OSCAR AMERINGER AND AMERICAN SOCIALISM

BY

O. JAMES HAZLETT

Kansas State University

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Thesis Approved:

Douglas Hale
Thesis Adviser

Theodore L. Agnew

George F. Jewsbury

Norman N. Durham
Dean of Graduate College

1131302

PREFACE

This study analyzes the ideology of Oscar Ameringer, one of the Midwest's noted socialists. While the immediate goal of the study is to determine whether Ameringer fits into a left-wing category instead of a right-wing one, it also provides an opportunity to view American radicalism from the perspective of a German immigrant who devoted his life to bringing about socialism in the United States. The nature of radicalism in the West remains little studied, and Ameringer's perspective is another view from which to understand it better. Also Ameringer continued to view American radicalism from a European viewpoint, which added a different perspective than many of his colleagues.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

While there is general agreement and awareness that American radicalism reached its height in the two decades before the First World War, there still are few biographical studies of the colorful characters who popularized Marxian socialism in the Midwest.[1] Oscar Ameringer was one of those popular socialist agitators and educators who brought a radical gospel into the lives of farmers, urban dwellers, and miners. Though historians have increasingly recognized the importance of Ameringer in the development of midwestern radicalism, they are still unsure about the doctrines he espoused. Was he a militant Marxist, advocating violent revolution, and therefore on the left wing of American socialism? Or was he a moderate social democrat, who favored the gradual achievement of a socialist society through peaceful means, and consequently on the right wing? Without thoroughly examining what he wrote during his career, most historians have assigned Ameringer to a position on the right wing of socialism in accordance with his own testimony on the matter. In his autobiography, If You Don't Weaken, Ameringer described his ideological position as "being one of the conservatives of the right wing of America's socialist movements."[2]

But as his career becomes better known, it appears that Ameringer may have identified himself with the more moderate wing of socialism only toward the end of his life. For the bulk of his career, Ameringer

was far more radical than historians have portrayed him. A number of his early comrades, for example, describe the man in revolutionary or syndicalist terms. Covington Hall, who worked with Ameringer in New Orleans before 1907, emphasized his identification with the radical goals of the Industrial Workers of the World. Len DeCaux, who collaborated with Ameringer in Illinois in the 1920s, described him as a militant and radical socialist.[3]

Despite this testimony from those who knew him, historians, while showing a greater appreciation in recent years for Ameringer's contributions to American socialism, still regard him as a man of the Socialist Right. Howard Meredith, in a study of Oklahoma socialism, labeled Ameringer a revisionist. Later Ameringer appeared in James R. Green's history of radical movements in the Southwest as the most significant personality in the region. Green, the first historian to analyze Ameringer's ideology, continued to assign him a place on the Right.[4]

A closer examination of what Ameringer believed supports the idea put forth by his early contemporaries that to view him merely as a right-wing evolutionary socialist fails to describe the ideological complexity of this important radical. In fact, Ameringer assumed a leftist position on numerous issues and at times was significantly more radical than historians have portrayed him. His writings demonstrate that he maintained a leftist "world view" throughout his life, but the reality of a weakening socialist movement forced Ameringer to adopt tactics that would eventually lead to cooperate with the Right. Nevertheless, he maintained a leftist perspective consistently enough to be labeled more accurately with the Left than with the Right.

To answer questions relevant to the ideological development of Oscar Ameringer first of all required an investigation into the historical literature of American radicalism. Secondly, research on this topic led to the investigation of what Ameringer wrote over the entire span of his career that was still available. Oral interviews with members of the Ameringer family added to the research. Fortunately, most of Ameringer's books, pamphlets, and newspapers were available for research. Probably more helpful in tracing Ameringer's development than his autobiography were the numerous pamphlets published throughout his career.[5] Also helpful were the many newspaper editorials and feature articles. Most of the newspapers he edited or published were on microfilm.[6] Both Freda Hogan Ameringer, Oscar's wife, and Mrs. Siegfried Ameringer, the wife of Oscar's first son, reside in Oklahoma City and were helpful in understanding his personality.

The major impersonal factor behind Ameringer's career was the failure of radical movements to sustain their momentum. Consequently the history of radicals like Ameringer is a story of social dreamers engaged in a losing battle within a culture that refused to consider their commonwealth. To aid in understanding that movement, Chapter II provides a short survey of both American and Oklahoma socialism and the various historical interpretations. Historians center their study around two central questions. First they study why radicalism existed at all in American society. Secondly, they ask why it lasted for only a short time and then experienced so severe a demise.

Chapter III surveys Ameringer's career. Ameringer provides much detail in his entertaining autobiography, and it is the major source for the chapter. The two major questions addressed are first, what caused the radicalization of Ameringer, and second, how did he pursue his

radicalism in a culture that resisted him? There are some details left out in his autobiography. Oral interviews and other secondary literature aid in filling in the gaps.

After establishing the background for radicalism and the career of Oscar Ameringer, Chapter IV begins the analysis of his ideology. The first question that provides the central focus of the chapter is the Marxian nature of his ideology. Was he a Marxist or a Revisionist? By investigating what Ameringer wrote in his pamphlets and newspapers on the question of economics, it is possible to begin to place him in general categories. One test to aid in evaluating Ameringer's ideological position was to compare his writings on economics with those of Karl Marx and Eduard Bernstein.

The Right and Left of American socialism constantly battled each other on numerous issues. By examining how Ameringer viewed those crucial issues and comparing them with left- or right-wing ideology further aided in categorizing Ameringer's ideology. Chapter V investigates how Ameringer viewed such issues as religion, violence, the Russian Revolution, war, and the land question.

Ameringer frequently said he believed socialism would be brought about by a triangular combination of labor unions, the political organization of labor, and the ideology of cooperation. Chapter VI continues to analyze Ameringer's views on those issues but also demonstrates how one radical adjusted much of what he believed to the changing fortunes of this radical movement.

To provide the necessary background for understanding Ameringer's ideology, the next chapter will provide a short history of both American and Oklahoma socialism and the differing interpretations historians provide for radicalism in the United States.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Among the most important works to appear in this first great wave of historical analysis are Ira Kipnis, The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); Daniel Bell, "The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States," in Socialism in American Life, 2 Vols. Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); Howard H. Quint, The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1953); David A. Shannon, The Socialist Party of America: A History (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955); Ray Ginger, The Bending Cross; A Biography of Eugene Debs (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1949).

[2]Oscar Ameringer, If You Don't Weaken (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940), pp. 294, 352-355, 361.

[3]Covington Hall, "Labor Struggles in the Deep South," (Typescript in Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University), pp. 47-48. Len DeCaux, Labor Radical: From the Wobblies to the CIO: A Personal History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 128-131.

[4]Howard L. Meredith, "A History of Socialism in Oklahoma" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1969), pp. 216-217; James R. Green, Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) pp. 45, 70-86; James R. Green, "The Mark Twain of American Socialism," Nation 219 September 21, 1974, pp. 245-247.

[5]Oscar Ameringer, Dynamite for the Brain (Milwaukee: State Executive Board-Social Democratic Party, 1910); Oscar Ameringer, Socialism, What It Is and How to Get It (Milwaukee: Political Action Committee, 1911); Oscar Ameringer, Union Scabs and Others (New Castle, Pennsylvania: I.W.W. Publications Bureau, 1912); Oscar Ameringer, Socialism for the Farmer Who Farms the Farm (St. Louis: National Rip-Saw, 1912); Oscar Ameringer; Communism, Socialism, and the Church: A Historical Survey (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Social-Democratic Publishing Company, 1913); Oscar Ameringer, The Yankee Primer, (Oklahoma City: The American Guardian, 1933); Oscar Ameringer, Life and Deeds of Uncle Sam: A Little History for Big Children (Oklahoma City: The American Guardian 1938); Oscar Ameringer, Bread or Lead: Production for Use or Production for Destruction (Norman, Oklahoma: Cooperative Books, 1940); Ameringer, Weaken.

[6] Oklahoma Pioneer, 12 January 1910-December 1912 (hereafter cited as OP); Oklahoma Leader, 1 February 1921-28 February 1930 (hereafter cited as OL) Illinois Miner, 1921-1920 (hereafter cited as IM); American Guardian, 1930-1940 (hereafter cited as AG); National Rip-Saw, August 1912-May 1918, February 1921-September 1924 (hereafter cited as NRS); Milwaukee Leader, 1915-1918 (hereafter cited ML).

CHAPTER II

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AMERICAN AND OKLAHOMA SOCIALISM

Worldwide socialism appeared in the nineteenth century and within a few decades dramatically altered the social order of millions in Europe and the Third World. Socialism in the United States paralleled the worldwide movement at first, but soon proved abortive and never developed beyond the embryonic stage as a political movement. Nevertheless, socialism seemed an attractive alternative to millions of disillusioned Americans. To thousands of leading radicals like Oscar Ameringer this new ideology became a religion. They found socialism more than an interesting idea and spent years trying to reform American society along socialist principles. Yet their efforts failed. The history of American radicals like Ameringer is a story of social dreamers engaged in a losing battle within a culture that refused to consider their commonwealth. A number of historians have written works analyzing the socialist movements as part of the history of radicalism; more recently historians have begun examining the western movements, as in Oklahoma. This chapter surveys the central events of the socialist crusade and analyzes the major historiographical questions pertaining to socialism in America.

