

Socialism in the “reactionary” Southwest: Lessons from James Green’s *Grass-Roots Socialism*

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James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978). ISBN 978-0-8071-0773-7.

On September 10, 2025, Texas State University fired historian Tom Alter after he spoke at a socialist conference. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, he was targeted both because of his political views *and* because his scholarship explores the history of socialism and the working class in Texas. This history of bitter class struggle, agrarian radicalism, and socialist organizing defies the carefully cultivated myth of Texas as a bastion of reaction. Under present conditions in which Texas is home to a massive, young, multi-national and multi-racial working class, the recovery of this history carries an unmistakable, explosive contemporary relevance.

Alter’s work stands in the tradition of an older scholarship on socialism and working class struggle in the Southwest, whose foundational text is James Green’s *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943*. First published in 1978, it remains, nearly 50 years later, a valuable and carefully researched work. Focusing on Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana from the mid-1890s to the mid-1920s, it documents the political movements, organizations, tactics, achievements, failures and remarkable personalities that made the American Southwest a center of socialism in the early 20th century.

Grass-Roots Socialism challenges the claim that racism and love of the rich and powerful are, and have always been, endemic to the white population in the Southwest and thus an explanation for the hold that far-right politics has on the region today.

The book emerged from Green’s dissertation, which was directed by C. Vann Woodward, whose book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, was called by Martin Luther King “the Bible of the civil rights movement.” Green (1944–2016) spent the bulk of his academic career at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where he was a professor of history and labor studies from 1977 until his retirement in 2014. The author of six books on American labor and radical movements, his works include *Death in the Haymarket*, a history of the 1886 Chicago bombing and the labor movement of the Gilded Age, and *The Devil Is Here in These Hills*, a study of West Virginia coal miners that inspired a PBS documentary.

The American Southwest at the turn of the century

By the 1890s, a sharp class divide had emerged in the American Southwest. With the closure of the frontier making further westward expansion impossible, land was increasingly concentrated in the hands of

wealthy farmers, absentee landlords, railroad companies and speculators. Much of the rural population in recently-established cotton-farming regions, including the old Black Belt that spanned from Dallas to Sant Antonio, lived as highly indebted tenants. The crop lien system, whereby supplies were provided to poor farmers in return for a claim on their product, left the population in a permanent state of penury. In addition to owing much of their yield to creditors, farmers ended up wedded to monocrop agriculture and thus vulnerable to both natural disasters and price swings.

Contrary to stereotype, sharecropping subsumed black and white farmers alike. But because of the large numbers of destitute black sharecroppers in the delta regions of the Mississippi river, it was not until the turn of the 20th century that the scale and scope of the problem of poor white tenancy in the Southwest was recognized. By then, the Southwest’s impoverished and disillusioned tenants were predominantly white.

Despite the growing hold of sharecropping on the rural poor, by the late 19th century, the agrarian Populist movement—embodied in the People’s Party, which mobilized farmers against banks and railroads—was collapsing and merging into the Democratic Party. Poor Southwestern farmers, schooled in years of struggle against the US’s landed and industrial elites, were left without a political home. They sought, Green argues, a new perspective and party that could explain their circumstances and lead their fight. These layers were joined by younger, poor agriculturalists and workers concentrated in the mining and timber industries. Together, they formed the social base of the emerging socialist movement.

While resisting proletarianization in everyday life, Green observes that the rural poor identified more with the working class than with better-off farmers and well-to-do layers concentrated in the region’s growing towns and cities. Thus, there existed the prospect of a powerful political alliance between the Southwest’s rural poor and its coal miners, timber hands, dockworkers and others.

Indeed, in the period before World War I, American socialism found its strongest grass-roots base of support in the Southwest. The evidence Green marshals is striking.

