

## Thomas Mackaman's *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor, 1914-1924*

# Immigration and socialist strategy in America, past and present

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In his book *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor, 1914-1924* (2017, McFarland & Company, available from Mehring Books for \$29.95), author and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania Kings College professor Thomas Mackaman calls “the phenomenon of mass international immigration” the “most consciously-experienced element” of the contradiction between the growth in the productive forces and capitalist social relations based in the nation-state system.

The massive influx of people from all corners of the world over the course of centuries—from 1620, really—is a critical foundation of a great American contradiction: On the one hand, a diverse working class has grown up through decades of racial, ethnic and cultural cross-pollination and carries forth the country’s democratic, egalitarian, and cosmopolitan traditions. On the other hand, the powerful xenophobic and backward tendencies promoted by the capitalist class and its state and military institutions, which increasingly dominate all aspects of political and cultural life.

Mackaman, who writes historical articles and book reviews for the *World Socialist Web Site*, takes up this question from the standpoint of historical materialism. He has done what historians must strive to do: hold a lantern to those overlooked but decisive moments in history the lessons of which must be assimilated to combat political reaction today. *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor* is not a general labor history of the 1914-24 period. Instead, the book is centered on three specific sections of the working class in the US: coal miners in Illinois, steelworkers in the 1919 national steel strike, and miners in Northern Minnesota’s iron range. The three industries were constituent parts of the emerging national steel industry and were linked by the Great Lakes as an internal waterway.

As the country’s productive forces exploded in the latter half of the 19th century and first years of the 20th, and as the US replaced Europe as the world center of industrial production and finance, America became a battlefield for unprecedented strikes and labor wars. Mackaman focuses on the coal and steel industries because of their central place in the explosive industrial development of the country and the war industry. Immigrants were the cheap labor that greased the wheels of these key industries.

Mackaman shows how American industry became dependent on mass European immigration in the pre-war period. This dependency was interrupted by the war in Europe in 1914 and then effectively ended in 1924 by the exclusionary National Origins Act, which was in large measure a reaction against both the strike wave of 1916-1919 and the specter of international socialism sparked by the Russian Revolution of 1917.

### The melting pot and the class struggle

Throughout the 1914-24 period, workers from countries all over the world were drawn together in the coal and steel industry and became organically linked by the process of production. An underappreciated element of American history that Mackaman addresses thematically is the resulting antagonism between the organic unifying logic of the class struggle and the response of the state and corporations, which fanned the flames of American nationalism and nativist reaction.

He explains that socialists saw immigrants not as a separate social force with independent grievances, but as a super-exploited component of the international working class whose demands could only be met through the class struggle.

The coming together of millions of workers from all over the world into increasingly complex and interrelated production chains was part of the unification and assimilation of the different strata of the *international* working class through the social struggles of the World War I period.

The experience was only an “American” one in the sense that it took place within the national boundaries of the United States. As Leon Trotsky wrote in the German preface to *The Permanent Revolution* in 1930, “In reality, the national peculiarities represent an original combination of the basic features of the world process.” The very existence of such mass immigration, moreover, was proof to socialists that the struggle for the socialist transformation of the economy must be carried out on an international level. Mackaman describes how this process of internationalization weakened the basis for national hatred between immigrant workers even as the world war raged in Europe. Representatives of the Central Powers were concerned, he explains, that so few immigrant workers were returning from the US to fight in the war that they sought to engage the more affluent sections of the immigrant population to whip-up national chauvinism. Despite this, local papers like *The Eveleth News* of northern Minnesota could report, “Eveleth has among its residents subjects of all the powers engaged in the war but no race feeling has developed here.”

During strikes, workers from different belligerent powers marched and picketed together, presaging the troop fraternizations which later became more commonplace in the European trenches as the war dragged on.

Mackaman quotes the social worker Edith Abbot who wrote that among miners, “none of the local unions ... are organized upon national lines and practically the only place where all the nationalities meet are at the mine and at the union meeting.”

