers, and the cost of setting up an independent farm was often prohibitive. Many nominally independent farmers became deeply dependent on creditors. By the turn of the century, most farmers in the region were tenants and sharecroppers, rather than the self-sufficient homesteaders of their dreams.



Oscar Ameringer in 1920 (Wikimedia Commons).

Some of these tenants were Cherokees, Choctaws, and other indigenous people who had their tribal lands stolen. Some were black migrants looking to get out from under Jim Crow. Most were white. Nearly all were poor, ensnared in exploitative forms of agricultural finance like the crop-lien system. This set of property relations generated bitter class struggles between tenant farmers and their landlords, which allowed the Socialists to exploit fissures in the Democratic Party's electoral base.

In addition to tenant farmers, Socialist organizers were well received among the miners, timber workers, and railroad men of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, and the interior West. They were particularly successful in recruiting militant miners, who built strong United Mine Workers (UMW) and Western Federation of Mineworkers (WFM) locals across the region.

The UMW was one of the main sources of black recruitment to southwestern Socialism, as it was one

of the only organizations that sought to unite working people across racial lines. Local SP organizations, however, were not always willing to do the same. Many white SP members resisted cooperation with black and indigenous farmers, and segregated party locals could be found in Texas, Louisiana, and elsewhere.

Still, a number of Socialist leaders fought racism and white supremacy in the movement. The rakish Southern radical [Covington Hall](#) organized dock workers across the color line in New Orleans and was a leading founder of the interracial [Brotherhood of Timber Workers](#) (BTW). [Oscar Ameringer](#), one of the most underappreciated figures in the history of American Socialism, worked to unite the black and white brewery workers of New Orleans while on assignment from the Socialist-led Brewery Workers' Union. When he moved to the Sooner State in 1907, he quickly began agitating for socialism among tenant farmers in Indian Country. Together with state party secretary [Otto Branstetter](#), another German social democrat with close ties to the Milwaukee Socialists, he sought to bring together black, white, and indigenous workers in a strong and well-organized SP affiliate.

Spreading the Good Word of Socialism

Official party organizations did not spring up overnight. In the first years of the twentieth century, the Southwest was covered by a vast web of journalistic and propaganda activity that drew masses of people into the Socialist movement — in many cases before under-resourced official party organizations could reach them. As Green recounts in *Grass-Roots Socialism*, radical journalists, intellectuals, and propagandists promoted “an unusual level of self-organization and self-education among the poor working people who joined the movement.”

None was more important than [Julius Wayland](#), whose weekly paper, the [Appeal to Reason](#), was central to Socialist education and organizing in places like Oklahoma and Texas. The paper's “Appeal Army” of volunteer salespeople would fan out into the country like Methodist circuit riders, hawking subscriptions and pamphlets and seeding party organizations wherever they went. By 1912, Green writes, “over six thousand Appeal volunteers were walking, bicycling, and driving buggies through Oklahoma and Texas spreading the Socialist gospel.”

Their efforts won the paper a national circulation of roughly 750,000 — the highest of any weekly publication in the country. The *Appeal*, in Green's words, “was literally the only contact with socialism experienced by many people in the first decade of the century, and it was particularly important in converting younger farmers and workers” who were not veterans of the Knights of Labor or the Populist movement. Other unofficial but Socialist-aligned papers like the [National Rip-Saw](#) (St Louis) and the [Rebel](#) (Hallettsville, Texas) served a similar role, bringing Socialism to the people in an idiom that blended class struggle with American republicanism and evangelical Christianity.

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Socialist organizers also made excellent use of mass encampments, a familiar institution associated with both Populism and religious revivals. Socialists organized their first encampment in 1904 in the Grand Saline area of Texas, where a thousand farmers from across the region showed up to listen to speeches and lectures for hours. As one account in the Socialist press described it, “Go into the Grand Saline country and see erstwhile democrats . . . preaching Socialism as earnestly as did the Pentecostals preach the New Gospel and perhaps you will have a clearer conception of what the encampment accomplished.”

