

The California recall in historical perspective: Lessons of Upton Sinclair's 1934 campaign

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The recall of California Democratic Governor Gray Davis and the installation of film celebrity Arnold Schwarzenegger was a significant event in the political life of the United States. In particular, the California election exposed the impotence of the Democratic Party, which once again, as in the Clinton impeachment and the stolen presidential election of 2000, proved incapable of mounting a serious struggle against the extreme right.

This article reviews the experience of the 1934 California gubernatorial election, in which novelist Upton Sinclair, a long-time member of the American Socialist Party, attempted to capture the governorship of California by running as a Democrat. The 1934 election highlighted some important political truths that bear on the above-cited experiences of the past five years.

The 1934 election was a practical refutation of many reformist conceptions—in particular, the notion of an insurgent movement seizing control of the Democratic Party and turning it into an instrument for radical, even socialist, change.

The attempt by Sinclair to enter the Democratic Party and capture the governorship on the basis of a social democratic program ran up against a stone wall of opposition from big business interests. It evoked a vicious counter campaign by the corporate and media establishment, aided by the leadership of the Democratic Party itself.

By 1934, following four years of depression, social protest was growing in the United States. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had decisively defeated Republican Herbert Hoover in the 1932 presidential election, and on taking office in 1933 inaugurated his New Deal program, an amalgam of reformist measures aimed at restoring public confidence in US capitalism.

Roosevelt's election came amidst a period of global crisis and uncertainty. In Germany, the bourgeoisie turned to Adolf Hitler's fascist movement to crush the workers' organizations and pave the way for the military rearming of German capitalism.

In France, armed fascist bands appeared on the streets, and in Spain, workers in Asturias met the installation of a reactionary government with an armed insurrection that was bloodily suppressed.

In the US, the year 1934 witnessed major strikes in a number of important industrial cities, in many cases under socialist or radical leadership. Unlike past attempts, several of these class battles achieved important gains for the working class, raising hopes and expectations among broad layers of the population.

In Minneapolis, truck drivers, organized by members of the Communist League of America, supporters of exiled Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, initiated a series of successful strikes that led to union recognition and laid the basis for the transformation of the Teamsters from a relatively small craft union into a mass organization based on the industrial union model.

Auto workers in Toledo defied police and National Guard troops to win a union contract that led to the organization of dozens of auto plants within a relatively short space of time.

This upward movement of working class militancy was reflected in California, where the collapse of the profit system had produced a desperate social crisis. In 1934, one out of every four people in Los Angeles was surviving on relief, which amounted to \$4.50 per month. The crisis was compounded by the influx of tens of thousands of ruined farmers from the Midwest dust bowl and unemployed workers from all over the US who had migrated to California in search of a better life. Many found that the only employment available was in the fields, where pay averaged 10 to 15 cents an hour.

California—particularly southern California—had long been a bastion of anti-unionism. In 1919, the state enacted the California Criminal Syndicalism Act, which effectively outlawed militant trade unionism. Mere membership in proscribed organizations, such as the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World, was a felony, punishable by up to 14 years in prison. Scores of workers were jailed under the terms of this Act.

Agricultural workers in California were among the first to rebel under the impact of the depression. Oppressive conditions in the fields precipitated strikes and in some cases violent clashes, in which the growers mobilized armed vigilantes to shoot down striking workers.

In May, 1934, San Francisco longshoremen struck. The authorities mobilized masses of police and National Guard troops to attack the strikers. Several workers were killed and hundreds were wounded or arrested.

Workers responded with a four-day citywide general strike, which was betrayed by the leadership of the American Federation of Labor, whose leaders forced an end to the struggle. However, the longshore union survived and in subsequent years went on to make substantial gains.

It was in this context that, in August 1934, Upton Sinclair won the Democratic nomination for governor of California in a primary election, having received more votes than the combined total of all the other candidates.

Sinclair was born in 1878 to a family with Southern aristocratic ties. His grandfather had been a US admiral. However, his parents were down and out, often forced to rely on the charity of relatives.

The young Sinclair showed an early talent for writing, though his initial work consisted chiefly of pulp fiction. He remained little known until 1905, when his book *The Jungle* became a massive success.