Socialism in American history began with the utopian communitarianism of the early nineteenth century. The utopian communities were part of an age of reform based on religious and philosophical ideas. The religious communities tried to conform to a utopia modeled after early

Christian communities. The secular communities, on the other hand, were founded upon the belief in the perfectibility of man. These utopians provided the foundation for the later social protest manifested in the socialist movement. Their utopian spirit inspired numerous novels and scholarly tracts which transmitted utopian ideas to the masses of American people. Particularly influential were Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward and Laurence Gronlund's The Common Commonwealth. Both popularized ideas of cooperation as an alternative to economic individualism.[1]

Although utopian socialism created much of the framework for radicalism, the political impetus came from European sources. The International Workingmen's Association, dominated by Karl Marx, the political ideas of Ferdinand Lassalle, and the anarchism of Mikhail Bakunin, moved socialism from a utopian to a more "scientific" position based on economic determinism. At the same time, from 1870 to 1890, labor unrest reinforced the Marxist notion of the rise of a working class in America. The organizational development quickened with the immigration of Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe. With a tradition of labor organizations, immigrants quickly formed unions, particularly in the needle trades on the East Coast. The history of Marxian socialism before 1900 was marked by unsuccessful attempts by socialist radicals like Daniel DeLeon to capture the American labor movement from the conservative leadership of the American Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor.[2]

American socialism resulted from a combination of major radical influences in the United States from 1901 to 1919. These factions worked together in the early years. The Socialist Party of America, founded in 1901, represented the majority of American radicals, with only Daniel

DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party and the Industrial Workers of the World remaining outside the loose federation. The national party was a union of the right wing, led by Victor Berger, and the left wing represented by Eugene Debs. Morris Hillquit provided leadership to the center faction. From 1901 to 1904 a center-left coalition controlled the party. A year later it split over the question of the participation of the Industrial Workers of the World. From 1905 to 1919, a center-right coalition guided the party.[3]

Berger's right-wing faction was the least radical in the Socialist Party of America and advocated a middle-class socialism. Berger formed the powerful Wisconsin party by using a centralized and disciplined organization and by gaining the support of craft unions. The Right held an evolutionary view of social change. Berger became noted for saying "socialism is partially here now and more of it is coming every day." He modified Eduard Bernstein's revision of Marxist teaching to fit his view of American economic realities. Berger agreed with Bernstein, who had challenged Marx's theories on historical materialism, dialectics, the labor theory of value, and the historical role of the proletariat. He theorized that in American industrial society capitalists had increased in number instead of decreasing as Marx predicted, that trusts and small businesses could coexist, and that large industrial unions were impossible. Berger insisted that the worldwide free market system itself would overcome depressions. The concept of the class struggle between labor and capital was not important in the Berger view.[4]

The Left represented the radical element of the party and identified Eugene Debs as its national spokesman. This faction rejected the evolutionary theories of the Right and insisted that the Socialist Party should

be revolutionary. The Left sympathized with the Industrial Workers of the World and the syndicalism of Bakunin. At the heart of leftist theory was the concept of class struggle; it believed that the working class should control the movement, rather than the middle class, as advocated by Berger. The Left rejected right-wing reformism and taught that relief for the working class would only come with the inauguration of a people's government. The only reason for socialists to run for political office, according to the Left, was to educate the masses on the advantages of socialism. Also central to Leftist theory was the conviction that the reorganization of society had to come through industrial unions. It held that craft unions hindered the growth and development of working-class solidarity.[5]

Morris Hillquit represented those radicals who were often Left in theory but Right in practice. Leader of the Center, Hillquit held to the theories of Marxist socialism but applied them to a world of middle-class sympathizers. He attempted to be both left-wing revolutionary and right-wing reformer. Radicals considered Hillquit the authoritative spokesman for Marxian socialism in America. But at the same time, Hillquit practiced law for wealthy corporate firms in New York City and entertained in middle-class social circles. Unlike many American radicals, he had little contact with the working class. Hillquit's conflicting dual role as reformer and revolutionary resulted in part from his childhood experiences among the impoverished immigrants of New York City. Even though he expounded an ideology of revolution, Hillquit recognized that until some reforms took place revolution was impossible. Poor living conditions convinced him that the working man had to regain

bodily health and overcome the battle against hunger, poverty, and tuberculosis. Without solving these problems first, the working class would never have the physical strength to carry out a social revolution, Hillquit believed.[6]

The major crisis for socialism in America was the First World War and the hysteria of patriotism that followed. Unlike the European socialists, the vast majority of American radicals opposed the war both before and after the United States became a belligerent. The St. Louis Manifesto promulgated by the Party in April, 1917, vehemently denounced the war. Many from the Left would not change that position until Germany attacked the new Soviet republic in Russia in 1918. On the Right, however, Berger soon shifted from an antiwar to a neutral position. This may have been because of Berger's close ties with the German Social Democrats. But during the years from 1914 to 1918 the Socialists increased their membership and held their own at the polls despite mass indictments, the denial of their right to hold meetings in public, the confiscation of their newspapers from the mails, tarring and feathering, and even lynching.[7]

The Russian Revolution inspired events that would lead to the split of American radicalism into the Socialist and Communist Parties and the gradual demise of socialism in America. Initially all Socialists praised the accomplishments of the Russian Revolution. But in 1919 the Third International called for worldwide revolution. Within the International, the Russians, led by V. I. Lenin, pushed for insurrection in all western nations, including the United States. They believed that if western revolutions did not take place the Soviet government could not survive. The foreign language federations in America, dominated by Russian

immigrants, immediately began organizing for revolution in coordination with the Third International. By 1919 these federations composed 53 percent of the Socialist Party membership and completely dominated the Left. Their first action was to call for a split with the Right. They reasoned that in Europe the revolution had not come until the party had split off its right-wing elements; therefore, the revolution in America would come only if the same thing happened. Controlled by the Right, the National Executive Committee realized that the foreign language federations would soon control the Party. Moving without a national vote, the Committee expelled all seven federations. This action allowed the Left to split the Party over the issue of party democracy. By 1919 the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party separated from the Socialists. Membership in the Socialist Party of America dropped from 109,000 to 36,000; it never again attained its former number of members.[8]

After the extreme Left formed organizations of its own, the Socialists entered a decade of inactivity. In the 1920s Socialists unsuccessfully attempted a fusion with the Progressives in the Conference for Progressive Political Action. During the 1930s the party was under the leadership of Norman Thomas, a Presbyterian minister. The Socialists attacked the social programs of the New Deal, but many Socialists deserted the weak party to support Franklin Rossevelt's concept of social reform. Another split developed between the Old Guard of the party, led by Hillquit, and the progressives, led by Thomas. This weakened socialism in America even further. The initiative to achieve a radical America then passed from the Socialists to the Communists.[9]

A number of scholars have written histories of the socialist phase of American radicalism. A major question for historians of the era was

the sources of the radical trend in American politics which began in the 1870s. A second question which they all address was why did radicalism as a potent force last only until the 1920s and then experience such a sudden demise? The historians of the socialist movement give a number of reasons for its failure, including fractionalization, ideological impurity, repression in the war years, and the confusion of the Third International. Local studies have examined these questions from the perspective of American cities, and organizational studies have concentrated upon radicalism within specific labor unions.

An excellent chronological history of American socialism was Daniel Bell's essay "The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States." Bell began his account with the influences of the utopian socialists and early Marxists and carried the survey to the 1950s. He hypothesized that American socialism failed because of its inability to resolve a basic dilemma between ethics and politics. Socialists could not adapt to the give-and-take of partisan politics because they refused to recognize the validity of the existing social order. Their goal was to replace the capitalist order with the cooperative commonwealth, not participate in the political system. Socialists never had the numbers to change the structure of the American economic system, and their elected officials could only act as moral censors and critics. Further, according to Bell, another weakness of American socialism lay in its chiliastic nature. It was an eschatological movement convinced that historical evolution would bring about a better society. However, there was no agreement on the means by which the new order would evolve. The result was a constant fractionization; the Socialist Party never succeeded in existing even for one year without some issue threatening to split the party.[10]

In 1953, Howard H. Quint published the first book on the national history of the socialist movement, entitled The Forging of American Socialism. This work was a political history of all the different forces in American society that combined to form the Socialist Party of America. Quint demonstrated that Marxism, Bellamy's nationalism, Christian socialism, DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party, Julius A. Wayland's grass roots socialism, and populism all came together in 1901 to organize a national party. He did not attempt to answer questions regarding the weakness of the movement after it began organizing in American society.[11]

Ira Kipnis in The American Socialist Movement argued that the failure of American socialism was caused by the betrayal by the right wing of their socialist principles. The Socialist Party organized originally to combat capitalism. But instead of winning over the American labor movement, the Socialists capitulated to big business and adopted a business-union approach. The right wing, Kipnis pointed out, controlled the Party and determined this policy. Consequently it turned the Party into a political organization devoted to winning offices and getting reform legislation passed rather than using political offices to educate the masses on the principles of "scientific socialism." Kipnis concluded that the right wing differed little from reform parties and the progressive movement. Likewise Kipnis accused the Center of the same error when it joined the Right after early electoral victories. Both factions became supporters of middle-class socialism and craft unionism. After the Right gained control of the Socialist Party of America, its goal was modified to that of achieving public ownership of the public utilities instead of the ownership of the means of production, according to Kipnis. Therefore the working classes could find little

difference between the reformism of the Right and the reforms promised by Woodrow Wilson. Consequently millions deserted the party.[12]

Beginning where Quint left off, David Shannon wrote an organizational history of the Socialist Party from 1901. His The Socialist Party of America reflected less of a political bias than Kipnis. Shannon's regional breakdown showed that the greatest numerical strength of the party lay in Milwaukee, but New York City remained the Marxist ideological center. Socialists west of the Mississippi River were so "emotional and radical" that they caused the national leaders to shudder. In Shannon's opinion, socialism never developed a significant following in the United States for various reasons. Socialists failed to convince themelves that they were a political party and did not focus on local issues. The party failed to win over the American labor movement and proved inept at communicating Marxist jargon to the American people. The strength of the American economy and its social mobility further hindered socialism's growth.[13]

The problem with socialism may have been a cultural one, according to James Weinstein in the most recent survey of socialism in America. In his The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925, he argued that the attempt by the Third International in 1919 to purge the right wing of the Socialist Party caused the split and eventual demise of the party. The American Left, dominated by the foreign language federations, failed to understand that the right wing in America took the opposite position from its right-wing European counterparts. The American position was more consistent with the proclamations of the Third International than the European position. American socialists like Debs and Berger failed to convince the extreme Left that the capitalists in America were stronger

than ever and that people were not agitating for revolution.[14]

Other recent studies concerning the question of radicalization in America have concentrated on local and institutional levels. Surprisingly, socialism actively competed with business unionism in only a few labor unions. Even then, radical American unions eventually adopted a more practical approach aimed at gaining economic benefits instead of changing the social order. Upon close examination, socialism on the local level seemed weak and compromising.

John Laslett in Labor and the Left analyzed the history of specific labor unions to understand why radicals had so little influence or control. Radical and socialist influences Laslett found linked to the legacy of the Knights of Labor idealism, the radicalization of populism, the strong dissatisfaction with craft unionism, technological change, and social and economic dislocation. The Western Federation of Miners went through a phase of radical political activity from 1902 to 1912. They found their radicalism gained them nothing in terms of dollars and cents. For that reason, the union later joined the American Federation of Labor. Laslett noted a connection between immigrant groups coming from European countries with a strong socialist party and radical American unions. Immigrant groups from Germany gave unions such as the German Brewery Workers of the Midwest a predisposition to radicalism because of their link with the German socialists. However, when faced with extinction as the result of prohibition laws, the brewers soon began pressuring traditional politicians from their districts for favorable legislation and abandoned their ideas about socialism. Unions such as the United Mine

Workers had a different reason for radicalization. Ideologically they were non-Marxists and favored the British Labor Party model instead. But they were radicalized by circumstances: excessive company control, the frequent hostility of the courts, and the routine use of the state militia to break strikes.[15]

A compilation of essays edited by Bruce Stave in Socialism in the Cities examined some of the crucial questions surrounding the influence of radicalism in a number of American cities. Sally Miller studied the Milwaukee movement and concluded that it was based upon the large number of German immigrants influenced by the German Social Democratic party.[16] Garin Burbank sought to analyze the failure of Ameringer's attempt to 'Milwaukeeize' Oklahoma City. He concluded that the city lacked the German ethnic groups and a working-class consciousness. Most of Oklahoma's industry was small and never developed to the size of the northern industrial giants. Finally, the mostly southern immigrants in Oklahoma City had no ideological disposition toward radicalism.[17]

After the 1920s, socialist municipal administrations became quite rare in the United States. Nevertheless, in the 1930s socialists gained power in the city government of Reading, Pennsylvania. William C. Pratt found socialism in that city to involve more than mere local politics. The Reading Party offered the membership a complete way of life, including educational meetings, picnics, and women's and youth clubs. Also the Party cooperatively owned several economic enterprises in the community.[18] The Schenectady, New York, socialists learned the mistake of supporting candidates more interested in personal gain than in changing the capitalist system. George Lunn was a minister committed to Christian socialism and proved to be a popular leader as mayor on the Socialist ticket.