These encampments brought thousands into the movement because “they drew upon the collective traditions of the frontier and added political significance to common experiences.” Preachers and teachers advanced Socialist ideas in biblical and populist language to justify the struggle against those

who would deny workers of hand and brain the full product of their toil.

Ameringer described the encampments' effect in vivid terms:

For these people radicalism was not an intellectual plaything. Pressure was upon them. Many of their homesteads were already under mortgage. Some had already been lost by foreclosure. They were looking for delivery from the eastern monster whose lair they saw in Wall Street. They took to socialism like a new religion. And they fought and sacrificed for the spreading of the new faith like the martyrs of other faiths.

Attendees were thrilled by the oratory of renowned leaders like Mother Jones, but they also made minor celebrities of forgotten figures like [Walter Thomas Mills](#). Known as the "little professor," this diminutive polymath established a "School of Social Economy for Socialists" and wrote a popular textbook called [The Struggle for Existence](#), which offered readers an eclectic blend of Christian moralism and scientific socialism. If a good organizer is, in the words of [Fred Ross](#), a "social arsonist who goes around setting people on fire," the old Socialist movement had them in droves.

And nobody in the movement set more people on fire than Eugene Debs, easily the most popular orator at the Southwestern encampments. Debs brought both prophetic and intellectual intensity to his speeches and exuded an unshakeable faith in the ability of the poorest and most despised people to change the world.

Reflecting on the success of the encampments, Debs related how farmers and their families would head home "feeling that they had refreshed themselves at a fountain of enthusiasm," ready and able to deliver "the glad tidings of the coming day" to their friends and neighbors.

Worker-Farmer Alliance

A lively press and effective organizing tactics like encampments were key to Socialists' success in rural areas. But the movement would not have found such fertile soil if it did not directly appeal to people's material interests — even if they diverged from orthodox Marxist prescriptions.

The Texas and Oklahoma parties, for example, supported tenant farmers' essentially Populist demands for private, small-scale ownership of farmland despite the opposition of party members from other sections of the country. Critics argued that small family farms were inefficient and obsolete, and that only demands for land collectivization were consistent with proper socialism.

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Other Socialists disagreed. In his influential 1902 study [The American Farmer](#), [Algie Simons](#) insisted that not only were small farmers not disappearing, but that the growing power of corporate capital made them a potential audience for Socialists.

Simons's main argument was twofold. First, "the small farm owner is a permanent factor in the agricultural life in America, and that he forms the largest uniform division of the producing class," and second, "any movement which seeks to work either with or for the producing class, must take cognizance of him." Industrial workers could not, in his view, transform society without the masses of small farmers standing with them at the ballot box and on the field of class conflict.

Simons's arguments gained additional strength after the party's disappointing results in the 1908 elections, when it offered no agrarian program beyond a vague call for collective ownership of all land. In 1912, the national party congress adopted an agrarian program that incorporated demands long raised by Simons and the Southwestern Socialists: state-supported cooperatives; public ownership of transportation, storage, and processing facilities; graduated land taxes; and expansion of

cheap government-backed leases of land to family farmers.

The new program marked an important moment in the movement's development. As Simons [wrote](#) after the 1912 convention, "Conditions in agriculture, in the party and in the views of the delegates have all changed with the years, and the Socialist party now goes forth with a clear statement of its position in regard to the farmer that should mean a tremendous growth in agricultural localities in the near future."

He was right. In 1912, Debs received a total of eighty thousand votes (about one-tenth of his national total) from Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. At its height in the middle of the decade, the Oklahoma party claimed about ten thousand members, the most members per capita of any state in the country. In 1914 and 1915, the year when the SP had its largest number of state legislators in office, states west of the Mississippi River accounted for nineteen of thirty-three legislators. Oklahoma alone accounted for six, second only to Wisconsin's nine, and it elected a total of a hundred seventy-five Socialists to local and county offices.



Eugene Debs speaking in 1908. (Wikimedia Commons)

The party's back-and-forth over how best to approach the rural masses resembled debates in other parties of the Second International. In his [review](#) of Simons's book, German theorist Karl Kautsky noted that the agrarian question was "one of the most difficult and disputed" issues in the German Social Democratic Party — pitting Bavarians and other southerners who wanted to appeal to poor and middle peasants against northerners who only wanted to recruit landless agricultural laborers on large estates.

