

Excerpts from a 1938 “Progressive Column” pamphlet:

“System has Failed: The Socialist party of Wisconsin once more points out that the capitalist system has totally failed to provide the people with proper food, clothing and shelter.

“The stupid blundering of the old parties, in attempting to patch up a collapsing capitalism has plunged our nation into economic chaos. Unemployment, with its consequent semi-starvation and degradation, has increased so rapidly that it now affects almost half of our entire population.”

“Solution is Delayed: Because a few people own the social tools, the mills, the factories, the mines and the railroads, they can and do prevent the rest of us from working to make the things we need.”

“Plenty for all: When the mills, mines and other means of production and distribution are owned by the people and democratically operated, then, and then only, will it be possible to have plenty, peace, and freedom for all.”

“Replace Profit System: The Socialist party proposes...replacing the profit system with a co-operative commonwealth based on service instead of profit, through collective ownership of the means of production and distribution.”

Works Cited

Rocco, Philip, and Sam Harshner. “Milwaukee Has Elected Two Socialists, Reviving the City’s Pro-Worker Political Tradition.” *Jacobin*, 17 Aug. 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/08/milwaukee-socialist-candidates-dsa-wisconsin-pro-worker-tradition>.
Socialist Party Records, 1893-2021, Collection 322. Local History Manuscript Collections, Milwaukee Public Library, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



**WLSC Zine
History and Platforms of the
Wisconsin Socialist Party**

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May 5th, 2023

Mid 1930s through mid 1940s policy, platforms, and history of the Socialist parties of Wisconsin and Milwaukee

Who were the Sewer Socialists?

Socialists in Milwaukee County are responsible for many of the services we have in Milwaukee today. "Milwaukee County's extensive system of parks and beaches was the product of visionary socialist city planner Charles Whitnall. Socialist mayoral administrations ushered in the eight-hour workday, created Milwaukee's first public higher-education institutions, and vastly expanded the quality and extent of city services, from streetlights and sewerage to libraries and museums" (Rocco & Harshner, 2022).

Why were they called "Sewer Socialists?" Socialists were given this name by political opponents to characterize their policy focus on city services. The name was meant to be negative to tell voters that the Socialists only focus on services. However, Socialists began to proudly use this label to emphasize their commitment to providing quality local public services to everyone in the community.

Socialists quickly won offices in Milwaukee city, Milwaukee County, and the state legislature in the 1910s. However, by 1936 most were out of office. The Socialist Party in Milwaukee was extremely popular and politically influential up until the 1950s when the last Socialist mayor was elected in 1956. By the 1960s, opposition had grown stronger in the county government and had effectively shut out Socialists from public office through organized and concerted efforts.

As Socialists declined in Milwaukee politics, policies pushed in the county were aimed at reducing the political power of the working class and people of color. Highways were built through the city, spreading out the population of Milwaukee while leveling entire neighborhoods. The neighborhoods that were destroyed were majority Black and included an area known for its minority owned and run

By 1942 the Socialist platform had grown to include:

- Against sales tax because it disproportionately burdens lower income people
- 100% income tax rate on people making more than the highest paid civil servant
- Opposed to taxes for specific projects
- Constitutional amendment for a unicameral legislature

In 1944 the Milwaukee Municipal Social Platform supported:

- Municipal ownership of electric, gas, and transportation
- Municipal ownership/development of docks
- Municipal ownership of dairy
- City planning of a garden
- Replace slums with municipal housing
- Tree planting/landscaping of certain areas
- Education for arts/craftsmanship and vocational training for all students
- Re-education of adults in vocational training
- Extension of free public education to junior college level
- Teaching of social sciences in public schools
- Public schools as forums
- Continued vigilance in management of municipal offices and finances
- No borrowing from banks
- Fair taxes based on services rendered
- Unemployment commission to put people into work

By 1940 no less than 16 planks from the 1916 Socialist Party of Wisconsin platform had been adopted by the other two major parties (cont.):

- Vocational education
- Public ownership of railroads
- No war without a referendum
- Better housing
- State insurance
- Encouragement of cooperatives
- Public assistance for farmers

