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Why Has Milwaukee Forgotten Victor Berger?

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I recently spent several days in Milwaukee to give a talk at the University of Wisconsin about urban history and politics. My new book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, includes a profile of Victor Berger -- the leader of Milwaukee's vibrant Socialist movement, which ran the local government for most of the years from 1910 to 1960 -- so I was curious to learn how he is remembered in his city.

Berger, who helped make Milwaukee one of the most progressive and well-run cities in the country, was an easy choice for my book's roster of greatest Americans. Many of the ideas that he and other Milwaukee Socialists espoused in the early 1900s -- like municipal parks, public health programs, municipal ownership of utilities, old-age insurance, a minimum wage, and women's suffrage -- were considered radical at the time, but are now taken for granted. Indeed, remove the now-maligned word "socialist" and much of Berger's agenda has broad support today throughout the country, including Milwaukee.

Berger would be shocked that Wisconsin is currently ground-zero in the nation's right-wing crusade against unions and progressive government -- causes that he espoused. The leader of that assault, Republican Gov. Scott Walker, was previously the Milwaukee County executive. His current attack on unions, social services, and working families has triggered a huge backlash that catalyzed huge protests last year and now a grassroots movement to recall him from office.

So perhaps in the current political climate, Milwaukee's business establishment (which includes the conservative Bradley Foundation, one of the leading funders of right-wing causes) would prefer that residents forget about the city's Socialist past which -- along with the bold progressivism of Gov. Robert La Follette during part of the same era -- could inspire a new wave of radical activism.

It turns out that there are no buildings, streets, or other landmarks in Milwaukee named after Berger. One middle-aged Milwaukee native told me he had attended Victor Berger Elementary School, but in 1992 the school district had renamed it after Rev. Martin Luther King. So, not surprisingly, few Milwaukeeans today know much about Berger's accomplishments and legacy.

Born in 1860 in Austria-Hungary, Berger came to the United States in 1878, settled in Milwaukee, and soon became a German-language teacher in its public schools. He was president of the local Typographical Union and a frequent delegate to American Federation of Labor conventions. For years, he published newspapers in both German and English, distributing free editions to all Milwaukee homes on the eve of elections. In 1892 he bought the Wisconsin *Vorwaerts* (*Forward*), a daily German-language newspaper affiliated with the Socialist Labor Party (SLP).

In 1900 he joined with labor leader Eugene Debs to form the Social Democratic Party, which merged the following year with the SLP to form the Socialist Party of America. Berger closed the *Vorwaerts* and began a new paper, the *Social Democratic Herald*, which carried on its masthead the description "Official Paper of the Federated Trades Council of Milwaukee and the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor." He was later editor of the *Milwaukee Herald*, an English-language labor paper owned primarily by the Brewery Workers union, a powerful force in the nation's beer-making capital.

In 1910, Milwaukee voters elected Emil Seidel, a pattern-maker, the first Socialist mayor of a major city. That year, the Socialists, building on their large German immigrant following and the city's strong labor movement, also won a majority of seats on the city council and the county board. At the same time, they made Berger the first Socialist elected to the U.S. Congress. Both Seidel and Berger lost in 1912, but in 1916 Milwaukee voters elected another Socialist, Daniel Hoan, as their mayor and reelected him through 1940. After a brief hiatus, in 1948, Milwaukeeans elected Frank Zeidler, a member of the school board, to be their third Socialist mayor. Zeidler was re-elected twice, serving until 1960, when he declined to run again for health reasons. In other words, Milwaukee had Socialist mayors for 40 of the 50 years between 1910 and 1960, a track record unparalleled in any other American city.

After they gained power in 1910, the Socialists turned Milwaukee into a laboratory for progressive change. Before the Socialists took office, Milwaukee was one of America's most corrupt cities. Businesses routinely bribed local officials to give favorite corporations private monopolies over utilities and streetcars, which were typically run inefficiently. Businesses paid little taxes while local government was starved for cash.

But under the Socialists, Milwaukee gained a reputation as a well-managed municipality. They believed that government had a responsibility to promote the common good, but particularly to serve the needs of the city's working class. They built community parks, including beautiful green spaces and recreation areas along the lakefront that are still widely-used. They increased the citywide minimum wage (28 years before the federal government adopted the idea) and established an eight-hour day standard for municipal workers. They championed public education for the city's children, built excellent libraries and sponsored vibrant recreation programs. The city municipalized street lighting, the stone quarry, garbage disposal and water purification. (Their biggest disappointment was their failure to take over the inefficient privately-owned street car system and electric utility company).

Proud of their well-managed public services, the Socialists constantly boasted about Milwaukee's excellent public sewer system. As both praise and irony, they were often known as "sewer socialists."

In May 1936, *Time* magazine put Mayor Hoan on its cover and reported that under him, "Milwaukee has become perhaps the best governed city in the U.S." Milwaukee won many awards for being among the safest and healthiest cities in the country. Thanks to its innovative public health programs, for example, Milwaukee regularly had among the lowest rates of infant mortality and epidemic diseases of any American city. During the global "Spanish flu" epidemic of 1918, Milwaukee's public health department closed down its schools, churches, and other public gathering places to prevent its spread. As a result, Milwaukee had one of the lowest contagion rates in the world.

Many of Milwaukee's urban reforms were later adopted by other cities, most of which were not run by Socialists.