By 1906, for instance, Texas and Oklahoma had 200 socialist party branches with an average of 10 members. The ration of dues-paying socialist members to socialist voters that year in Oklahoma was 1:3 and 1:15 in Texas, as compared to 1:9 in the US as a whole and 1:7 in Germany. In the 1908 presidential election, socialist candidate Eugene Debs won 21,425 votes in Oklahoma, 8.4 percent of the total. In Texas, Debs won fewer—just 8,000—but this was three times more than the socialist candidate had secured four years earlier, despite the fact that voter turnout had dropped by 33 percent due to the violent efforts by the Democrats to disenfranchise voters. In Louisiana and Arkansas, the vote

totals made clear that Debs now had a base in coal mining areas, in New Orleans, and among timber workers in the piney woods region.

In 1912, 80,000 people in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma voted for Debs, again the party's presidential candidate. By 1914, Oklahoma had more dues-paying members (organized in 960 locals) than New York, and that same year socialist candidates won 15,000 more votes than their New York counterparts.

How did American socialism achieve such a significant presence?

Support for the Socialist Party in the Southwest increased rapidly with the publication and circulation of Julius Wayland's *Appeal to Reason*, first printed in 1895. The socialists' call for the creation of a "cooperative commonwealth" resonated with poor farmers, for whom the concept bore within it the idea of land collectively owned and operated and in which land speculation was banned. By 1897, *Appeal to Reason* had 141,000 regular subscribers in the Southwest and special editions had circulations more than eight times that amount. Readership was actually far larger. The magazine switched hands and was read aloud to the illiterate.

As industrial unionism grew in the early 19th century, the socialists gained support among broad sections of the Southwest's working class—coal miners in Oklahoma, Mexican-American rail workers in Laredo, Texas and brewers and others in New Orleans. In the latter city, two important figures emerged during a 1907 strike. These were Covington Hall, who would become a leader in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and Oscar Ameringer, a Bavarian social democrat who spoke English with a heavy German accent but was nonetheless known as the "Mark Twain of American Socialism" and a dogged anti-racist. The same year, Tom Hickey, an Ireland-born socialist steeped in hatred for British colonialism and Catholicism, was also establishing himself as a significant personality in Southwestern socialism.

Beginning in 1904, the Socialist Party began holding summer encampments, a practice it continued for years. Tapping into cultural traditions of the region, the socialists organized multi-day events that attracted tens of thousands of people who listened to speakers, took educational courses and enjoyed entertainment. The Socialist Party sponsored multiple events yearly, drawing huge crowds. It even issued what today might be called "best practices" guidelines for them.

Employ some comrade well fitted to conduct a school of instruction each day. ... Don't hire a brass band unless you have money to waste. Better spend the money for literature. Don't allow the concession stand or the merry-go-round to be too near the speakers' stand. And don't believe the hard luck stories of the professional privilege man.

Eugene Debs was immensely popular at the encampments. Writes Green,

Extraordinarily skilled at speaking to massed audiences, Debs thrilled the Southwesterners with his indignant attacks on the capitalist oppressors and their political agents. More important, the party's standard-bearer could convince the poor and the disinherited that the Cooperative Commonwealth was within their grasp. He could identify with their problems but he could also make them feel their collective power.

Other frequent speakers were radical labor leaders Mother Jones and Kate Richards O'Hare, the latter of whom, according to the author, was the only person to rival Debs in popularity at the encampments.

Green also examines the socialist movement's rank-and-file fighters. One of the most interesting sections of his work is a discussion of the Socialist Party's "*Appeal Armies*," which were made up of ordinary members who bicycled, walked and drove buggies across the Southwest to sell subscriptions. In 1912, there were 6,000 such militants in the Southwest. Two years later, the party published a "Who's Who in Socialist America," to feature its most dedicated foot soldiers. Ninety-four were from the Southwest.