However, when the Party tried to bring him under its discipline, he left the Socialists and continued as an elected official on his own. That action eventually led to the demise of the Party in that city.[19]

The radicalism of the Sooner State differed considerably from those movements in industrial areas like Milwaukee and New York City. Instead of a base of support concentrated in one small area with thousands of workers to draw upon, the Oklahoma movement gained support from farmers who were widely dispersed throughout the counties of the southeastern and western part of the state. Socialism in these agrarian areas followed in the tradition of the agrarian discontent of the South before the turn of the twentieth century. The major complaints were tenancy, high freight rates, mortgage indebtedness, and taxes. The Populist Movement in the western states reached its climax in the 1896 election with a fusion attempt with the Democrats. It declined rapidly thereafter, leaving no political voice of protest for farmers. The Populist Movement was not strong in Oklahoma except in the northern wheat-growing areas. The socialists in Oklahoma had an inauspicious beginning: the first local was organized in Medford in 1895 and identified initially with DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party. By 1899 numerous isolated locals had affiliated with the Social Democratic Party to create a territorial movement.[20]

The Oklahoma socialists rapidly gained strength after 1903. With an increase in the price of wheat, farmers in the old populist strongholds lost interest in socialism. But the farmers on the marginal lands in the western counties and the tenant farmers of the Southeast did not share in the same prosperity. Following the example set by the populists in earlier decades, these farmers again sought a political party of protest. The 1907 election confirmed that the support for the socialists was overwhelmingly rural. The urban socialist vote never exceeded 10 percent,

except in coal mining areas, but rose to 96 percent in some rural area. The state party affiliated with the newly formed Socialist Party of America and resorted to promotional efforts like summer encampments. These were enlivened by nationally known speakers, such as Eugene Debs, Kate Richards O'Hare, and "Mother" Jones.[21]

Within a few years the ideological struggles of the national Party afflicted Oklahoma. The indigenous radicals reflected a left-wing radicalism similar to that of Debs, but voiced their socialism in the language of Protestant evangelicalism. The "Reds", led by J. Tad Cumbie and Stanley Clark did not hesitate to advocate violent revolution. After Oklahoma Socialists affiliated with the national Party, outside organizers were sent into Oklahoma from Chicago and Milwaukee in 1907. John Hagel, Otto Branstetter, and Oscar Ameringer controlled the leadership of the Oklahoma party from 1908 to 1913. The local Socialists resented the control and discipline imposed by these new leaders and advocated a greater degree of democracy in the party. By 1913 these indigenous Oklahoma radicals had regained control of their Party and expelled what they called the "silk stocking contingent" from the northern cities. While the Right controlled the Party on the national level, in Oklahoma, the Left managed the state organization until the end in 1917.[22]

By 1914 the party experienced both gains and losses in its drive to control the state. The Socialists shifted their emphasis from labor to the problems of the tenant farmer and the small landowner. They helped organize a Renter's Union in the southeastern counties but lost support among white farmers when the leadership supported the demands of blacks. As the Socialists increasingly threatened the traditional parties, the Democrats found ways to deny the seating of Socialist poll watchers.

Still the Socialists elected six state legislators. At the same time, the state party felt the competition from organizations affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World in the southeastern part of the state. Although the Agricultural Workers' Organization and the Working Class Union had no official affiliation with the Socialist Party, many Oklahomans associated it with the sinister syndicalist reputations of these organizations. Critics discovered that unfounded charges of atheism or free love could be used to further discredit the new and struggling Party. However harmful these attacks proved to the progress of Oklahoma Socialists, the issue of resisting the draft after American intervention in the First World War was the fatal one. The national Party stated in the St. Louis Platform that Socialists would turn their guns on officers of the law in resisting the draft. Even though the Oklahoma Socialists did not endorse this platform, the charge of un-Americanism quickly became a major liability to the Sooner party. The final blow came from the syndicalists, who staged the Green Corn Rebellion in 1917 as an armed revolt against the draft. The Party could not overcome the stigma of this violent reaction against the war and therefore called an emergency convention and disbanded.[23]

The issue of resistance to the war discredited the Socialist Party in 1917, but its leaders sought a new approach. Inspired by the example of the North Dakota Non-Partisan League, Oscar Ameringer and others organized the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League in 1921 and nominated J. C. Walton for govenor. The League captured the Democratic Party, and Walton won the election for governor in 1922. Walton soon proved a disappointment. The farmer-laborites saw none of the reforms they wanted in state government realized, and by 1923 Walton had openly joined the

money interests of the state. That was the end of the socialist politics and influence in Oklahoma.[24]

Serious study of Oklahoma socialism has emerged only quite recently. Graduate students in the sixties looked anew at the earlier histories of radicalism and found in Oklahoma socialism an area not fully explored. Howard Meredith wrote a chronological and political history of the Party, and Ellen Rosen examined social and economic conditions that led to socialist voting. James R. Green and Garin Burbank began their studies independently, but both sought to explain the nature of Oklahoma radicalism. E. P. Thompson's work, The Making of the English Working Class, influenced both writers. Green studied radicalism in the southwestern region of the United States while Burbank concentrated on a local study in Marshall County, Oklahoma.[25]

Meredith maintained in "A History of Socialism in Oklahoma" that the Socialist Party was part of the area's traditional farmer protest. The socialists were little different from the populists of the 1890s or the Non-Partisan League that organized in the 1920s. Meredith interpreted the movement as economic. The Socialists were the only party that addressed agrarian issues. His research suggested that the first weakening of the Sooner movement began in 1910 with the split of the right and left wings. In the few years before the First World War the Industrial Workers of the World began to take the initiative away from the socialists. The extreme radicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World attracted many of the desperate tenant farmers. The socialists seemed moderate in comparison. The association with anarchism and anti-Americanism during thewar, according to Meredith, were the causes of the demise of the Sooner party.[26]

Rosen, in "Peasant Socialism in America?", went beyond Meredith's position and argued that socialism in Oklahoma before the First World War was much more than a movement based on economics. Her position was that socialism was a classic case of peasant socialism better understood in terms of class conflict. She argued that Oklahoma farmers feared the loss of their way of life based on the use of the land. By use of a multiple regression model, Rosen confirmed Meredith's supposition that the rate of tenancy in the southeastern counties and the rise of mortgage foreclosures in the western counties correlated with the socialist vote. Rosen found class conflict centered around the tenant and landlord in the Southeast. In the West, conflict existed between the small farmer and the town merchants. The conflict extended to the social separation of the middle-class churches of the towns from the country churches. The middle class also controlled the schools.[27]

Garin Burbank, in When Farmers Voted Red, hypothesized that Oklahoma socialists were merely angry farmers. Socialists in Oklahoma were members of a protest party that momentarily gave hope to impoverished farmers in a time of difficulty but quickly lost influence when they violated the cultural traditions of white Protestant Oklahomans. The ideological basis for the Oklahoma movement was both imported Marxism and the indigenous Protestant religious feeling that envisioned universal harmony under the reign of Christ. Burbank showed that no political movement could be successful in the state without addressing this deeply ingrained ideology. While the official state Party position was to ignore religion, for the farmers of the state religion was a major concern. Discussion of the compatibility of Christianity and socialism appeared in party newspaper discussion columns, and to the dismay of

socialist leaders, religion was a major topic of discussion at the socialist encampments. The tension between Christianity and socialism remained submerged in the first years of the Party history but later began to turn many farmers away from the movement. Burbank showed a further contradiction between the farmers and the socialists on the land question. Settlers came to Oklahoma wanting to own land privately rather than participate in a system of common ownership. Although depression and difficulty would force them to look for relief among the socialists, Burbank contended that farmers never gave up hope of being property owners. The socialists also violated the cultural sensibilities of white Protestants by seeking the black vote. They lost support by arguing against prohibition laws and defending evolution. Burbank contended that any Oklahoma party that violated treasured concepts of white Protestant Oklahomans would necessarily alienate large segments of the population.[28]

Green studied socialism in the Southwest in Grass-Roots Socialism and maintained that the farmers attained a "proletarian perspective" in the Marxian progression toward a utopian state. He agreed with Meredith and Burbank that the popularity of socialism grew out of its attachment to populist agrarianism and religious revivalism. But Green went further and contended that the movement transcended its provincial origins and politicized contemporary class struggles. Green added considerably more to the issue by pointing out the connection between the militant strikes in the 1880s and the farmer's protest against monopolists. With the continued impoverishment through the early years of the 1900s, a new kind of class conflict arose between the farmers and wealthy townspeople. The Socialist Party was able to exploit this class conflict and relied heavily upon the activities of militant industrial unions

among the miners and timber workers. Green disagreed with Burbank and argued that southwestern tenants identified more readily with the industrial worker than with the yeoman farmer. Green showed that militant unionism grew in tandem with socialist agrarianism until 1912. He concluded that socialism declined after 1912 because of the increasingly violent nature of the region's class struggle.[29]

Any American radical like Oscar Ameringer had to contend with a basic fact: the socialist movement was bound to fail in American society. Historians can point to various reasons why this form of radicalism never developed a significant following in the United States. Undoubtedly, more local studies will further illuminate those reasons. They may be further classified by an examination of how Ameringer himself sought to cope with the difficulties implicit in creating a radical movement in such refractory soil and against such insuperable odds.

FOOTNOTES

[1]E. Harris Harbison, "Socialism in European History to 1848," in Egbert, Socialism, I:23-51; Edward Bellamy, Looking Backward, 2000-1887 (New York: Random House, 1886; reprint, 1951); Laurence Gronlund, The Cooperative Commonwealth: An Exposition of Socialism (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1884; reprint ed., 1896).