The work, first published in serial edition in the socialist *Appeal to Reason*, was a biting exposure of capitalist reality seen through the eyes of Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant living in Chicago. The book is most often spoken of as an exposure of the filthy conditions in the meatpacking industry. That, however, is only one aspect of the work, which is fundamentally an indictment of capitalism as a whole. Sinclair would later comment, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach" (*Upton Sinclair, American Rebel*, Leon Harris, Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1975, p. 70).

Sinclair followed with more searing exposures of capitalism. He and

other left-wing social critics were labeled muckrakers, a term coined by President Theodore Roosevelt. Subsequent Sinclair novels took on, among other institutions, the oil industry, organized religion and the academic establishment.

At about the same time that he wrote *The Jungle*, Sinclair became active in the Socialist Party, establishing contact with other socialist-minded intellectuals such as author Jack London and attorney Clarence Darrow. Like many intellectuals who joined the Socialist Party, Sinclair oriented toward its reformist wing, never assimilating even the rudiments of a serious Marxist education. As subsequent events demonstrated, his conception of socialism, like that of so many others in the movement, barely rose above a vulgar admixture of American radicalism and populism.

World War I exposed the growth of opportunism within the Social Democratic Second International. All of the major European social democratic parties, with the exception of the Russian Bolsheviks, betrayed their pledges to uphold international working class solidarity by opposing their own government's participation in the European war. Instead, Social Democracy split along national lines, each party supporting its respective government's military mobilization.

In the United States there was strong opposition among the Socialist Party's substantial reformist wing to the movement's formal opposition to US entry into the war. Sinclair went further. He resigned from the party in 1915, declaring "I believe it is a work of civilization the allies are doing..." (*American Rebel*, p. 157).

After the war, Sinclair rejoined the Socialist Party, which had been severely weakened by the exit of its internationalist section. Revolted by the betrayals of Social Democracy and inspired by the example of the Russian Revolution, the more militant wing of the old Socialist Party became the nucleus of the American Communist Party.

The split relegated the Socialist Party to relative political insignificance, under the control of a small group of parliamentarians and trade union bureaucrats. Sinclair opposed revolutionary methods, but remained sympathetic to the Soviet Union. Like many other left intellectuals, however, Sinclair's sympathy for the Soviet Union extended to the emerging Soviet bureaucracy led by Joseph Stalin. He turned a blind eye to Stalin's abandonment of socialist and internationalist principles and his repression of his left-wing opponents, whose towering political and theoretical leader was Leon Trotsky.

Sinclair, an internationally known celebrity, lived a life far removed from the working class. Those in his social circle included many of the rich and famous of Southern California, where he now resided.

In 1933, Sinclair quit the Socialist Party again, announcing his candidacy for the 1934 Democratic gubernatorial nomination. Sinclair had succumbed to the fantasy that he could enter a party of the capitalist class and capture it from within.

Sinclair's entry into the Democratic Party foreshadowed a general alignment of American social democracy, Stalinism and radicalism behind the Democratic Party and the Roosevelt administration. In California, Sinclair's decision to join the Democrats had an immediate and devastating impact on the Socialist Party organization in the state, with one half of the membership quitting in order to join Sinclair's campaign.

Two years later, in 1936, Socialist Party leaders David Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and other prominent figures called for a vote for Roosevelt, splitting the movement.

In 1934, the American Communist Party was still adhering to the ultra-left line imposed by the Stalinist regime in Moscow, and consequently denounced Sinclair as a "social fascist." However, at the Seventh World Congress in 1935, the Moscow-dominated Comintern abandoned its ultra-left orientation and adopted the Popular Front policy, which called for its affiliated parties to support so-called progressive capitalist politicians, and

even form coalition governments with bourgeois parties. Accordingly, the Communist Party USA began to give political support to Roosevelt.

Upon announcing his candidacy for the Democratic nomination, Sinclair wrote the pamphlet, "I, Governor of California, and How I Ended Poverty—a True Story of the Future." Therein he advanced his plan to "End Poverty in California," which became popularly known as EPIC. It envisioned the state taking over idle farms and factories and turning them into cooperatives that would trade among themselves using scrip. In Sinclair's vision, these cooperatives would compete with privately-owned businesses and corporations and prove their superiority. "Production for use" would triumph over "production for profit."

Others planks in the EPIC plan included more conventional reforms—a progressive corporate and individual income tax, an inheritance tax, property tax relief for small homeowners, and public works programs.