This question was also a major dividing line in Russian social democracy, where Lenin's support for aligning with the Russian peasantry put him at odds with the Mensheviks, who focused primarily on the urban working classes and bourgeois liberals.

The erosion of small farmers as a social class means that contemporary socialists don't confront the same "agrarian question" as our predecessors. But the conundrum of "contradictory class locations" is very much on the agenda, as the [often-heated discourse](#) over the "PMC (professional managerial class) question" clearly shows. The challenge today is to reconcile two groups who are largely isolated from each other socially and politically: progressive, highly educated wage earners and the masses of lower paid, less-credentialed working people.

Contradictions and Failures

In his [history of the SP](#), Jack Ross observes that "the movement of the Old Southwest never fit neatly into the factional categories of the national party." The left-wing Texas Socialists, for example, supported the essentially "revisionist" agrarian program. They were sympathetic to the [Christian Socialists](#) and sought to recruit ministers to the movement — positions in keeping with many of the party's more moderate elements. At the same time, they staunchly opposed the successful campaign to recall "Big Bill" Haywood from the party's National Executive Committee in 1913 over his support for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and sabotage.

Similar dynamics played out on organizational questions and white supremacy. Left-wingers dominated the Oklahoma party's ranks, but for years its social democratic leaders like Branstetter and Ameringer sought to reproduce the more centralized methods of Victor Berger's Milwaukee organization. Local radicals denounced this "German form of organization" and sought greater organizational decentralization wherever possible.

The degree of commitment to interracial organizing did not tend to break down along neatly defined left-right lines either. In general, the Oklahoma Socialists took a firmer stand against white supremacy than their counterparts in Texas and elsewhere. Even the most radical elements of the movement could be weak on the question of racial equality. When *Rebel* editor [Tom Hickey](#) and other left-wing Texas Socialists formed a Land Renters' Union in 1911 they barred blacks from joining the organization.

The union eventually organized black and brown tenants, but into separate locals. As Green notes, many of the poor white tenant farmers of the region "pitted themselves against landlords and businessmen on one hand, and against black sharecroppers and brown migrants on the other." Otherwise radical leaders like Hickey did not combat this racism. Some of them, like *Rebel* publisher [E. O. Meitzen](#), were blatant race-baiters and nativists.

To their credit, leaders like Ameringer, Branstetter, and *Tenant Farmer* editor Pat Nagle defended the rights of black and brown people and courted their support. In 1912, they and others successfully campaigned to add an explicitly anti-racist plank to the party's platform through a membership referendum. Two years earlier, in 1910, Oklahoma party leaders campaigned against the Democrats' successful referendum to disenfranchise black voters in the state. Some party members voted for it, but Green concludes that a majority of Oklahoma Socialists voted against it.

In light of these struggles, Ameringer denounced "the bitter race hatred that has been a nightmare to every clear-seeing Socialist working man in the South." Many rank-and-file Socialists agreed with him. There were some important examples of interracial organizing in the region, particularly among miners and timber workers oriented toward industrial unionism.

The BTW, which organized black and white workers in the piney woods spanning west Louisiana and east Texas, was exemplary in this regard. It proved much harder, however, to convince white tenant farmers to unite with blacks in common organizations instead of fearing them as competitors. The movement as a whole was weaker than it should have been as a result.

Rebellion, Repression, Retreat

The SP maintained a fairly steady level of membership and electoral strength in the Southwest and interior West until the United States entered World War I in 1917. But the combination of repression and a severe cotton crisis triggered by the war arrested the movement's growth and set the stage for its eventual defeat.

The organized strength of Socialism stirred the region's ruling classes to wage a reactionary countermovement. Timber workers, miners, and tenant farmers clashed with bosses and landlords in bitter strikes and confrontations. At the same time, left-wing "Reds" in the Oklahoma party took aim at social democratic "Yellows" like Ameringer and Branstetter, and ousted them from their positions in 1913.