[2]Harry W. Laidler, "European Socialism Since 1848," in Egbert, Socialism, I:53-96; Bell, "Marxian Socialism," in Egbert, Socialism, I:213-496.

[3]James Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925 (New York: Monthly Press, 1967), pp. 1-27; Kipnis, Movement, pp. 107-136.

[4]Weinstein, Decline, pp. 6-8; Kipnis, Movement, pp. 119-129; see also Sally M. Miller, Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism, 1910-1920 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1973).

[5]Ginger, Cross, pp. 237-244; Weinstein, Decline, pp. 10-12; Kipnis, Movement, pp. 107-129.

[6]Richard Fox, "The Paradox of 'Progressive' Socialism: The Case of Morris Hillquit, 1901-1914," American Quarterly 26 (May 1974):127-140; Weinstein, Decline, pp. 9-10.

[7]Ibid., pp. 119-176.

[8]Ibid., pp. 177-233.

[9]Shannon, Party, pp. 182-249.

[10]Bell, "Marxian Socialism, "I:213-406.

[11]Quint, Origin, passim.

[12]Kipnis, Movement, pp. 1-6

[13]Shannon, Party, passim.

[14]Weinstein, Decline, pp. 324-339.

[15]John H. M. Laslett, Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialism and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924 (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp. 3-8, 241-286, 9-53, 192-240.

[16]Sally M. Miller et al., "Milwaukee: Of Ethnicity and Labor," ed., Bruce Stave, Socialism in the Cities (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp. 41-71.

[17]Garin Burbank, "'Milwaukeeizing' Oklahoma City," in Stave, Cities, pp. 99-115.

[18]William C. Pratt, "'Jimmie Higgins' and the Reading Socialists Community: An Exploration of the Socialist Rank and File," in Stave, Cities, pp. 141-156.

[19]Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "Tribune of the People: George R. Lunn and the Rise and Fall of Christian Socialism in Schenectady," in Stave, Cities, pp. 72-98.

[20]Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," pp. 1-19.

[21]Ibid., pp. 41-66.

[22]Ibid., pp. 116-142.

[23]Ibid., pp. 198-217.

[24]Bell, "Marxiam Socialism," I:308; OL, 4 January 1924-15 February 1924.

[25]E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Pantheon, 1963); Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism,"; Ellen I. Rosen, "Peasant Socialism in Oklahoma? The Socialist Party in Oklahoma Before the First World War" (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1976): Garin Burbank, When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976); Green, Grass-Roots.

[26]Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," passim.

[27]Rosen, "Peasant Socialism," pp. 1-26.

[28]Burbank, Red, pp. xi - xvi.

[29]Green, Grass-Roots, pp. xi - xxi.

CHAPTER III

DEVELOPMENT OF A LABOR RADICAL

The life and career of Oscar Ameringer paralleled the failures and successes of American radical movements from the 1890s to the 1930s. His life can be separated into four different phases. From 1873 to 1907, Ameringer experienced a period of radicalization. He began as a German peasant fleeing Prussian militarism and concluded that phase as a proponent of industrial unionism. From 1907 to 1921 Ameringer engaged in a socialist phase when he crusaded for the Socialist parties in both Oklahoma and Wisconsin. After the disheartening collapse of socialism, Ameringer continued agitating for reform throughout the decade of the 1920s as a labor editor. During this phase he edited both the _Illinois Miner_ and the _Oklahoma Leader_. The last era of Ameringer's career extended from 1930 to 1943. This phase of national prominence brought Ameringer recognition as editor of the _American Guardian_. Although many historians have mentioned Ameringer, and his autobiography provides many interesting details, no study exists that provides a chronology of Ameringer's life. This chapter will survey the radicalization of Oscar Ameringer and his attempts to implement the cooperative commonwealth.

In his entertaining autobiography, Ameringer described the experiences that predisposed him to become a social rebel. This phase of radicalization started long before his contact with socialism in the first sixteen years of his life. He was born in Bavaria in 1873. The Ameringer family was Roman Catholic, and the father was a self-employed cabinetmaker. The

Ameringer ancestors possessed a talent for art and music, and Oscar claimed them as his natural talents as well. Ameringer remembered his childhood as an unhappy one in which he early rebelled against authority. He hated the Prussian drill sergeants on maneuvers near his home and resented the harsh methods of education used by the German schoolmasters. His interest in playing the cornet survived the rote methods of instruction utilized by his instructors. In the village school of Catholic Laupheim, Ameringer became a social outcast for writing an essay extolling the benefits of the Protestant Reformation. That ostracism forced him to seek friendship among the Jews and liberal Protestants of his community. Through their influence, he began to read the German classics and developed an intellectual faculty for critical thinking. These liberals also introduced him into a more critical view of American history. His reading developed in him an urge to devote his life to "avenging the bloody wrongs which the palefaces inflicted on my heroic red men." Another source of liberalism came from his mother who participated in anticlerical reading circles. Ameringer believed that his mother was a liberal who practiced her Catholic religion as a cover for radical thinking. Oscar's separation from his homeland came over the choice of being conscripted for military service or immigration; he chose to leave for America.[1]

Thus, even before reaching the United States in the 1880s, Ameringer possessed an independence of mind and an inclination for unorthodox ideology. His exposure to American industrialization, Knights of Labor radicals, and strikes and boycotts furthered his intellectual development. Upon his arrival in Cincinnati, Ohio, his brother found him employment in a furniture factory where he experienced a disillusionment with industrialization. In Germany, Ameringer remembered, cabinetmaking had been the work of an artist. Sometimes it took a week to put a dresser together. In his new job

everything was done by machine, and he worked a ten-hour day. But worse, he created only part of a finished product. He performed the same repetitive work every day with no artistic talent needed. This industrialization of his father's craft made him eagerly receptive to the preachments of Knights of Labor agitators. Ameringer quickly joined the union and enjoyed discussing labor problems with other working-class radicals. Soon he was in the mainstream of labor agitation and assisted in carrying red flags on May Day in a downtown Cincinnati parade. A strike in the furniture factory soon followed. But the ferocious reaction to an anarchist bomb in the Haymarket in Chicago in 1886 quickly stifled labor activity in Cincinnati. Ameringer himself was blacklisted after throwing a brick at an anti-union employee. This ended his career as a workingman.[2]

Unemployment and an economic depression added to Ameringer's disillusionment with capitalism and at the same time provided opportunities for further education. Out of work, Ameringer relied on his artistic talents to survive. He made extra income playing the cornet in symphony orchestras and beer halls. Reflecting his exposure to labor radicalism, Ameringer and his fellow musicians resented the treatment they received from saloon keepers and orchestra masters. Consequently they organized the American Federation of Musicians. Later, when the economic depression worsened, and even music could not keep him employed, Ameringer studied at the Cincinnati Library to keep warm during the winter of 1887-1888. A librarian helped him to learn to read English. Having nothing else to do, he spent from early morning to late evening reading radical interpretations of American history written by exiled German revolutionaries of 1848. Ameringer read the biographies of most of the American founding fathers and became imbued with the American revolutionary past. Later he claimed this reading made him a firm Jeffersonian-Jacksonian. The influence of this

crucial time of self-education became apparent in many of his later pamphlets and propaganda pieces. As the economy improved, Ameringer found that he could make money by portrait painting for wealthy patrons as well as by playing the cornet.[3]

In his late teens and early twenties, Ameringer had still not solidified his radicalism. Those years were spent in further training for the future socialist and trying to earn a living. Ameringer's first stay in the United States ended in 1890, when an appeal from his aged mother prompted him to return to Germany, where he remained until 1894. To make a living Ameringer continued portrait painting and selling his talents as a musician. While in Germany, Ameringer joined the Social Democratic Party. A significant event for him was hearing a speech by Wilhelm Liebknecht. His son Karl later became one of Ameringer's heroes. Ameringer referred to Liebknecht many times in later years in his editorials. Ameringer's Marxism started with the German Social Democrats. He remembered those times as the first occasions in which he seriously considered what the socialists had to say, and he had a profound feeling that these "despised Reds were animated by something much higher than the itch for office."[4]

Ameringer came back to the United States impressed with the Social Democrats but again faced the reality of earning a livelihood. Employment ranged from serving as a director of military bands in Texas and Indiana to traveling through Ohio as a portrait painter. To support his growing family, Ameringer became a life insurance salesman. During this time of ever uncertain unemployment he was married to Lula Wood of Mount Sterling, Ohio. The first of their sons, Siegfried, was born in Milwaukee in 1895. Ameringer found selling easy because he liked people, and that characteristic would also aid him as a labor organizer. But his interest in life insurance

diminished when he read muckraking articles exposing the fraudulent practices of life insurance companies.[5]

At the age of twenty-six, Ameringer reached a key turning point in his career. Abandoning his attempts at earning a living by art, music, and life insurance, he turned to a career of labor editor and organizer in Ohio. In 1903, through his connections with the musician's union, he became a delegate to the Trades-of-Labor Assembly, which in turn led to the job as labor editor of the Labor World, the union paper of the Brewery Workers Union. Additionally, Ameringer contributed humorous pieces to the periodicals Judge and Puck. After his publication of an editorial on industrial unionism in the Labor World, the Brewery Workers Union invited him to Louisiana. He helped settle a jurisdictional dispute in New Orleans between the American Federation of Labor craft unions and the local brewery union. This conflict deepened Ameringer's hatred of craft unionism. This was also his first exposure to working-class blacks. One of Ameringer's jobs was to act as liaison to the black dockworkers. He began to understand that to the blacks unionism meant far more than wages and hours--it was a religion. The unions gave blacks their only hope of rising from the depths of economic slavery.[6]

The American Federation of Labor won the dispute, and Ameringer became unemployed again. During this time Ameringer also developed a hatred of powerful labor leaders--a hostility that appeared repeatedly as a major theme in his career. He wrote in the Labor World some of the,'bitterest invectives' , against Samuel Gompers ever uttered. Eventually the paper died from lack of financial support. After being forced out of the port city, the German socialist took a position as field organizer for the Jeans Foundation in Oklahoma. It contributed millions of dollars to uplifing the poor whites and blacks of the South.[7]

By the time Ameringer reached Oklahoma in 1907, his radicalization was complete. He spent the remaining years of his life agitating for a new world order. Having entered the state because of the Jeans Foundation, he became a full-time "world saver" after encountering the impoverishment of Oklahoma farmers. He soon became a leader in the Oklahoma party and ran for political office. His association with the Jeans Foundation soon ended, and with the encouragement of Victor Berger of Milwaukee, Ameringer dedicated himself to the Socialists of Oklahoma. His first interest in the state was the labor unions, but he soon became convinced that the strength of Oklahoma socialism was with the farmers. Otto Branstetter encouraged him to tour the state to speak for the Socialist Party and at the same time conduct an economic and social study of the Sooner state. After the tour, Ameringer gave himself to arousing Oklahoma farmers. He felt they lived under poorer conditions than the sweatshop workers in New York City, the packinghouse workers in Chicago, or the black dockworkers in New Orleans. What he saw permanently cured Ameringer of the notion that American farmers were capitalists and exploiters.[8]