The publication of the EPIC plan evoked an enthusiastic public response. An EPIC movement, diffuse but broad, spread across California. Nearly 2,000 EPIC clubs were established. The movement published a newspaper, *EPIC News*, which at one point boasted a circulation of one million.

Sinclair's proposal for the creation of cooperatives as a solution to the mass unemployment caused by the Depression ignored basic social and political realities. In the first place, it assumed that it was possible to end poverty and unemployment in California, separate from the rest of the US, not to mention the rest of the world. Further, it assumed that the Roosevelt administration in Washington could be convinced of the reasonableness of the plan and that the capitalists would peacefully acquiesce, even though the EPIC movement stated its intention of challenging "production for profit," the cornerstone of the capitalist system.

Sinclair's scheme for industrial and agricultural cooperatives embodied ideas long prevalent among American left intellectuals, going back to utopian socialists such as Edward Bellamy, author of the novel *Looking Backward*. Members of the Utopian Society of America, an offshoot of the Technocracy movement, played an important initial role in the EPIC movement. The EPIC program borrowed heavily from their conceptions, which envisioned a rationally managed capitalism run by a technological elite.

What all these schemas had in common was a rejection of the class struggle as the vehicle for socialism. Central to this was the outlook of American exceptionalism—the view that the United States was a unique society, immune to the class conflicts of Europe.

As Sinclair saw it, a major purpose of his campaign was to avoid the danger of revolution by providing a reformist channel for social discontent. On the eve of the election Sinclair declared, "Our old industrial system is falling into ruin and a new system has to be built in the midst of collapse. Unless democracy can find a way to do this, we shall have civil war, followed by Fascism and ultimately by Bolshevism. In an effort to avert these events we present a plan to the people of California" (*Endangered Dreams, The Great Depression in California*, Kevin Starr, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 151).

However, the corporate establishment in California wanted nothing to do with EPIC. It reacted to Sinclair's campaign with frenzied opposition, bordering on hysteria.

Sinclair and his followers were unprepared for the corporate counterattack that took place after the writer's Democratic primary victory. This was, in part, because Sinclair had not expected to win. His triumph in the Democratic primary was as much a surprise to him as to his adversaries.

His main opponent, George Creel, was a career politician who had served in the administration of President Woodrow Wilson. Sinclair had never held elective office, though he had previously run for governor on the Socialist Party ticket.

The vote reflected a major shift in California politics. The state had been

solidly Republican for decades, with Republican registration normally surpassing Democratic by a three to one margin. Partly as a result of the EPIC movement, in 1934 Democratic voter registration surpassed Republican registration in California for the first time in the twentieth century. Sinclair's vote total was larger than the primary vote for his Republican opponent, Governor Frank Merriam. Given these facts, it appeared likely that a Democratic governor could win office for the first time since 1899.

Shortly after his primary victory, Sinclair announced his intention of seeking a meeting with President Roosevelt. However, Roosevelt was far from eager to embrace Sinclair, who was considered too radical by the vast majority within the Democratic Party establishment. In particular, Roosevelt feared that by endorsing Sinclair he would alienate the banking and industrial elite, which he was attempting to win to the side of his New Deal policies. At the same time, he did not want to demonstratively rebuff the winner of the California Democratic primary.

Roosevelt agreed to meet Sinclair. However, he insisted on the humiliating stipulation that the meeting be publicly advertised as "nonpolitical."

Characteristically, Roosevelt sought to charm and disarm his guest, while committing himself to nothing. Sinclair, however, came away with the impression that he had the tacit support of the White House. He believed Roosevelt would publicly endorse the concept of "production for use."

In actuality, the president's policy was to put as much distance as possible between his administration and the EPIC movement. As an aide commented, Roosevelt's policy toward Sinclair consisted of two basic elements: to do nothing and say nothing (*American Rebel*, p. 302).

Later in the campaign, Roosevelt's policy turned to active sabotage—throwing the election to the Republicans in exchange for their pledge of future conciliation.

After his visit to Roosevelt, Sinclair made the rounds of cabinet officials, where he was given the same courteous but noncommittal treatment. Again, Sinclair interpreted the diplomatic evasions of administration officials in the best possible light, construing them to be a promise of future support. He returned home full of confidence.

Back in California, business interests were organizing a well-funded movement to derail Sinclair's campaign. All efforts were made to boost the candidacy of Republican Governor Frank Merriam, a reactionary and political nonentity, who held the governorship due to the recent death of Governor James Rolph.