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These dynamics inverted the story that was playing out elsewhere in the movement at the time. As Green observes, the heightening of Southwestern class conflict around 1913 boosted the fortunes of local left-wingers and direct-actionists at the same time the likes of Haywood were being ousted from national leadership positions.

The Oklahoma Socialists made solid gains at the ballot box in 1914, when UMW militant Fred Holt stood as the party's gubernatorial candidate. With the state's cotton farming districts racked by drought and a collapse in prices, the party waged a robust campaign against the Democrats and Republicans. Holt won 21 percent of the statewide vote, polling more votes than Debs in his 1912 presidential campaign. His coattails, and those of other effective candidates like Nagle, swept a wave of Socialists into office at the state, county, and local levels throughout Oklahoma.

While the party made big gains in Oklahoma and held ground in Texas, it did not fare as well elsewhere. In 1914, lumber barons smashed the BTW in Louisiana, which effectively defeated the Socialist movement in the state. At the same time, Democrat-sponsored suffrage restrictions and election "reforms," combined with the devastating cotton crisis, pushed increasingly desperate tenant farmers to adopt guerrilla tactics.

In 1915, an underground conspiratorial organization called the [Working Class Union](#) (WCU) began dynamiting vats in protest of Oklahoma's tick eradication law, which fell hardest on poor tenants. (The vats were used to dip cattle in arsenic to kill ticks, but only wealthier farmers and cattlemen could afford to comply with the rule.)

These and other militant actions like night-riding were understandable, even predictable, responses to economic hardship and political repression. But as Green notes, the turn to social banditry brought repression "where the party had already suffered serious losses as a result of blacklisting campaigns organized by Democratic businessmen, landlords, and politicians."

To its lasting credit, the SP — unlike many of the other parties of the Second International — took a strong stand against entering World War I. Their reward was ruthless repression. The most damaging anti-Socialist measures came from the postmaster general, who removed party papers from the mail, impacting nearly every Socialist periodical of importance in the country. For the movement in rural areas — which relied heavily on the mail to organize, educate, and agitate — the postal crackdown was especially devastating.

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Oklahoma was the site of the most militant antiwar activity, including a failed armed uprising in 1917 called the [Green Corn Rebellion](#). The SP was officially against these tactics, but since many of its members were involved in armed resistance the state’s ruling Democrats attacked the Socialists in a fury of patriotic repression. By 1918, the once-mighty Oklahoma Socialist Party was crushed.

The party organization dissolved itself out of fear of further repression, and many of its key leaders and militants fled the state. In 1918 alone, Weinstein notes, “some 1,500 of the more than 5,000 Socialist Party locals were destroyed, mostly in small communities” and disproportionately in areas west of the Mississippi. By the time of the 1918–19 split, which decimated the SP and birthed two fractious Communist parties, the movement in Oklahoma and the trans-Mississippi region in general was already crushed by vicious wartime repression.

A Deeper Shade of Red?

Rural socialism continued to find expression in the [Nonpartisan Leagues](#) and Farmer-Labor movements of the Midwest. But over the subsequent decades socialism became a predominantly urban phenomenon, particularly as the Communists and various Trotskyist groups focused much of their attention on workers in the mass production industries.

Communists played an important role in the early years of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, as Robin Kelley documents in [Hammer and Hoe](#), and the Communist Party made some limited headway among Midwestern farmers, particularly in the Dakotas amid the farm protests of the 1930s. Socialists led the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU), founded in 1934 to unite black and white tenants in the SP’s old Southwestern strongholds.

The union recruited tens of thousands of members by the late 1930s, but it ultimately could not survive the combined pressures of New Deal farm relief, violent landowner repression, and the growing mechanization of agriculture, which radically reduced the scope of both agricultural wage-labor and farm tenancy. By the latter decades of the twentieth century, the social layers that formed the base of classical American Socialism were in severe decline.

Thousands of family farms were permanently wiped out in the 1980s, bringing rural communities down with them. Deindustrialization and the attack on labor decimated the ranks of the UMW and other unions with a rural presence. The economic base of rural America [shifted](#) largely from agriculture, mining, and manufacturing to the service sector, particularly healthcare and food services.