As the party's influence grew, so did the number of its publications. There was the *National Rip-Saw* edited by Debs and Kate Richards O'Hare, which by 1913 reached a circulation of 150,000. Others included the *Coming Nation*, *Industrial Democrat*, *Oklahoma Pioneer*, *Social Democrat*, *New Century*, *Daily Socialist*, *Pioneer*, *Tenant Farmer*, *Laborer*, *Lumberjack*, *Sledge Hammer*, *Otter Valley Socialist*, *Constructive Socialist*, and *The Rebel*, a Texas weekly edited by Tom Hickey that combined muckraking radicalism with an evangelical style, an assault on landlordism, and, in contrast to publications overseen by Debs, an appeal to racism.

The race question

In a chapter of this book titled, "Troublesome Questions," Green takes up the Socialist Party's attitude towards racism and segregation, major issues in a region increasingly dominated by the Democratic Party's Jim Crow system. Many Southwest socialists followed Debs' example in opposing black disenfranchisement and racial division. The Socialist Party in Oklahoma led the fight against a 1910 referendum that would deny blacks the vote. An analysis of 1910 vote tallies reveals that, according to Green, "a significant positive correlation existed between the level of opposition to disenfranchisement and the level of Socialist support in the general election of 1910 (especially in predominantly white areas)." A black political convention held in November 1910 issued a statement condemning the Republican Party for failing to mobilize opposition to disenfranchisement and declaring, "The negro must turn to the only true friend he has ever had, the socialist party."

Understanding the presence and poisonous character of racism within sections of the white laboring population, Oklahoma socialist leaders appealed to the workers' and farmers' class consciousness in an effort to beat back the referendum. "The negro belongs to the working class, and the working class must stand by the negro," insisted Oscar Ameringer and Irish socialist Pat Nagle.

However, significant layers within the Socialist Party, most notably Victor Berger of Milwaukee, embraced, promoted and accommodated themselves to racism. Southwest socialism's radical Irish-born fighter, Tom Hickey, for instance, opposed forming integrated locals, refused to organize black farmers, and his Texas publication, *The Rebel*, sought to outdo the Democrats in terms of appealing to fears over race-mixing. But racist politics frequently came up against objective reality. Hickey had to abandon, for example, his opposition to organizing blacks as part of the building of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers.

The race question was never decisively fought out within the Socialist Party. Even Debs, who refused to speak before segregated audiences, retreated from an open fight on this issue, instead avoiding the explosive question by insisting that racial inequality would be overcome when class inequality was solved and thus, there was no need for a specific socialist program on the race question.

Socialism and working class struggle in the Southwest

Grass-Roots Socialism details the socialists' role in the many hundreds of strikes and labor conflicts that rocked the Southwest for years. There was, for instance, the five-month-long 1910 strike of 30,000 coalminers in United Mine Workers District 21, which spanned eastern Oklahoma, western Arkansas, and north central Texas. There were the "timber wars" of the early-mid teens in the Piney Woods region of western Louisiana and eastern Texas. There were the 1911 transport worker strikes in Texarkana, Dennison and Houston, Texas. The list goes on.

The ruling class's efforts to suppress the rebellion included blacklisting workers, disenfranchising poor white and black voters, intimidating workers at the ballot box, and, particularly after Debs' strong showing in the 1912 election, hysterical campaigns by newspapers and politicians that blended anti-socialism with race-baiting of socialists as "nigger lovers." In Oklahoma, where the Socialist Party had its biggest wins in the 1912 election, an anti-socialist newspaper, *The Kumrid*, was founded by C.E. Guthrie—the father of Woody Guthrie, who became a communist and the bard of the rural poor.

The repression also took physical forms—evictions, arrests, kidnappings, beatings and murders. In 1912, a major event known as the Grabow Massacre occurred in the Piney Woods. Over the course of years of struggle, lumberjacks, many of whom in the off-season were cotton farmers, had formed the Brotherhood of Timber Workers (BTW) under the leadership of socialists. They were, in the words of Covington Hall, "engaged in a life and death struggle" against the mill owners, "intimidated, shot at, and ordered to leave their communities." The Ku Klux Klan emerged early here to do the companies' dirty work. The mill owners felt threatened not just by workers' fighting mood, but by the fact that the BTW opposed segregation and had organized on equal standing in its ranks both white and black workers. The union had, noted Hall, eliminated the "great bugaboo of 'nigger domination'" and was armed and ready for a long fight.