Indicative of the oppressive political climate fostered by the Rolph administration was an atrocity that occurred in 1933. When a mob broke into the San Jose jail and lynched two suspected murderers of a department store heir, Rolph welcomed the crime. He declared, "This is the best lesson California has ever given the country. We show the country the state is not going to tolerate kidnapping." (*Endangered Dreams*, p. 149.)

Throughout the 1934 gubernatorial campaign, Merriam's strategy was to keep as low a profile as possible, leaving the dirty work to his big business handlers. Louis B. Mayer, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios, led the anti-Sinclair forces, which formed the group United for California. Seldom if ever before had such viciousness been seen in a major US electoral campaign. The drive to stop Sinclair united virtually the entire big business establishment in the state and had the support of all major press outlets.

The biggest corporations in California bankrolled the anti-Sinclair campaign, amassing a war chest of \$10 million, at that time a truly enormous sum. Among those contributing were Southern California Edison, Southern Pacific Railroad, Standard Oil and Pacific Mutual.

Mayer solicited donations from the other movie studio bosses and imposed a forced levy on his own studio employees of one day's pay. The

anti-Sinclair forces employed a major advertising and marketing firm to develop its propaganda effort. This effort was described by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as the "first all out public relations Blitzkrieg in American politics." (*The Age of Roosevelt, Vol. III, The Politics of Upheaval*, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Houghton Mifflin, 1960, p. 118.)

Ninety-two percent of media outlets endorsed incumbent Governor Frank Merriam, and five percent endorsed Progressive Party candidate Raymond Haight. The others remained neutral. None endorsed the Democratic-EPIC candidate.

However, neutrality was dangerous, as the *Beverly Hills Bulletin* discovered. The paper was driven to the verge of bankruptcy by the withdrawal of corporate advertising dollars in retaliation for its relatively even-handed approach to the campaign.

The press vilified Sinclair as a "Communist" and a "Bolshevik." Typical was an October 5, 1934 column in the *Los Angeles Times* that declared the EPIC movement represented "a threat to sovietize California."

Comparing EPIC to a "hostile fleet" off "our" shores, it continued: "Gentlemen—and Ladies—This is not politics. It is war." (*The Campaign of the Century, Upton Sinclair's Race for Governor of California and the Birth of Media Politics*, Greg Mitchell, Random House, 1992, p. 300.)

The *Times* and other newspapers predicted a rush of unemployed to California if Sinclair were elected. The California Real Estate Association announced its backing for Republican Merriam with the slogan, "It's Merriam or Moscow" (*The Campaign of the Century*, p. 298). Press reports claimed movie executives were preparing plans to pull their studios out of California if Sinclair won.

Merriam supporters flooded the mail with anti-Sinclair tracts. In one of the first uses of direct mail, they tailored their message to target audiences. Everyone from university professors to Christians—even the Boy Scouts—received specialized anti-EPIC propaganda pieces.

The campaign against Sinclair did not stop with simple editorializing. In its effort to defeat the EPIC movement, big business utilized a wide variety of dirty tricks. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced propaganda newsreels, in which ostensible Merriam supporters—in reality, Hollywood actors posing as ordinary voters—were presented as sober and well spoken working people and businessmen, while Sinclair supporters came off as shifty-eyed vagrants, often speaking in thick foreign accents. Other newsreels showed tramps, again played by Hollywood actors, riding freight trains headed for California in anticipation of a Sinclair victory. The smear campaign was presented as objective news reporting and distributed free to movie theaters.

As the election neared, *Literary Digest* published results of a rigged voter survey purporting to show Sinclair's campaign collapsing, with the Democratic-EPIC candidate garnering the support of just 25 percent of California voters. The wide publication of the survey helped demoralize the Sinclair forces. It was later revealed that the magazine had failed to poll voters in areas of Sinclair's greatest support.

Merriam supporters challenged the registration of thousands of Democratic voters in Los Angeles. The California Supreme Court threw out the challenge a few days before the election, calling it a "sham proceeding and a perversion of the court process." Despite this, Republican officials threatened to personally challenge the registration of voters on Election Day. The threats had the intended effect of intimidating Democratic voters, helping to depress turnout in areas critical to Sinclair's campaign.