In this sense at least, urban and rural areas have actually grown more alike — potentially making it easier to craft demands and programs that bridge seemingly insurmountable geographical divides. In any case, the dramatic transformation of the American “heartland” means that the contours of democratic-socialist politics in these regions will look very different today.

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Many rural areas are in a dire state. As Marc Edelman describes in his [sobering survey](#) of rural America, since the 1980s, “Mutual savings banks and credit unions, cooperatives, mom-and-pop businesses, local industries and newspapers, health and elder care facilities, schools, and libraries have all fallen victim to relentless austerity policies or private-equity raiders.” The disintegration of rural communities opened the door to reactionary demagogues like Donald Trump and Markwayne Mullin, who point the finger at everyone except those who really deserve the blame: the corporate interests who have plundered and abandoned Main Street, USA.

The Left has a dual imperative to rebuild its base in small-town America. The severe distress and deprivation that prevails demands relief for its own sake. People are suffering, and the Left should do all it can to relieve that suffering.

There's a more practical reason, too: the United States' system of political representation is structurally biased against urban and metropolitan areas. Organizations like DSA are growing in membership and building power in the nation's most urbanized districts, but cities often lack the economic and political capacity to solve their own problems. They'll need support from the states and the federal government, which likely won't come if rural and small-town representatives aren't willing to grant it. Consider, for example, the wave of preemption laws right-wing state governments have passed to stop municipalities from raising wages, implementing antidiscrimination ordinances, reining in police power, or building municipal broadband systems.

The old Socialist movement made many of its first rural inroads by deftly using mass media, particularly newspapers. Today's left should attempt to replicate this by developing media aimed specifically at rural and small-town audiences.

The decline of local print media has allowed a vacuum for Fox News and right-wing radio hosts to fill, but the Left can reach people who want an alternative to this steady diet of reactionary demagoguery. A wave of public school strikes swept GOP-dominated states like [Oklahoma](#) in 2018–19, which briefly revived a dormant militant tradition and pointed to a potential political opening among educators and other public service workers.

The disintegration of rural communities has had terrible social consequences. At the same time, it gives the Left a chance to create even small circles that give people a social outlet and focal point for community life. As Green observes in *Grass-Roots Socialism*, “in many of the rural sections of the Southwest the party local served as a little Socialist community, a sort of surrogate for the declining ‘country community.’”

The old Socialists also capitalized on people's discontent with established Christian denominations that catered to their exploiters. The “prosperity gospel” that is so popular today demands a new social gospel that resonates where evangelical Christianity is a central aspect of daily life.

We should link social and spiritual appeals to a program of material demands, including land reform. As Levi Van Sant [has argued](#), a land reform program that challenges concentrated land ownership and ecologically destructive corporate agriculture could bridge geographical divides and underpin a multiracial, working-class alliance.

Rural areas are commonly assumed to be monolithically white, but that perception is far from the reality. Immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere work on [farms](#) and [meatpacking plants](#), and substantial communities of Native Americans, blacks, and Latinos live throughout rural America. A strong, consistent message of racial equality must be an integral part of this agenda — not only to combat the racism and nativism of the Right but to appeal to core components of our potential base.



Thousands gather in Oklahoma City outside the state capitol building during a statewide education walkout in 2018. (Scott Heins / Getty Images)

In addition to the land question, a left-wing program would support funding for public schools and libraries, widening Medicare/Medicaid eligibility, mental health and substance abuse services, transportation investments that reduce auto dependence, high-speed broadband, and an expansion of the US Postal Service — including reestablishing postal banking to combat predatory check-cashing services and payday lenders. Marginalized urban communities share many of these same interests, which could make it easier to unite periphery and metropole around a common program than it initially appears.

We can't simply transpose what the Socialists did a hundred twenty years ago to our own time. But there is much to learn from this history, particularly when it comes to building a radical movement in apparently inhospitable territory. The legacy of Ameringer, Hall, and Debs can help us turn some of the most seemingly intractable corners of Republican America a deeper shade of red.