On July 7, 1912, striking BTW members were marching on the Grabow mill in outrage over news that there had just been an attempt to assassinate a socialist leader. Company thugs were waiting for them and opened fire. The workers returned fire. Two union members were killed, along with a bystander and one gunman hired by the mill. One union leader and 65 workers were arrested, imprisoned in Lake Charles jail in Louisiana and charged with murder. The events inflamed the oppressed of the region and increased the socialists' and the BTW's popularity. Ultimately, a jury acquitted all of the accused.

The situation in the Piney Woods was emblematic of broader conditions in the Southwest. In 1915, the federal government issued a report on labor conditions in the Southwest.

After hearing testimony in Dallas for four days in March of 1915, the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations concluded that "a state of acute unrest" existed in the Southwest as a result of usurious interest rates, bonus rents, blacklists, and other forms of "oppression" inflicted on tenants; in fact, an "organized resistance" had already appeared which could produce civil disturbances of "a serious character." (pp. 308–09)

Testifying at hearings, the chief commissioner noted that tenants no longer thought of themselves with an "old feudal concept of being tenants

of the soil, and have dropped into the modern condition of being laborers in fact." (p. 309)

The ruling class responded to these class dangers with ferocity, and within a couple of years the BTW was effectively broken up. By 1915, the Louisiana Socialist Party had been "virtually destroyed by repression," writes Green. While the movements in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma suffered less and continued to play leading roles in forthcoming class struggles, the Democratic Party worked mightily to suppress socialist votes, blacklist socialist workers, drive socialist farmers off their land and stoke popular hostility to the "vicious atheists who would destroy home, family, church, and the white race."

In frustration over the ongoing repression and failure to achieve lasting improvements, Green explains that workers and poor farmers turned to social banditry. New organizations formed, often still led by layers within the Socialist Party, but increasingly taking on a semi-secretive character. One of these was the Oklahoma Working Class Union (WCU), which supported "legal methods" of protest but also engaged in "direct action," including strikes, boycotts, barn burning, bank robbing, night riding, murdering landlords, and other terrorist methods. Between 1915 and 1917, the WCU recruited several thousand members in eastern and southern Oklahoma.

World War I and the Green Corn Rebellion

When World War I broke out, the Southwest's socialists mobilized around an anti-war program. In Texas, they organized demonstrations in Houston and other cities. In Oklahoma, the party's section issued a statement declaring, "If War is declared, the Socialists of Oklahoma shall refuse to enlist: but if forced to enter military service to murder fellow workers, we shall choose to die fighting the enemies of humanity in our ranks rather than to perish fighting fellow workers." Their declaration, understood to mean a call to turn guns on the officers, won broad support.

Shortly after the US entered the war in April 1917, Southwest socialists increased their anti-war organizing efforts. The WCU, the Industrial Workers of the World, and a newly-formed secret group in West Texas called the Farmers' and Laborer's Protective Association (FLAP) formed an alliance and made plans for an armed uprising.

By late July, the WCU, a combination of white tenant farmers, black sharecroppers and Native Americans, had between 18,000 and 35,000 members. Red flags were raised aloft on barns, while night raiding parties cut telephone and telegraph wires, blew up oil pipelines and burned railroad bridges in preparation. Posters declared, "Now the time to rebel against this war with Germany boys." Efforts to break up the WCU met violent resistance.

The alliance prepared for action on August 3, in what is now known as the Green Corn Rebellion. The plan was as follows:

A large army of Wobblies would march on Washington to overthrow the government and put an end to the war and the draft. The Working Class Union should start its own march to the nation's capital, and link up with thousands of farmers and workers throughout the land who would also be up in arms. The Oklahoma rebels would be the vanguard of an army marching across the South to the sea, living on beef and ripe corn as it traveled.