A unique aspect of the socialist movement in Oklahoma was Ameringer's participation in the socialist encampments, which were modeled after earlier Protestant camp meeting revivals. Although Ameringer minimized his role in the encampments, he was in fact one of the most popular speakers. By this time he had become an expert on the southwestern farm problem. The Ameringer family provided the music and rough humor for entertainment. Kate Richards O'Hare credited Oscar as being one of those speakers who created an abiding spirit of radicalism among Oklahoma farmers.[9]

Despite the ability of the Oklahoma socialists to draw large crowds, their organization was uncoordinated and decentralized. With the encouragement of Berger, Ameringer wanted to develop the party along a centralized

plan modeled after the Wisconsin organization. That included bringing the many locals under the control and discipline of the state Party organization. By 1908 Ameringer had worked himself into the leadership of the Oklahoma Party. His rapid rise was due to his excellent credentials. He was readily accepted by Oklahomans because the old leadership had either died off or ceased to be a force. Ameringer and Otto Branstetter shared the leadership of the party from 1908 to 1913.[10]

Ameringer's first attempts to establish a socialist newspaper in the Sooner State proved frustrating. He felt that along with the socialist encampments and a party organization, the state needed a newspaper for propaganda purposes and to carry news of the various county locals. But soon Ameringer began to make enemies with the native Oklahoma socialists and was refused editorship of the Industrial Democrat, the official party paper. The conflict started over the question of supporting a referendum by the railroad brotherhoods. This conflict continued throughout Ameringer's stay in Oklahoma and took a more severe turn in May, 1910. As a result the Ameringer faction started the Oklahoma Pioneer. Financial difficulties plagued the paper from the start. Although it later became the official voice of Oklahoma socialism, it received few contributions from the locals. The Oklahoma Pioneer also faced competition from the Appeal to Reason, published in Girard, Kansas, which claimed 40,000 readers in the state.[11]

When Ameringer originally came to Oklahoma, he vowed to "Milwaukeeize" Oklahoma City. He wanted to duplicate Victor Berger's success in Wisconsin. Berger had successfully taken control of Milwaukee's city government and through a "clean government" campaign established a strong power base. Ameringer believed that in order to win in the Sooner State, the Socialists needed control of the larger cities. In May, 1911, the capital city

mayoral election became the first target. The major issue was the Socialists' opposition to the efforts of businessmen to replace the city's council government elected by wards with a commission government elected in a city-wide vote. Oscar Ameringer ran for mayor of Oklahoma City on the Socialist ticket.[12]

The union leaders in Oklahoma City had become dissatisfied with the Democratic politicians, and when the Socialists polled eleven percent of the statewide vote in 1910 they established themselves as a credible political threat to the Democrats. The Oklahoma Pioneer addressed issues of immediate concern to Oklahoma City's labor. Ameringer wanted to give labor the first real opportunity to compare socialist solutions with the performance of Democrats. Ameringer's campaign received attention during a strike against the Oklahoma Street Railway Company. Discharged motormen had organized a union, but the company placed armed guards aboard the cars. A strike, a union boycott, and a street demonstration halted the streetcars in Oklahoma City for six days. The attempt at gaining recognition of the union failed when businessmen formed a vigilante group to break the strike. Ameringer and the Oklahoma Pioneer challenged the Democrats, who campaigned as "friends of labor." Ameringer pledged that if elected major, he would not permit police to protect strikebreakers. In the city election held on May 9, 1911, Ameringer received 23 percent of the vote for mayor. Though defeated, he gained a plurality from the working class precincts of the south side. However, Ameringer's prediction that he would "Milwaukeeize" the city never came true. It proved to be an illusion founded on a largely inappropriate comparison of the two cities. The city election of 1911 was the only election in which the Socialists polled more than a negligible vote. After that date they were not able to hold the working-class vote when the emotion aroused by the streetcar strike subsided.[13]

Ameringer's organizational role in Oklahoma socialism ended in 1913 with his expulsion from the state party. The final split with the native Socialists came when the Ameringer faction expelled a member of the anti-Ameringer faction from the State Executive Committee for not turning over money to the headquarters in Oklahoma City. To a number in the movement, Ameringer offered too much leadership and demanded far too much centralization through the control of funds. Further conflict between Ameringer and the Oklahoma Socialists arose in the national party convention of 1912, when Ameringer gave the Oklahoma votes to Emil Seidel in opposition to Eugene Debs for the party's nomination for president. The native Oklahoma Socialists believed that Oklahoma loyalties were necessary for party leadership. They viewed the close association of Ameringer and the socialist leadership in Wisconsin a major irritant. Thus the publishers of the New Century in Sulfur, Oklahoma, representing the anti-Ameringer faction, began a movement to expel Ameringer from the State Executive Committee. The party conducted a statewide vote and expelled him on June 7, 1913.[14]

Thus the forty-year-old Ameringer left the state where independent locals ruled and did not return permanently until the 1920s. He spent the next seven years helping Berger run the Milwaukee party and occasionally made trips back to Oklahoma. The Milwaukee Leader began to publicize him as one of the popular speakers in the Milwaukee area soon after Ameringer's expulsion from the Oklahoma organization but did not mention his separation with the Oklahoma comrades. The paper even ran a column on Ameringer. It portrayed him as one of America's most popular socialist humorists in a weekly column entitled "Socialists You Should Know." Berger immediately began to use Ameringer's talents as speaker. Ameringer made numerous speaking tours throughout Wisconsin. He addressed the faculty at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and the Wisconsin State Legislature on

the land question. Ameringer moved easily back and forth from Wisconsin to Oklahoma. Even though he spent from 1910 to 1913 in the Sooner state, his residency remained in Wisconsin. The same year Ameringer ran for mayor in Oklahoma City, Berger asked him to help win a crucial election in the Wisconsin Third Congressional District. Ameringer's task was to campaign in Waukesha County and help trim the Republican Party's majority. Ameringer campaigned among predominantly German immigrants in their native tongue.[15]

He experienced considerable success in the Milwaukee organization. He rose from the Socialist Party's county organizer in Milwaukee to statewide organizer. Also he became the editor of the Polish newspaper Voice of the People (even though he did not know Polish) and aided as an editorial writer and columnist with the Milwaukee Leader. Later Ameringer campaigned as a candidate for the office of governor for the state of Wisconsin. In August, 1914, Ameringer was a delegate to the International Socialist Congress in Vienna, Austria. The delegation returned to Wisconsin when the First World War interrupted the conference. In addition, from 1904 to 1912, Ameringer edited the National Rip-Saw, a Socialist monthly magazine published in St. Louis.[16]

Throughout the war Ameringer helped the antiwar Milwaukee Leader in publication. The paper began to encounter financial problems in 1914 because many of the paper's readers and advertisers were either German or Polish. The Germans supported the Leader editorial policy, but the Polish community supported the war. This clash of interest lost the paper many subscribers and advertising support. Because Ameringer had gained a reputation as a fund raiser, Berger gave Ameringer the task of appealing to the paper's supporters for direct contributions. But after the United States entered the conflict in 1917, Ameringer's job became increasingly

difficult. Postmaster-General Albert S. Burleson revoked the second-class mailing privileges of the paper because of its opposition to American entry into the war. For assistance Berger called upon Ameringer. The powerful Milwaukee party called a mass meeting and assembled a crowd of twelve thousand supporters. Ameringer and the Milwaukee Socialists told their story. The federal government, under the powers of the Espionage Act, revoked their letter privileges, boycotted the advertisers and cut off circulation outside of Milwaukee. The direct appeal brought in four thousand dollars, and the paper continued publication. It was hand delivered in the city. They handled further financial problems in a similar manner, but there were so many emergency meetings that after a time even the most faithful failed to respond. In an attempt to suppress the Socialist, federal attorneys indicted Ameringer and other Socialists for obstruction of recruitment into the military. The cases never came to trial; Ameringer charged that the indictments were a tactic used by the government to destroy the Socialists politically without having their cause heard in court. Specific charges against Ameringer included printing and writing articles in the Milwaukee Leader that attacked the Councils of Defense, refusing to submit an English translation of the Polish newspaper Voice of the People to the censures, and printing an antiwar poem "Dumdum Bullets."[17]

During this time of financial crisis, Ameringer began to look for a better use of his talents. In 1916 he had again turned to the possibility of reviving radicalism in Oklahoma. He decided to create the Oklahoma Leader as an extension of the Milwaukee paper in Oklahoma City. In that year Ameringer returned to the Sooner state and began soliciting money among miners and electrical workers. There was little enthusiasm for the new inspiration. Despite his expulsion from the State Executive Committee

three years earlier, it realized that Ameringer was a popular and effective editor and tried to help him. The state office sent out a prospectus on the proposed enterprise to 3800 committeemen of the Socialist Party. In response to the prospectus, Ameringer received only twenty dollars. After those efforts, by 1917 Ameringer's creative imagination discovered an unusual source of revenue. The intense patriotism of the state required that each person buy a quota of Liberty Bonds assessed by the local Councils of Defense after the United States entered the war. Ameringer found that many people in the state, particularly the Socialists and German immigrants, despised these bonds and willingly contributed them toward the founding of the Oklahoma Leader. By discounting the bonds, Ameringer claimed to have accrued a quarter of a million dollars worth of capital. Even then publication would have to wait four more years in order for the paper to be adequately capitalized.[18]

The First World War had destroyed Ameringer's hopes for the cooperative commonwealth coming through the Socialists. The Oklahoma party disbanded in 1917, and most of the Socialist newspapers survived only by refraining from antiwar commentary. Ameringer devoted his talents to the farmer-labor coalition which emerged in the state and assisted in forming the Farmer Labor Reconstruction League. Socialists worked behind the scenes because of their identification with syndicalism. The strategy was to capture the Democratic Party of Oklahoma. Ameringer was convinced that a third party could not survive long in Oklahoma. Ameringer dedicated the Oklahoma Leader to his increasingly regular job or raising funds for the coalition, which in 1922 elected Jack Walton as governor. However, ten months after his inauguration, the state

legislature impeached Walton. That action destroyed the farmer-labor coalition and the Oklahoma Leader as a daily paper.[19]

At that point Ameringer's career as a labor editor began. In the previous decade, he had established close ties with the United Mine Workers of Illinois. During their strike in 1910 and 1911, he had gone to the state and made speeches for the union in virtually every coal town in Illinois. When the mounting financial problems of the Oklahoma Leader threatened its dissolution in 1923, Ameringer called upon Frank Farrington, president of the UMW in Illinois, to help bail him out. Somewhat to his surprise, Ameringer not only received a loan of forty thousand dollars but also became editor and publisher of the Illinois Miner. Ameringer moved to Springfield, Illinois, while his son Siegfried remained behind to manage the Leader plant in Oklahoma City. Increasingly influential in the plant was Freda Hogan, who became Oscar's second wife in 1930.[20]