The strikes of this period linked the working class of all nationalities in

a common fight for social equality. In response, the government, employers, and American Federation of Labor sought to whip-up xenophobic sentiments among US born workers, creating the illusion that the immigrant and non-immigrant workers had opposing interests, that their cultural differences were too great, or that immigrants were biologically inferior to earlier waves of immigrants. Although Mackaman does not focus extensively on the role of the Democratic Party, the role of its Tammany Hall machine was a crucial part of the ruling class' efforts to tame immigrants' grievances by placing them under the political control of a layer of more affluent and established immigrants.

Mackaman does address the key point that it was socialists, often in the leadership of the strikes of the period, who fought to elevate the sentiments of unity between nationalities to the level of internationalist socialist consciousness and who rejected the notion that workers of differing nationalities had differing social interests. The conversion to socialism of the protagonist of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Jurgis Rudkus, reflected a broader social process. The growing popularity of socialism at the turn of the century was partly a response to and rejection of the systems of graft, favoritism, and nationalism dominated by ward politicians and party bosses.

### **American political reaction in the imperialist epoch**

The ruling class viewed the strike wave of 1916 to 1919 as a major threat to the imposition of the diktats of American imperialism both during the war and during the post-war carve-up. The political reaction thus provoked left its indelible mark on the country.

President Woodrow Wilson was aware that US entry into war would unleash forces of reaction that would be difficult to control. In his book *The American Political Tradition*, historian Richard Hofstadter cites Frank Cobb of the *World* who reported a conversation between Wilson and his advisor Colonel House. Cobb said that Wilson's position was:

When a war got going it was just war and there weren't two kinds of it. It required illiberalism at home to reinforce the men at the front. We couldn't fight Germany and maintain the ideals of the Government that all thinking men shared. He said we would try it but it would be too much for us.

'Once led this people into war,' he [Wilson] said, 'and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street.'

The reaction that unfolded was a reaction of a more developed and dangerous sort than ever before in American history. The transition of American reaction from the post-bellum period to the imperialist epoch must be carefully studied.

The old threads of American chauvinism—Know-Nothing anti-Catholicism, KKK terror tactics, and Jim Crow legal discrimination—adapted the pro-war, anti-communist essence of the new state-sanctioned nationalist reaction and built a broader social base among the upper middle class which supported the war and saw the unification of immigrant and non-immigrant workers as an existential threat to capitalism. The development of the anti-immigrant thread of American politics can only be understood as the product of efforts to suppress the class struggle, giving rise to an atavistic brand of politics based on race

and nationality.

Mackaman describes the reaction in chilling detail. As the class struggle ebbed in the early 1920s, the ruling class mobilized to punish and deport the most radical sections of the working class. The Palmer Raids may be well known, but how many have heard of the anti-Italian race riots of West Frankfort, Illinois; the Finnish socialists who were tarred and feathered when they refused to buy Liberty Bonds in Minnesota; and the dozens of Finns in West Virginia who were forced to kneel and kiss the American flag in a public square due to their anti-war sentiments? Steinbeck drew from these mob attacks when he wrote of thirty strong men burning the house of Mr. Fenchel, the friendly German neighbor in the novel *East of Eden*. "We of Salinas did all of the things that are inevitably done in war," he wrote.

The reaction was not simply a response to the class struggle as it manifested itself nationally. Above all, it was a conscious response to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and a recognition on the part of the ruling class of the correctness of Marx's adage that "the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat." As Mackaman explains, "The appeal of the Russian Revolution on new immigrant workers was significant." He continues:

This question is posed first by the rapid increase in factory committees during the period, many in open opposition to official union leadership, but even more explicitly by the emergence of workers' councils, or Soviets as they were called in Russia. It is likely the case that the factory committee and the workers' councils were the spontaneously-generated result of workers' struggles in a period of social and economic upheaval, but this does not preclude the possibility of direct influence by international events.

The case of the Toledo, Ohio, workers' council is telling. The name—the "Workers, Soldiers, and Sailors Council"—suggests inspiration born in Petrograd... Another workers' council, calling itself the "Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines Soviet," was formed in Pittsburgh, probably in 1918.

A telegram from a local Toledo judge to Attorney General Palmer reads like a message from Duma Chairman Mikhail Rodzianko to Tsar Nicholas Romanov in February 1917: "I beg to say that the situation in Toledo with reference to the Overland strike has been quite desperate... The local authorities are powerless and have lost all moral authority."