In Congress, where he served intermittently until 1928, Berger sponsored bills providing for government ownership of the radio industry and the railroads, abolition of child labor, self-government for the District of Columbia, a system of public works for relief of the unemployed, and women's suffrage. He put forward resolutions for the withdrawal of federal troops from the Mexican border and for the abolition of the Senate (which was then not yet elected directly by the voters and was called the "millionaires' club"). He introduced the first bill in Congress to provide old-age pensions -- an idea that eventually adopted in 1935 when President Franklin Roosevelt created Social Security.

Despite these radical stances, Berger was criticized by the Socialist Party's left wing because, they argued, these measures, even if passed, would not add up to socialism. They criticized Berger's "step at a time" brand of socialism. Berger disagreed. One of his favorite mottoes was, "Socialism is coming all the time. It may be another century or two before it is fully established."

It was Berger who introduced Eugene Debs to socialism. In 1894, Debs, leader of the railroad workers union, was sentenced to six months in prison in Woodstock, Ill., for violating a federal injunction during his union's strike against the Pullman company. In jail, Debs read voraciously and began questioning many core beliefs, including his longtime membership in the Democratic Party. As Debs recalled, "Victor L. Berger -- and I have loved him ever since -- came to Woodstock, as if a providential instrument, and delivered the first impassioned message of socialism I had ever heard -- the very first to set 'the wires humming in my system.'" Debs became a beloved figure, running for president on the Socialist Party ticket five times, gaining almost one million votes -- 6 percent of the total -- in 1912. That year, 1,039 Socialist Party members held public office in 340 cities and towns.

Like Debs, Berger was a leader in opposing the U.S. entry into World War I. In an editorial on the mayoral election in the *Milwaukee Leader*, Berger wrote that the Socialist Party gave each voter a chance "to register his vote in favor of an immediate, general and democratic peace or for a bloody, long, drawn-out plutocratic war."

In 1918, Berger ran for the U.S. Senate from Wisconsin. In his campaign he demanded the return of American troops from Europe and a system of taxation on war industries that would "take every penny of profits derived from the sale of war supplies." He put up fifty billboards in Milwaukee that said, "war is hell caused by capitalism. socialists demand peace. read the people's side. *Milwaukee Leader*. Victor I. Berger, Editor."

During the campaign, Socialist meetings were harassed by organized mobs and local chambers of commerce. Berger had difficulty hiring halls in which to speak outside Milwaukee. Socialist Party members distributing campaign literature were arrested without cause. Berger's paper, the *Milwaukee Leader* (which he started in 1911 and which had a statewide circulation) was banned from the mails, so it could only be circulated in and near Milwaukee. In February 1918, in the middle of the campaign, Berger and four other Socialists were indicted under the Espionage Act. Despite this harassment, Berger won 26 percent of the vote statewide in the April Senate election.

Berger was more successful the following November, when Milwaukee voters returned Berger to the congressional seat he had held from 1911 to 1913. On Feb. 20, 1919, Berger was convicted and sentenced by Judge Kenesaw Landis (later famous as major league baseball's iron-fisted commissioner) to twenty years in federal prison for his opposition to World War I. In April 1919, his colleagues in Congress expelled him by a 309-1 vote.

Wisconsin's Emanuel Philipp, called a special election to fill Berger's seat in December of that year, and again Berger won, only to be refused his seat still another time by a 328-6 margin.

Berger appealed Landis's decision, and the U.S. Supreme Court overturned it in 1921. Berger was reelected in 1922 and seated; he remained in Congress until he was defeated in 1928. He returned to Milwaukee, where the Socialists still had considerable influence, and resumed his newspaper career until he was killed in a streetcar accident the next year.

Milwaukee has a bridge named after Daniel Hoan and a municipal building named for Frank Zeidler, but Milwaukeeans will look in vain for a landmark named for Victor Berger, who was the genius behind the Socialists' initial triumphs. Milwaukee's progressives and liberals, its unions, the local historical society, and other civic activists should mount a campaign to restore Berger's name to its rightful place in the city's history.

How? The City Council could rename a major street Berger Boulevard. The Milwaukee Area Labor Council could install a statue of Berger, the guiding spirit of the city's union movement during its heyday, in front of its headquarters. The Milwaukee County Historical Society could sponsor a permanent exhibit about the city's illustrious Socialist past, including Berger's important role, so that current and future residents will learn about this important chapter of the city's history and its current legacy. The school district could repent for erasing Berger's name from a school 20 years ago by identifying another building that could bear the name of this former public school teacher. (Or they could restore his name to that school and share it with the slain civil rights leader, who was also an economic radical and who shared many of Berger's views, which would then be known as the "Berger King" school!)

Given his political base, Berger would certainly applaud having a local baseball team called the Brewers, but shouldn't Milwaukee's progressives and unionists insist that Miller Park -- the team's privately-owned stadium that was built with public funds -- be renamed Berger Ballpark? Shouldn't one of the city's few remaining breweries produce a new product called Berger Beer? And shouldn't one of Milwaukee's many German restaurants add to its menu a Berger Burger?

As a nation, we need to celebrate the achievements of the people and movements that have made America a more humane and democratic country. Unless we know our history, we will have little understanding of how far we have come, how we got here, and how that progress was made thanks to the moral convictions and political skills of great Americans like Victor Berger.

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