Ameringer edited the Illinois Miner from 1920 to 1929, a most difficult period for the coal industry. He expended much time attacking big labor leaders. The industry went through a period of decline after the First World War. Ameringer championed the independent state organizations of the United Mine Workers in Kansas, led by Alex Howat, and of Illinois led by Farrington, against the national president John L. Lewis. Ameringer's boss, Frank Farrington, accepted the business unionism of Gompers and Lewis. Farrington was a political conservative but had a long-standing feud with Lewis. The Illinois miners resisted the attempts by Lewis to extend his heavy-handed control into their state. By taking Ameringer on as editor of the union's paper, Farrington placed himself on the side of the progressives. But he also gained an effective voice later used in the bloody strike at Herrin, Illinois, and against Lewis himself.[21]

The Illinois Miner became the only voice in the nation to defend the actions of the miners at Herrin. In the spring of 1922 the United Mine Workers struck nationwide, shutting down the coal industry. However, an independent coal company at Herrin hired armed guards and strikebreakers to take advantage of the demand for coal production and started mining coal in defiance of the miners' union. Violence soon broke out that led to the massacre of several strikebreakers. An angry mob of Herrin miners executed one of the strikebreaker leaders. While the national press reacted with a call to crush the national union, Ameringer defended the miners' actions in a series of articles in the Illinois Miner which he entitled "Other Side of Herrin."[22]

Ameringer's efforts among the miners continued, but a final clash with Lewis in 1929 ended Ameringer's career as an Illinois labor editor. Ameringer helped lead a rank-and-file rebellion against Lewis, who was moving to exert a greater degree of control over the Illinois organization. In 1930, during the first months of the depression, Ameringer helped form the reorganized United Mine Workers, which was in open revolt against Lewis, and dedicated himself to attacking Lewis. When Lewis won the dispute, he refused to allow Ameringer to remain on as editor of the Illinois Miner. He did not want to unleash Ameringer on the miners again. After losing the battle with Lewis, Ameringer returned to his floundering paper in Oklahoma.[23]

During the 1930s Ameringer developed a national reputation after an inauspicious beginning. Only a few months after returning to Oklahoma, Ameringer filed for bankruptcy and reorganized the Leader plant to publish the weekly American Guardian. Old-time Oklahoma radicals rallied around Oscar Ameringer's new weekly and prepared for the socialist revival that was sure to come in the wake of the depression. This radical resurgence

of the 1930s did in fact represent a kind of Indian summer for the pioneer socialist agitators of Ameringer's generation. But when the revival came, it occurred in the Arkansas Delta region and not in Oklahoma. The revival was led by young men who copied the party building tactics of Ameringer. But they soon turned from the hopeless task of reviving the old Socialist Party to the more pressing job of building an interracial industrial union for sharecroppers. When that effort also failed, nothing remained to keep the old movement alive save Oscar Ameringer and the Guardian. Employing Julius Wayland's sales tactics, Ameringer raised a "Minute Man Army" of subscription salesmen, which helped the Guardian's circulation increase from about twenty thousand in 1931 to over forty-five thousand in 1934. By this time the weekly claimed a diverse national readership.[24]

In the latter part of the 1930s Ameringer moved away from his earlier preoccupation with the social and political problems of the Southwest and took a more international approach. His newspaper developed an antiwar focus. Even though Ameringer supported the battle against fascism in Spain, he adopted a stand resembling traditional midwestern isolationism as the threat of total war became more menacing. His weekly was no longer a regional paper. It had more readers in California than in Oklahoma, more in New York than in Texas. Ameringer was now a noted national figure, and the Guardian took up the old Socialist call for an end to military appropriations and for a national referendum on the subject of war. But the antiwar movement never developed broad-based support in the United States. By 1942 the number of Guardian supporters had declined precipitously. Ill and disillusioned, Ameringer closed his last paper. On November 6, 1943, he died in an Elk City, Oklahoma, hospital.[25]

Like many Socialists of his day, Ameringer immigrated from Germany and quickly became involved with the American labor movement. His radicalization started in the first sixteen years of his life and continued through contact with labor union radicalism. His work carried him from Wisconsin to Illinois and Oklahoma as a labor organizer and socialist agitator. In the face of the national weakness of the socialist movement, Ameringer braved expulsion from his own party in Oklahoma, the hysterical patriotism of the First World War, and the failure of the farmer-labor movement to carry on resolutely for many years as a promoter and editor of newspapers in Oklahoma. To what degree was his persistence and resolve the product of a coherent ideology? The next chapter will approach this problem with an analysis of the influence of Marxism on his work.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 1-35; McAlister Coleman, "Oscar Ameringer Never Weakened," Nation (New York) 27 November 1943, p. 608.

[2]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 36-47.

[3]Ibid., pp. 48-83.

[4]Ibid., pp. 139-143.

[5]Ibid., pp. 169-192; James R. Green, "The Mark Twain of American Socialism," Nation (New York) 21 September 1974, p. 245; Interview with Mrs. Siegfried Ameringer, 26 August 1981, Oklahoma City.

[6]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 192-213; Green, Grass-Roots, p. 36.

[7]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 221-223; Green, Grass-Roots, p. 37.

[8]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 227-235.

[9]Ibid., pp. 261-275; NRS, September 1914.

[10]Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," p. 71.

[11]Ameringer, Weaken, p. 278; Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," pp. 113-115; Howard H. Quint, "Julius A. Wayland, Pioneer Socialist Propagandist," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 35 (March 1949) pp. 585-606.

[12]Ibid., pp. 99-115.

[13]Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," pp. 81-85; Burbank, Red, p. 38.

[14]Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," pp. 136-139.

[15]ML, 9 April, 21 April, 25 April, and 31 May 1913; Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 283-300.

[16]Ibid., pp. 285, 342, 325-328, Weinstein, Decline, p. 87.

[17]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 305-344.

[18]Ibid., pp. 306-307, 310-314, 358-364; O. A. Hilton, "The Oklahoma Council of Defense and the First World War," The Chronicles of Oklahoma 20 (March 1942) pp. 17-42.

[19]Green, Grass-Roots, p. 380; Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 365-381; OL, 4 January 1924.

[20]Ameringer, *Weaken*, pp. 395-405; Freda Hogan Ameringer, "Interview."

[21]Coleman, *Coal*, pp. 112-114.

[22]*Ibid.*, pp. 115-125; Ameringer, *Weaken*, pp. 416-427.

[23]Green, *Grass-Roots*, pp. 433-435.

[24]*Ibid.*, pp. 396-397.

[25]*Ibid.*, 413, 433, 435.

CHAPTER IV

MARXIST OR REVISIONIST?

One test to aid in evaluating Ameringer's ideological position is to compare his writings on economics with those of Karl Marx and Eduard Bernstein. Even though Ameringer could not qualify as a consistant exponent of Marxist theory, Marx significantly influenced his ideas. On the other hand he disagreed with Bernstein on numerous points. Ameringer viewed the world from the perspective of an economic determinist, considered class conflict to be the essential form of economic relationship, explained the economics of American capitalism in terms of the labor theory of value, and constantly found the contradictions of capitalism operating in American society.

The ideological lines among American radicals sometimes crossed each other in a confusing pattern. But for clarification, historians have agreed that the Left generally adhered to Marxist principles while the Right took a Revisionist position. Even then, when compared to European Marxists, the quality of the American Marxist thought was simplistic and unsophisticated indeed. Paul Buhle, the author of recent studies on American Marxism, believed that there were generally two types of intellectuals in the movement. First were the "textualists" like Daniel DeLeon who carried Das Kapital around like a free thinker's Bible. These early Marxists isolated themselves in the larger cities in the East and had little contact with the nation as a whole. The second type were the "Americanizers," whose interest in Marx was virtually non-existent and who

were only a "half-step" from the ideas of Henry George and Edward Bellamy.[1]

Even though Ameringer never qualified as a textualist, he was considerably more Marxist than the Americanizers, though historians have usually placed him in that category. Popular propaganda pieces written early in Ameringer's career before the First World War demonstrate the Marxist influence on Ameringer's economic analysis. In a tract called Communism, Socialism, and the Church, from 1913, Ameringer identified the source of much of his socialism. This booklet answered charges made by Milwaukee clergymen that socialism destroyed the family, advocated free love, and meant the confiscation of private property. The material for the book came primarily from the works of Karl Kautsky. Ameringer admitted that he did not have the time or the ability to do original research and consequently used the works of this German Marxist to interpret socialism to the Milwaukee working class. Five years earlier, in an essay entitled The Life and Deeds of Uncle Sam, Ameringer made clear his view that the underlying force in all life was economics. His workingman's definition of the principle of economic determinism was "way down at the bottom of every human movement are the selfish material interests of classes which strive against each other in an endeavor to make an easier living." In this tract, Ameringer interpreted American economic behavior as a struggle between the owners of capital and the working classes. To demonstrate that point, Ameringer used a sketch of American history and argued that the desire for profit motivated such events as the American Revolution, Shays' Rebellion, the Constitution, and the Civil War. The real heroes in American history were the growing labor movements, whose struggles brought about free schools, the abolition of imprisonment for debt, higher wages, the eight-hour day, and the abolition of child labor. He never

altered his view of economic determinism. Contrary to Bernstein, Ameringer never seriously considered the role of noneconomic factors in social evolution.[2]

Ameringer was much closer to Marx in his thinking on class conflict than he was to Bernstein. While even for American Marxists the heart of socialist theory was the concept of class struggle, Bernstein de-emphasized class conflict. The Revisionists argued that under the pressure of the working classes, social reaction had set in against the exploiting tendencies of capital in western nations. Consequently the efforts of organized labor gradually improved the living standards of the workers. On the contrary, Ameringer did not believe that the class struggle was an idle phrase. Capitalism created a separation of ownership and labor. The result was the division of mankind into two classes. The instructive pamphlet, Socialism: What It Is and How to Get It, which Ameringer wrote in 1911, identified the struggle between the trusts and the working classes. He used arguments familiar to the working classes of the South and Midwest because they were similar to those of the Populists of the 1890s. But Ameringer's argument went far beyond a discussion of silver and freight rates and advocated nationalization of major industries. Ameringer also tried to politicize the class conflict that he believed existed in rural America. The exploiters of labor in Oklahoma and Wisconsin were the lawyers, doctors, bankers, and merchants who owned land only for speculation and contracted tenant farmers to work it. But Ameringer's greatest contempt was reserved for "a non-producing, non-progressive, parasite class composed of tired and retired farmers who hang around the bungholes of molasses barrels." Ameringer observed farmers in western Oklahoma flock to the socialist banner in the 1910s when their mortgages were endangered. But these same people turned their backs on the Socialists and their fellow

farmers when the price of wheat rose or when drillers discovered oil on their land. Later when these newly prosperous farmers retired to the county seat towns to live off the "surplus" of their tenants, they became the exploiters.[3]