None of these efforts would likely have been sufficient to defeat Sinclair if not for the desertion and sabotage of the Democratic Party. In most counties, the leadership of the California Democratic Party lined up behind Merriam, and George Creel, whom Sinclair had defeated in the primary, announced his support for the Republican incumbent.

Sinclair had been led to believe that Roosevelt would endorse his EPIC

plan in a national radio address set for October 22. However, Roosevelt never mentioned EPIC in his radio address, which turned out to be a short speech devoted to the importance of private charity.

Meanwhile, Roosevelt's postmaster general, James Farley, announced that a letter sent to EPIC headquarters announcing support for Sinclair was not authorized. Farley said it was an error committed by a member of his staff.

The Roosevelt administration initiated behind-the-scenes efforts to try to get Sinclair to drop out of the race in favor of Progressive Party candidate Haight. When this plan failed, Roosevelt struck a deal with Merriam. Roosevelt would not endorse Sinclair if the Republican governor would not present his re-election as a repudiation of the New Deal.

A Roosevelt insider, J. F. T. O'Connor, comptroller of the currency, communicated these terms to Merriam. In a discussion held October 31, Merriam expressed his appreciation for the efforts by California Democrats on behalf of his campaign and pledged his "cooperation" with Roosevelt, telling O'Connor he would not claim his re-election represented the repudiation of the administration's policies (*The Campaign of the Century*, pp. 482-83).

Sinclair's campaign made a strong showing despite the combined efforts of big business, the media and both the Democratic and Republican establishments. He polled nearly forty percent, receiving 879,537 votes, as compared to 1,138,620 for Merriam and 302,519 for Haight. Thus, the Republican candidate failed to win an absolute majority.

It is possible Sinclair would have won with Roosevelt's backing. The 1934 elections recorded a sweeping victory for the Democrats at the state and federal level. In California itself, many EPIC-backed candidates were elected to the state legislature.

The sabotage of Sinclair demonstrated the very narrow limits of the New Deal. Even in the midst of the greatest crisis of capitalism in history, proposals for social reform had to be kept within tight boundaries. Nothing could be tolerated that even implicitly challenged the right of private property. To maintain these limits, Roosevelt willingly sacrificed Democratic control over a major state.

Sinclair himself learned little from the debacle, maintaining, as one historian remarked, a "child-like faith" in Roosevelt. (*Endangered Dreams*, p. 155) Sinclair never understood the significance of Roosevelt's back-stabbing. He withdrew from active politics and returned to writing.

Despite its sabotage of Sinclair, the Democratic Party had become a major force in California politics, in part due to the efforts of the EPIC movement. In 1936, Roosevelt and the Democratic Party swept the state.

Betrayed and disillusioned, the EPIC movement itself soon dissolved, a process that was encouraged by the Stalinists of the Communist Party, who, in line with their Popular Front policies, insisted on full subordination to Roosevelt.

Several EPIC-backed candidates went on to play leading roles in Democratic politics. Sheridan Downey, Sinclair's running mate, was elected to the US Senate in 1938. Augustus Hawkins, elected to the state assembly as an EPIC candidate and later elected to Congress from the Watts area of Los Angeles, played a leading role in the US House of Representatives and was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

The more thoughtful supporters of EPIC were embittered by the experience of the campaign and some drew radical conclusions. The liberal historian Schlesinger was forced to note that the outcome of the election "led some to wonder whether democracy and the business system were compatible" (*The Politics of Upheaval*, p. 122).

The 1934 California election expressed in crystallized form tendencies long manifest in US politics—in particular, the myth that social equality could be achieved through an orientation to the Democratic Party. As on previous occasions, radicals and reformers came forward to tout one of the two parties of the American corporate elite as the champion of the

working man, helping it to co-opt a potential challenge to capitalism and divert social protest into channels essentially harmless to the established order.

Today, the depth of the crisis of American and world capitalism makes it increasingly difficult for the Democratic Party to play its traditional role of political lightning rod for social discontent. The policies of the Democrats become more and more indistinguishable from those of the Republicans, as the Democrats adapt cravenly to the policies of the extreme right.

Under these conditions, big business must seek support from middle class "left" forces—such as the Green Party and allied tendencies—that orient to sections of the Democratic Party, or promote the illusion that the Democrats can be transformed into a party of progressive social reform. The central political task facing the American working class remains that of breaking from the Democratic Party and taking the road of independent political struggle and organization, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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