### **Factory and strike committees and the impact of October**

The new form of the class struggle grafted from the Russian Revolution—the workers' council—provided a tremendous impetus advancing the social grievances of the working class in the early decades of the 20th century. The general strikes of Seattle in 1919, as well as of San Francisco-Oakland, Minneapolis, and Toledo in 1934, won mass support through the workers council or general strike committee model, forcing major concessions on the part of the government and causing a substantial elevation in the living conditions of tens of millions of workers.

The Russian Revolution also served as a driving force behind the coalescence of a communist movement in the United States, based on the anti-war elements from the left-wing of the Socialist Party and IWW. Immigrants played a central role in importing socialism to the United

States, and some of the Marxist movement's key players, including veterans of the revolutions of 1848-51 like Joseph Weydemeyer, Joseph Dietzgen, and Frederick Sorge.

At the time of the Russian Revolution, immigrants made up a substantial portion of the nascent communist movement during this time, especially those from Eastern Europe and Finland. The political fight over the relationship between foreign language tendencies within the communist movement was a crucial experience for the young movement that sought to break the perception that Marxism was a "foreign" ideology. Though this question cannot be taken up at length here, James P. Cannon deals with the struggle with the foreign languages groups in his book *The First Ten Years of American Trotskyism*. But by Memorial Day 1924, it was emblematic that Lawrence, Massachusetts—which had just 12 years earlier been the center of IWW militarism—played host to a successful march of Italian fascists in honor of Mussolini. The mass deportation raids ordered by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer through 1919-20 led to the arrest and deportation of hundreds of radical immigrant workers and socialists, especially those who had openly sympathized with the revolution in Russia. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which banned immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, was an explicit attempt to limit the influence of socialism after the strike wave of 1916-19.

The American reaction, too, was part of a worldwide process, Mackaman explains. In the mid-1920s, the isolation of the workers state in Russia and the failures of the revolutions in Germany, Italy, England, and China strengthened the position of the conservative Soviet bureaucracy led by Joseph Stalin. The international strategy of the new Soviet Union was guided less and less by Lenin and Trotsky's struggle for world revolution and more by the foreign policy needs of the bureaucratic caste that had usurped power in Russia.

Mackaman writes of this period that the growth of political reaction led to "various barriers and restrictions on trade" worldwide which "helped set the stage for the Great Depression and World War II."

While it is not the subject of Mackaman's book, the century of world revolution introduced by the October Revolution had not run its course by the mid-1920s, and the struggle to break the Soviet Union from its national isolation was embodied by Trotsky and the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country." Those interested in investigating this point further should turn to David North's *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* and in particular its second chapter titled "Was there an alternative to Stalinism?"

### **Socialist strategy today and the lessons of history**

One hundred years later, the reader cannot help but be struck by the degree to which the most reactionary anti-immigrant tendencies present in 1914-24 have emerged as the backbone of the political establishment.

While in the earlier period groups like the KKK and American Protective League may have played important and even semi-official roles in terrorizing immigrants and breaking strikes, the American government today has constructed a massive military apparatus geared toward state repression of immigrants.

Conditions for public physical attacks on immigrants or even the mass round-up of immigrant workers are being prepared by the state and Trump's fascist advisers both recent and current. The Democratic Party and trade union apparatus—long the purveyors of nationalism and responsible for the passage of all anti-immigrant laws in effect today—cannot be counted on to defend immigrants from mass deportation or worse.

But beneath the official political and media organs of the political establishment, the working class in the US is being drawn together by the underlying social differentiation taking place between the wealthiest 10 percent and the bottom 90 percent of the population. Mackaman's research points to the fact that the artificial suppression of the class struggle over the last 40 years has produced a truly anomalous situation.

Today, the power of international communication has been greatly transformed, and the world's productive forces are more interconnected than ever before, providing the objective basis for the unity of workers around the world.

The events of 1914-24 cannot provide a blueprint for how the development of mass social protest will emerge in the coming period, but Mackaman's book does establish part of the historical framework for the development of a program capable of harmonizing the social grievances of immigrant and nonimmigrant workers and thereby preparing the socialist movement for the historic social upheavals on the immediate horizon. His book should be widely read.



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