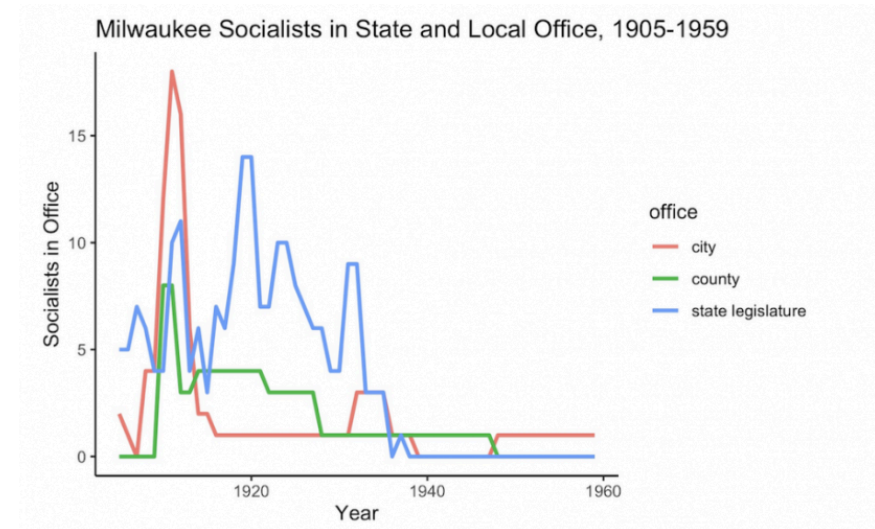
The 1940 Socialist platform advocated for these policies:

- Legislation and/or a state constitutional amendment to engage in any industry or business for the welfare of the people
- A public authority to organize the unemployed
- A state owned and developed power system to supercede private power
- A state owned bank charged with refinancing farms and home mortgages
- Extension of state insurance for workers and farmers
- Enlarged old age pension system to be financed by profits from newly public utilities
- Shifting tax burdens from farms and homes to those with high incomes
- State dental and health services
- Public marketing authority to guarantee price of produce
- Vocational training and retraining for those whose work has disappeared
- Free public education through two years of college

businesses. These decisions were made on purpose to destroy the political power of minorities in Milwaukee.

Following their leave from office, opponents swiftly reversed certain Socialist policies, like racial integration in the city's affordable public housing. Combined with the declining industry and shrinking union in the city, racial and class tensions arose in city politics.

See below, number of Socialists elected to office in various levels of government:



Milwaukee Socialists in State and Local Office, 1905-1959; source: Authors' analysis of data drawn from Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015)

The 1936 Socialist Party of Wisconsin was demanding:

1. Constitutional changes:
 - a. Workers' Rights Amendment, allowing congress to transfer private ownership of industries to social ownership
 - b. Abolition of "usurp power of the Supreme Court to" overturn legislation
 - c. Make future amendments easier to pass
 - d. Child Labor Amendment (after which congress shall abolish child labor)
 - e. Taxation of all government securities
2. Un/employment:
 - a. "Adequate federal relief to the unemployed"
 - b. Quick expansion of public works programs
 - c. Public employees earn union wages
 - d. Eliminate slums and build affordable housing
 - e. Old age pensions for people 60+
 - f. Federal health insurance and unemployment insurance
 - i. To be funded with contributions from taxes on the highest incomes and inheritance taxes
3. Education scholarships for youth as outlined in the American Youth Act
4. "Drastic increase in income and inheritance taxes on higher income levels and excess profits taxes, and wide experimentation in land values taxation"
5. Labor legislation:
 - a. Enactment of 30 hour work week with no reduction in pay
 - b. No injunctions in labor disputes

- c. No company unions, spying, and use of private guards
 - d. No use of police, deputy sheriffs, militia, or federal troops in labor disputes
6. Civil Liberties
 - a. "Abolition of all laws that interfere with the right of free speech, free press, free assembly, and the peaceful activities of labor in its struggle for organization"
 - b. "The enforcement of constitutional guarantees of economic, political, and legal equality" for Black people and to pass/enforce anti-lynching laws
7. Militarism/war
 - a. Reaffirm historical position of the Socialist party being anti-war
 - b. Propose curtailing arms
 - c. End compulsory military training in school
 - d. Strengthen neutrality laws

By 1940 no less than 16 planks from the 1916 Socialist Party of Wisconsin platform had been adopted by the other two major parties:

- Mother's pensions
- No employment of children under 18
- Freedom to organize
- Minimum wages
- Conservation and development of resources
- Extension of useful public works
- Old age pensions
- Unemployment insurance
- Workmen's compensation