

This article appears courtesy of Emma Goldman Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division,
The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Socialism: Caught in the Political Trap

by Emma Goldman

Legend tells us that healthy newborn infants aroused the envy and hatred of evil spirits. In the absence of the proud mothers, the evil ones stole into the houses, kidnapped the babies, and left behind them deformed, hideous-looking monsters.

Socialism has met with such a fate. Young and lusty, crying out defiance to the world, it aroused the envy of the evil ones. They stole near when Socialism least expected and made off with it, leaving behind a deformity which is now stalking about under the name of Socialism.

At its birth, Socialism declared war on all constituted institutions. Its aim was to fell every injustice to the ground and replace it with economic and social well-being and harmony.

Two fundamental principles gave Socialism its life and strength: the wage system and its master, private property. The cruelty, criminality, and injustice of these principles were the enemies against which Socialism hurled its bitterest attacks and criticisms. Private property and the wage system being the staunchest pillars of society, every one who dared expose their cruelty was denounced as an enemy of society, a dangerous character, a revolutionist. Time was when Socialism carried these epithets with head erect, feeling that the hatred and persecution of its enemies were its greatest attributes.

Not so the Socialism that has been caught in the trap of the evil ones, of the political monsters. This sort of Socialism has either given up altogether the unflinching attacks against the bulwarks of the present system, or has weakened and changed its form to an unrecognizable extent.

The aim of Socialism today is the crooked path of politics as a means of capturing the State. Yet it is the State which represents the mightiest weapon sustaining private property and our system of wrong and inequality. It is the power which protects the system against every rebellious, determined revolutionary attack.

The State is organized exploitation, organized force, and crime. And to the hypnotic manipulation of this very monster, Socialism has become a willing prey. Indeed, the representatives of Socialism are more devout in their religious faith in the State than the most conservative statist.

The Socialist contention is that the State is not half centralized enough. The State, they say, should not only control the political phase of society, it should become the arch manager, the very fountain-head, of the industrial life of the people as well, since that alone would do away with special privileges, with trusts and monopolies. Never does it occur to these abortionists of a great idea that the State is the coldest, most inhuman monopolist, and if once economic dictatorship were added to the already supreme political power of the State, its iron heel would cut deeper into the flesh of labor than that of capitalism today.

Of course, I will be told that Socialism does not aim for such a State, that it wants a true, just, democratic, real State. Alas, the true, real, and just State is like the true, real, just God, who has never yet been discovered. The real God, according to our good Christians, is kind and loving, just and fair. But what has he proven to be in reality? A God of tyranny, of war and bloodshed, of crime and injustice. The same is the case with the State, whether of Republican, Democratic, or Socialist color. Always and everywhere it has and must stand for supremacy, hence for slavery, submission,

and dependency.

How the political scene-shifters must grin when they see the rush of the people to the newest attraction in the political moving-picture show. The poor, deluded, childish people, who are forever fed on the political patent medicine, either of the Republican elephant, the Democratic cow, or the Socialist mule, the grunting of each merely representing a new ragtime from the political music box.

The muddy waters of the political life run high for a time, while underneath moves the giant beast of greed and strife, of corruption and decay, mercilessly devouring its victims. All politicians, no matter how sincere (if such an anomaly is at all thinkable), are but petty reformers, hence the perpetuators of the present system.

Socialism in its inception was absolutely and irrevocably opposed to this system. It was anti-authoritarian, anticapitalistic, anti-religious; in short, it could not and would not make peace with a single institution of today. But since it was led astray by the evil spirit of politics, it landed in the trap and has now but one desire---to adjust itself to the narrow confines of its cage, to become part of the authority, part of the very power that has slain the beautiful child Socialism and left behind a hideous monster.

Since the days of the old Internationale, since the strife between Bakunin, Marx and Engels, Socialism has slowly but surely been losing its fighting plumes---its rebellious spirit and its strong revolutionary tendencies---as more and more it has allowed itself to be deceived by political gains and government offices. And more and more, Socialism has grown powerless to arouse itself from the political hypnosis, thereby spreading apathy and passivity in proportion to its political successes.

The masses are being drilled and canned for the political cold storage of Socialist campaigns. Every direct, independent, and courageous attack on capitalism and the State is being discouraged or tabooed. The stupid voters wait patiently from one political performance to another for the comrade actors in the theater of representation to give a show, and perhaps perform a new stunt. Meanwhile, the Socialist congressman introduces yard upon yard of resolutions for the waste basket, proposing the perpetuation of the very things Socialism once set out to overthrow. And the Socialist mayors are busy assuring the business interests of their towns that they may rest in peace, no harm will ever come to them from a Socialist mayor. And if such Punch-and-Judy shows are criticised, the good Socialist adherents grow indignant and say that we must wait until the Socialists have the majority.

The political trap has transferred Socialism from the proud, uncompromising position of a revolutionary minority, fighting fundamentals and undermining the strongholds of wealth and power, to the camp of the scheming, compromising, inert political majority, busying itself with non-essentials, with things that barely touch the surface, measures that have been used as political bait by the most lukewarm reformers: old age pensions, initiative and referendum, the recall of judges, and other such very startling and terrible things.