The rebels, massing in Oklahoma counties around the Canadian River,

never started marching. A right-wing citizens' posse was unleashed to suppress the movement, and roundups and arrests followed. Hundreds were detained, tried and convicted, and about 75 imprisoned. Former Congressman William Murray called for the rebels to be "set up against a hill and shot." Notably, many newspapers buried news of the rebellion out of fear that it would kick up similar efforts.

World War I-era repression continued, ultimately directed from the White House by the Woodrow Wilson administration and the Democratic Party. By 1919, socialism in the Southwest was strangled, "its most militant newspapers had been suppressed, its party locals disbanded, and its boldest leaders imprisoned," Green writes.

The decline of American socialism in the Southwest

The final chapters of *Grass-Roots Socialism*, in which Green discusses the decline of American socialism and its failure to survive the "desperate years" of 1921–1943, are the weakest part of the book. While Green documents the falling influence of socialism in the Southwest and observes that the movement was overtaken by political repression, the Great Depression and the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, he never explains why the socialist perspective lost its hold in the region, as it did elsewhere in the US.

Incubating within the Socialist Party since its inception were two political currents—the "direct action," militant industrial unionism embodied in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the figure of Big Bill Haywood, and a reformist, electoral approach represented by Victor Berger that centered on vote-getting and the idea that winning offices would somehow lead to the gradual realization of socialist policies. Neither the IWW nor the Berger reformists could articulate a program for the seizure of political power and the overthrow of the capitalist economy and state. One stopped at ferocious picket-line battles metastasizing into a general strike that would banish capitalism and the other at the "sewer socialism" of electoral politics. Debs, a genuine revolutionist, straddled these two tendencies and was never satisfied with either. He saw and sensed their limitations, but was unable to overcome them.

This political conundrum had its own particular reality in the American Southwest. Green discusses at various points in the book how the tensions between the IWW and electoral reformism manifested themselves in the region. He reviews the conflicts between the "centralizers" and "decentralizers"—i.e., those in the Southwest who thought political efforts should hew more closely to the prescriptives of the national organization with its focus on electoral gains and those that advocated more independent, radical tactics.

But Green does not understand that American socialism in the Southwest, and everywhere, declined because both of these approaches were superseded by the Russian Revolution of 1917. In fact, Green makes no mention of the Russian Revolution whatsoever, as if it had no impact on the debates among Southwest socialists, much less the thinking of workers and poor farmers. But it was in March 1917, just months before the Southwest's rebels declared their intention to overthrow the government in the Green Corn Rebellion, that the Russian working class drove the tsar from power. In October that year, the Bolshevik Party under Lenin and Trotsky, proved that revolution was more than theory when the working class seized power in the world's largest country.

By way of its success, the coming to power of the working class in Russia made clear that "direct action" limited to battling the owners on the picket lines, however ferocious, would not solve the problem of capitalist oppression and war. And the belief that capitalism's democratic institutions could be bent to the will of the masses through gradual

electoral gains was equally false. The Bolshevik revolution made clear that the realization of socialism required a "direct action" not against the capitalist factories owners, but against the capitalist state. And the satisfaction of the masses' demand for "bread, land, and peace" required not working within the capitalist state's allegedly democratic institutions, but creating new organs of workers' power.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding this limitation, *Grass-Roots Socialism* performs a vital service. At a moment when opposition is being hounded off of campuses in Texas and throughout the US, and when scholars like Tom Alter are targeted for bringing this history to light, Green's work underscores what is at stake in its recovery. The Southwest he reconstructs—of tenant farmers, itinerant workers, and mass socialist organization—stands in stark contrast to the manufactured image of the region as inherently reactionary.

That this past existed, and on such a scale, is itself a fact of immense political significance. By restoring it, Green provided a work of lasting historical value, and a reminder that the social forces capable of transforming the region and the world have appeared before. And the working class in Texas and throughout the Southwest is far more powerful today than it was a century ago.



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