Ameringer proved sensitive to the argument that the working classes should control the Party rather than the middle-class intellectuals. Like other American Marxists, he believed that the greatest danger facing the Socialists was that the middle-class intellectuals would come to dominate the working-class movement. They believed that members of the middle class were unreliable and that at best they were nothing more than reformers. Ameringer strongly identified himself with the working classes, contrary to the middle-class orientation of the "American Bernstein," Victor Berger. Ameringer emphasized his membership in the proletariat. On this issue, Ameringer found reality and dogma at odds, since he himself fit the definition of middle-class intellectual. The only blue-collar job that Ameringer ever held was as a laborer in a Cincinnati furniture factory. Most of his life was spent working as a editor, labor organizer, life insurance salesman, portrait painter, or muscian, but he never addressed this contradiction. During the 1922 Shawnee Convention, Ameringer revealed how he felt on this issue when he expressed bitterness toward the middle-class composition of the Socialist Party. He recalled that the farmer-labor convention was more of a working-class convention than any Socialist Party convention ever held "because among its participants there was a total and absolute absence of preachers, lawyers, and other middle-class intellectuals."[4]

Ameringer described to Wisconsin farmers how the theory of capitalism worked in a tract of 1910 intriguingly entitled Dynamite for the Brain. The capitalist class, represented by the railroads and lumber companies,

had controlled that state from its inception with a view to acquiring profits. The farmers had no part in that prosperity. Wisconsin tenantry was a result of the trusts manipulating land values. Ameringer wrote that the capitalists could not help themselves; it was always their nature to buy cheap and sell high, or as he put it, "to squeeze the producer and to soak the consumer." The result of this system ultimately was that Wisconsin farmers could not give away the potatoes they raised, "while folks in a city not a hundred miles away were sent to jail for stealing a few of the priceless tubers."[5]

Throughout Ameringer's career are found discussions of the Marxist labor theory of value. While the starting point of orthodox Marxian economics was the theory of exchange value, Bernstein declared that the labor theory of value and the theory of surplus value were mere abstract concepts remote from actual conditions. Ameringer illustrated his belief in the Marxist construct by stating that "every brick, girder, beam, window, pole, wheel, pully, shovel of mortar is the product of labor--get that, labor, labor and nothing else." Ameringer warned the workingman that the profits of the capitalists were derived from this surplus value. The industrialists could expand only by producing cheap and selling high. The loser, Ameringer was quick to point out, was the workingman, because the industrialist extracted his surplus by employing child labor, suppressing wages, and utilizing the latest technology.[6]

Reflecting his Marxist economics, Ameringer explained the imperialistic policies of western nations in terms of surplus value. He reasoned that the imperialism of western nations was inherent in capitalism and a permanent feature of its world-wide influence. Competition between nations to sell their surplus products inevitably led to armed conflict. Ameringer

argued that the reason the American government had difficulty in Mexico, China, and the Philippines was that American investors had invested the surplus extracted from the American laborers in overseas enterprises. The surplus of American labor went to foreign nations in order to develop mines, railroads, and factories, instead of being used to increase the wages of American producers. Overseas investment kept wages down.[7]

Consistent with the Marxian economic view, Ameringer also liked to illuminate the contradictions of capitalism for the tenant farmers and workingmen in American society. Marxists held that the contradictions of capitalism were the result of the manner in which capital accrued in a capitalist society. One such contradiction was cyclical unemployment. First, the accumulation of capital expanded the demand for labor power and hence tended to raise wages at the expense of surplus value. Capital met this threat by introducing labor-saving machinery. The effect was to throw workers out of work. Consequently, unemployment was a necessary feature of the system. Second, panics and depressions were inherent in the system. The accumulation of capital tended to depress the rate of profit. At a certain stage in the fall of the rate of profit, capitalists temporarily curtailed their accumulating activity. The result was a crisis followed by a depression, during which wages were reduced and capital values deflated. In time, profitability was restored, and accumulation picked up again. To the Marxists, this explained why capitalist development followed the peculiar form of alternating cycles of prosperity and depression. A third contradiction of capitalism was its incapacity to maintain a stable consumer demand. As a capitalist economy matured and grew wealthier, its power to produce and accumulate tended to expand at an increasing rate. Consuming power, on the contrary, was kept in check by the system's natural tendency to hold down wages and the capitalists'

desire to accumulate rather than consume. Therefore, the producing power tended to outgrow the consuming power. Fourth, capitalism by its very nature created unwholesome monopolies. The effort of capitalists to acquire surplus value at the expense of their competitors led to a steady enlargement of the average scale of production, since the larger enterprises were both more efficient and yielded greater bargaining power than the smaller. Moreover, the larger ones tended to take over the smaller. As a result of this dual process, monopoly spread and eventually came to dominate the decisive branches of production. Finally, capitalism caused war. The capitalist class of each country made use of the power of the state which it controlled in order to overcome the contradictions and to expand the field for profitable accumulation. The ultimate recourse of every capitalist country was always to attempt to solve its problems at the expense of the rest of the world. This led to colonial expansionism, imperialistic rivalries, and eventually to war itself.[8]

Bernstein did not accept the "increasing misery theory," and believed that the world market forces would correct the depressions and business panics. Instead of accepting Marx's prediction that monopoly would soon control the state, Bernstein believed that trusts and small businesses could co-exist. Nor did Bernstein believe that the process of capital accumulation necessarily led to imperialism. Marxist notions about the contradictions of capitalism found a prominent place throughout Ameringer's works. He wrote that while the working classes were a major consumer of the capitalist's production, these laborers could not purchase the manufactured goods on subsistence incomes. Even in the 1920s, Ameringer told farmers their difficulty was in the low price of their products and the "ever rising expenses of their tools." Ameringer pointed out that inevitably unconsumed manufactured goods

remained idle, production ceased, and the workers became unemployed. The final result was that the working classes stopped buying altogether, and this ever-increasing cycle caused business panics and depressions. As a result of the steady increase of efficiency and bargaining power of the capitalists, monopoly spread and eventually dominated all branches of production. To find markets for unconsumed goods, the capitalists had begun in American history to use the South as a dumping ground for their surplus industrial products, enforcing that policy by means of the tariff.[9]

Ameringer explained how, as big business intensified the contradictions of capitalism, the control of government passed to a small circle of big industrialists and financiers. He centered the discussion around the conflict of Jeffersonian versus Hamiltonian influences in American history. The Jeffersonians represented the working classes and the Hamiltonians represented the capitalists. Ameringer believed that the working classes reached the highest degree of freedom in the half century of what he called "the reign of the farmer-labor coalition founded by Thomas Jefferson." He wrote that in the early days of American history there was economic democracy based on the union of ownership and labor. But after the Civil War, the Hamiltonians increasingly gained power and exploited the working classes. Modern industrialization allowed the divorce of ownership and labor and founded a new economic slavery of working men employed by capitalists. During the troubled decade of the 1930s Ameringer increasingly put forth as a solution the idea of industrial democracy as an alternative to capitalism. Ameringer pointed out that in their government Americans enjoyed political democracy, but in economics "an imperial power has arisen that knows no parliament, whose laws are written behind barred doors, and whose laws are not subject to appeal."[10]

Ameringer continued to point up the contradictions of capitalism in all of his writings until his death in 1943. With the increasing poverty of the unemployed in the 1930s, Ameringer turned to a new theme. America had the capacity to provide all the needs of every American. But he predicted that conditions would not improve because all decisions of the capitalists centered on making a profit. Since there was no money to be made during the Depression, Ameringer concluded, essential industries closed down while people starved. The Depression would get worse, he warned, because with the concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands "the shares of the owners would become larger and larger, while that of labor would become smaller and smaller." In his last pamphlet, Bread or Lead, from 1940, he renewed that theme with emphasis. He wrote that science and mechanical energy had made a world of abundance, and yet "one-third of our people are ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-sheltered."[11]

An examination of Ameringer's views on economics indicate that he was much more of a Marxist than a Revisionist. Any study of Ameringer's Marxism needs to take into account the background of American radicalism, where there were few pure Marxists either on the Right or Left. The radicals who attempted to apply Marxism in America found that the American economic forces did not parallel the European economic environment. It was necessary for them to adjust the European theory to conform to the American reality. Since Ameringer did make such adjustments, historians have erroneously assigned him a place on the Right, with the Revisionists. This analysis shows however, that in contrast to the Revisionists, Ameringer was an economic determinist, considered class conflict an inevitable form of economic relationship, explained the economics of American capitalism in terms of the labor theory of value, and constantly found the contradictions of capitalism operating in American society. But to establish further

that Ameringer was an early Leftist requires a study of his views on the specific issues that separated the Left from the Right in American Socialism. Ameringer's position on these issues will further demonstrate the inaccuracy of calling Ameringer a right-wing socialist.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Weinstein, Decline, p. 3; Paul Buhle, "Intellectuals in the Debsian Socialist Party," Radical America 4 (April 1970): 36-37; Paul Buhle et al., "Marxism in the United States," in Towards a New Marxism: Proceedings of the First International Telos Conference, eds., Bart Grabl and Paul Piccone (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973), pp. 35-58; Paul Buhle, "Marxism in America" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975), passim.

[2]Ameringer, Communism, p. 2; Paul M. Sweezy et al., "The Influence of Marxian Economics on American Thought and Practice," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 456-460; Ameringer, Uncle Sam, p. 5; Ameringer, Bread, p. 47; Laidler, "Since 1848," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 70-73.

[3]Kipnis, Movement, pp. 110-121; Laidler, "Since 1848," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 71; Ameringer, Socialism, How, pp. 17-18; Ameringer, Primer, p. 6; Ameringer, Farmer, pp. 1, 23.

[4]Kipnis, Movement, pp. 115-117; Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 43-47; OL, 29 April 1922.

[5]Sweezy, "Marxian Economics," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 457; Ameringer, Dynamite, p. 11.

[6]Sweezy, "Marxian Economics," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 457; Laidler, "Since 1848," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 71; Ameringer, Uncle Sam, pp. 52-54; Ameringer, Primer, p. 18; OP, 26 January and 9 January 1910.

[7]OL, 7 February 1922: IM, 19 February 1927; AG, 8 March 1940.

[8]Sweezy, "Marxian Economics," pp. 457-459.