In order to achieve these "revolutionary" measures, the elite in the Socialist ranks go down on their knees to the majority, holding out the palm leaf of compromise, catering to every superstition, every prejudice, every silly tradition. Even the Socialist politicians know that the voting majority is intellectually steeped in ignorance, that it does not know as much as the ABC of Socialism. One would therefore assume that the aim of these "scientific" Socialists would be to lift the mass up to its intellectual heights. But no such thing. That would hurt the feelings of the majority too much. Therefore the leaders must sink to the low level of their constituency, therefore they must cater to the ignorance and prejudice of the voters. And that is precisely what Socialism has been doing since it was caught in the political trap.

One of the commonplaces of Socialism today is the notion of evolution. For heaven's sake, let's have nothing of revolution, we are peace-loving people, we want evolution. I shall not now attempt

to prove that evolution must mean growth from a lower to a higher state of mind, and that thus Socialists, from their own evolutionary standpoint, have failed miserably, since they have gone back on every one of their original principles. I only wish to examine into this wonderful thing, Socialist evolution.

Thanks to Karl Marx and Engels we are assured that Socialism has developed from a Utopia to a science. Softly, gentlemen, Utopian Socialism is not the kind that would allow itself to be caught in the political trap, it is the kind that will never make peace with our murderous system, it is the kind that has inspired and still inspires enthusiasm, zeal, courage, and idealism. It is the kind of Socialism that will have none of the disgustingly cringing compromise of a Berger, a Hillquit, a Ghent, and other-such "scientific" gentlemen.

Every daring attempt to make a great change in existing conditions, every lofty vision of new possibilities for the human race, has been labeled Utopian. If "scientific" Socialism is to substitute stagnation for activity, cowardice for courage, acquiescence for daring, submission for defiance, then Marx and Engels might never have lived, for all the service they have done to Socialism.

But I deny that so-called scientific Socialism has proven its superiority to Utopian Socialism. Certainly, if we examine into the failure of some of the predictions the great prophets have made, we will see how arrogant and overbearing the scientific contentions are. Marx was determined that the middle class would get off the scene of action, leaving but two fighting forces, the capitalistic and proletarian classes. But the middle class has had the impudence not to oblige comrade Marx.

The middle class is growing everywhere, and is indeed the strongest ally of capitalism. In fact, the middle class was never more powerful than it is today, as can be adduced by a thousand facts, but mainly by the very gentlemen in the Socialist ranks---the lawyers, ministers, and small businessmen---who infest the movement. They are making of Socialism a respectable, middle-class, law-abiding issue because they themselves represent that very tendency. It is inevitable that they should espouse methods of propaganda to fit everybody's taste and strengthen the system of robbery and exploitation.

Marx prophesied that the workers would grow poorer in proportion to the increase of wealth. That did not come to pass, either, in the way Marx hoped. The masses of workers are really getting poorer, but that has not prevented the rise of an aristocracy of labor in the very ranks of labor. A class of snobs who---because of superior wages and more respected positions, but mainly because they have saved a little or acquired some property---have lost sympathy with their own kind, and are now the loudest proclaimers against revolutionary means. Truth is, the entire Socialist Party of today is recruited from these very aristocrats of labor; that's why they will have nothing to do with those who stand for revolutionary, anti-political methods. The possibility of becoming mayor, congressman, or some other high official is too alluring to allow these upstarts to do anything that would jeopardize such a glorious chance.

But what about the much-extolled class consciousness of the workers which is to act as such leaven? Where and how does it assert itself? Surely, if it were an innate quality the workers would long since have demonstrated this fact, and their first act would have been to sweep clean from the Socialist ranks lawyers, ministers, and real-estate sharks, the most parasitic types in society.

Class consciousness can never be demonstrated in the political arena, for the interests of the politician and the voter are not identical. The one aims for office while the other must stand the cost. How then can there be a fellow-feeling between them?

Solidarity of interests develops class consciousness, as is demonstrated in the Syndicalist and every other revolutionary movement, in the determined effort to overthrow the present system, in the great war that is being waged against every institution of today in behalf of a new edifice.

The political Socialists care nothing at all for such a class consciousness. On the contrary, they fight it tooth and nail. In Mexico, class consciousness is being demonstrated as it has not been since

the great French Revolution. The real and true proletarians, the robbed and enslaved peons, are fighting for land and liberty. It is true they know nothing of the theory of scientific Socialism, nor yet of the materialistic interpretation of history, as laid down in Marx's Das Kapital, but they know with mathematical accuracy that they have been sold into slavery. They also know that their interests are inimical to the interests of the land robbers, and they have risen in revolt against that class, against those interests.

How do the class-conscious monopolists of scientific Socialism meet this wonderful uprising? With the cries of "bandits, filibusters, anarchists, ignoramuses"---unfit to understand or interpret economic necessity. And predictably, the paralysing effect of the political trap does not permit of sympathy with the sublime wrath of the oppressed. It must move in straight-laced legal bounds, while the Indian Yaquis, the Mexican peons have broken all laws, all propriety, they have even had the impudence to expropriate the land from the expropriators, they have driven back their tyrants and tormentors. How then can peaceful aspirants for political jobs approve such conduct? Trying hard for the fleshpots of the State, which is the staunchest protector of property, the Socialist cannot possibly affiliate with any movement that so brazenly attacks property. On the other hand, it is quite consistent with the political aims of the party to oblige those who might add to the voting strength of class-conscious Socialism. Witness how tenderly religion is treated, how prohibition is patted on the back, how the anti-Asiatic and Negro question is met with, in short how every spook prejudice is treated with kid gloves so as not to hurt its sensitive souls.