[9]Ibid., pp. 458-460; Ameringer, Uncle Sam, pp. 32-33; Ameringer, Primer, p. 16; Ameringer, Bread, p. 4; OL, 2 November 1921; Laidler, "Since 1948," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 70-73; Kipnis, Movement, pp. 117-118.

[10]Sweezy, "Marxian Economics," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 459; Ameringer, Primer, pp. 1-15; Ameringer, Bread, p. 50.

[11]Ameringer, Primer, pp. 16-17; Ameringer, Bread, p. 4; AG, 30 August 1935.

CHAPTER V

LEFT-WING ISSUES

While Marxist ideology clearly influenced Ameringer in his approach to economic concerns, he also demonstrated a left-wing bias on issues such as religion, violence, the Russian Revolution, war, and the land question. As a confirmed progressive, Ameringer remained critical of religion throughout his life. He encountered a strong Protestant evangelicalism in the Midwest that seemed incompatible with socialism. Although he never advocated violence as a method of social change, he excused it as an undesirable but inevitable side effect of progressive politics. Ameringer supported the Russian Revolution long after most of his colleagues had become disillusioned with its consequences. His view on war was more consistently Marxist than that of many other socialists of his day. A solution to the land question baffled all socialists in America, but Ameringer advocated eventual nationalization of the land and held this position with consistency.

Ameringer's belief in historical progress undergirded his view on many issues. He ignored the pessimism of the twentieth century and clung to a romantic belief in the goodness of mankind. During the First World War he testified to the paradox between faith and reality for a progressive. "Surely," he wrote, "there must be another destiny to two centuries of progress than self-inflicted death among the ruins of smouldering cities, and the stench of gory battlefields." While editing the Milwaukee Leader he expressed his optimism. The anti-socialist press charged that socialism

was dying in Milwaukee because the Party had lost ground in the 1914 election. Ameringer rejoined that socialism could not be killed and pointed to Otto von Bismarck's unsuccessful attempt to stamp out the German Social Democrats. He many times referred to European socialism as proof that class consciousness could not easily be destroyed. But as with many romantics, there was another side to Ameringer's view of progressive politics. Built into his ideology was an explanation for violence. Ameringer lived in a world that "moves onward and upward. Those who refuse to move with it are left behind. Those who throw themselves in the path are crushed to death." Part of Ameringer's faith was that capitalism would eventually destroy itself in the United States. He observed that "economic systems are only born to die. Men on their road to die give life to men who are their grave diggers."[1]

Ameringer's view of religion paralleled that of the early Leftists: religion enslaved the working class. Simply stated, in his heart Ameringer hated religion, but in order to recruit socialists, he had to soft-pedal his denunciations. Any radical who attempted to communicate atheistic Marxism to farmers in the Midwest confronted a deeply ingrained Protestant ideology and culture. Despite his convictions, Ameringer had to demonstrate that socialism and white Protestant Christianity were compatible in order to succeed. There was still room in 1914 for Christianity and socialism to achieve a compatibility in the minds of midwestern farmers. As Garin Burbank found in researching Oklahoma socialism, religion was the most disputed question in the socialist newspapers and at the socialist encampments. Farmers had not identified socialism with atheism in these pre-Russian Revolution days. Even in Oklahoma many Protestant ministers advocated Christian socialism from the pulpit.[2]

Nevertheless a growing tension did exist between the two ideologies. Officially the Socialist Party banned any discussion of religion, but Ameringer had great difficulty adhering to that policy. Ameringer's attacks on religion were a major theme running through all of his writings and reflected the importance of the issue in the minds of Midwesterners. He could never understand the attraction of the working class to emotional religion and found his attempts at re-education frustrating. Both in Wisconsin and Oklahoma, Ameringer had to continually address the issue and thus contributed to the growing tension. As one socialist of the Oklahoma party wrote, undoubtedly referring to Ameringer, "the Socialist party has been too long dominated by the atheist, [and] there are more people being kept out of the party by free love and atheism than any other cause."[3]

Ameringer changed his view on religion little throughout his life. His critical attitude toward Christianity started with early confrontations with the village priest in Germany. The best source for his views in the 1910s was the National Rip-Saw, because this magazine allowed the Left to speak freely. Ameringer cooperated with Kate Richards O'Hare and Eugene Debs as editors and expressed his feelings on religion openly. While writing at the same time for the right-wing Milwaukee Leader or the Oklahoma Pioneer, Ameringer muffled his comments on the issue.

Ameringer presented a working-class view of Christianity whenever possible. The founder of that religion was a humble workingman who preached brotherhood and equality. He wanted to "fetch heaven out of the clouds," and condemned the rich as exploiters of the poor. Ameringer believed the evangelical view of the Fall was inconsistent with historical evolution. He noted that "those who go as far as proclaiming that man has fallen from the perfect state to a lower plain denies [sic] the very facts of life." He also believed that the rich used the church as a means of social control:

capitalist propaganda through the use of the pulpit taught the working class submissiveness, obedience, hard work, and fatalism. Preachers were the mouthpieces and apologists for the ruling class: their principal function consisted of keeping the "poor and oppressed from flying at the throats of their oppressors." He also saw religion as one of the strongest bulwarks of private property, which in turn restricted the growth of the working class and socialism. Even as late as 1940 Ameringer continued to attack religion with ridicule. He remembered the Protestants' insensitivity to the conditions of tenant farmers in Oklahoma. He described "smug, well-dressed, overly-fed hypocrites marching to church on the Sabbath, with Bibles under their arms, praying for God's kingdom on earth while fattening like latter-day cannibals on the share croppers [sic]."[4]

While rejecting religion, Ameringer also had to face the question of the use of violence to bring about social change. While Marx advocated violent revolution, few on the American Left thought it necessary in the United States. Both Daniel DeLeon and Eugene Debs felt that as long as there was universal suffrage the working class could bring about change peacefully. Consequently the American Left was closer to Bernstein's position on the use of violence. Ameringer's position on violence sometimes seemed contradictory; he was not so much an advocate of violence as an apologist for violence. Ameringer was ambivalent on the issue; he called himself a non-violent person but excused violence in retrospect. He de-emphasized the role of the individual in bringing about change. Revolutions did not come about because of a conspiracy of radicals: they were a minor part of the whole process. Revolutions were instead "spontaneous combustions" brought on by the breakdown of economic and political systems. He believed that revolutions occurred when the masses reached a point of desperation.[5]

The labor wars of the Midwest demonstrated this apology for violence masked behind a profession of pacifism. An incident that typified Ameringer's pacifism occurred during the Walton campaign for governor in 1922. The farmer-labor coalition suggested that Ameringer's name be placed on the ballot as Adjutant General for the State of Oklahoma. This officer called out the militia in a time of crisis. Ameringer protested that he could not serve in such a capacity because "Oscar is a pacifist, a Tolstoian non-resident, a vegetarian, and a total abstainer from moonshine and blood." Yet earlier, as editor of the Oklahoma Pioneer, Ameringer showed little inclination for pacifism. He warned state politicians that 50,000 socialists in the state were willing to use force if blacks and poor whites were disenfranchised. During the 1914 Ludlow Massacre in Colorado, Ameringer sympathized with the violent reaction of the miners led by the Industrial Workers of the World. Violence had become necessary, Ameringer felt, because mine operators closed all other avenues of protest. While working among the brewers of Milwaukee, Ameringer addressed the use of sabotage by the workers, "Sabotage? What does it mean? Why sabotage is putting soap in the beer." In 1922 Ameringer defended miners of Herrin, Illinois, who brutally massacred non-union men, strikebreakers and guards. He believed that these men were not responsible for their crimes; the responsibility lay with the men who allowed the conditions to exist.[6]

That Ameringer thought much on the issue of revolution became clear in his observations on the Russian Revolution. Consistent with his view on violence, Ameringer interpreted it as an event that came about by its own momentum; it was an "explosion of stomachs." During 1917 Ameringer enthusiastically hailed the event; it provided the first evidence for radicals that historical evolution led to the change of governments. It provided Ameringer with a model to emulate. He considered it the most

inspiring phenomenon of all history. In his enthusiasm for the event, Ameringer again became an apologist for the violence: it resulted from the environment surrounding the Russian conditions. He explained "that the Russian Revolution could take place without a great deal of violence would be the height of folly to assume. Revolutions are not Sunday school picnics."[7]

Even though Ameringer was an apologist for the Russian Revolution, he strongly opposed those radicals who wanted to spread the revolution to America. Lenin called for revolution in Europe and the United States based on the belief that the Russian Revolution would not survive unless revolutions occurred elsewhere. This policy split the American Socialist movement into those who supported the Russian policy and those who opposed it. The pro-Russian faction had by 1919 become dominated by recent immigrants from East Europe and Russia. They were organized in the foreign language federations and their membership composed 53 percent of the voting membership in the Socialist Party of America. Consequently, when Lenin sent out a call for revolution, the immigrants from the foreign language federations were the first to respond. To prevent their takeover of the Socialist Party, the Executive Committee expelled them. That action led to the creation of the Communist and Communist Labor parties. Ameringer, along with Debs and Berger, vainly attempted to persuade the Communist parties that capitalism had not died in America and that the United States was not ready for a revolution. Ameringer explained, consistent with his earlier view, that revolutions had to spring forth from the environment; they could not be imposed on a nation merely because the radical members of that society decided they should have one. He remembered that after the news of the call for revolution reached the United States, American radicals became blind to reality in their enthusiasm for revolution. Their reasoning

was rather simple: "Russia had a successful revolution. Let's have one over here." Ameringer responded with an equally ludicrous American analogy: "Florida raises oranges. Let's raise them in Minnesota!" In 1919, when the crisis within American socialism was at its height, Ameringer was in eastern Oklahoma raising money for the Oklahoma Leader. He wrote down his reaction to the doctrinal battles provoked by the Comintern which portended the destruction of socialism in America.[8]

> Sometimes I would stop on the side of the road and absorb the sundry, clarion calls for immediate revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Then my eyes would wander over the peaceful landscape with its farm homes, barns, and silos. In one field I could hear the distant rattle of a reaper. The smoke of the thresher clouded the deep blue sky. A row of wheat-laden wagons winded their way toward the town. And then I would say to myself, 'These men do not know America. They live in another world. They dream strange dreams.' And so they did. And of which did not prevent the smashing of our little party by the secession of the foreign elements.

Despite the effects of the Russian Revolution on the Socialist Party, Ameringer represented it in favorable light throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. That was possible because he was able to separate the revolution itself from the bad decisions made by the leaders of the revolution. In this view Ameringer sided with the Left. As Shannon found, all wings of the American Socialist Party hailed the Russian Revolution in its first months, but only the Left retained any enthusiasm for it after 1919. Upon Lenin's death in 1924, Ameringer wrote a favorable report of the Russian leader's contribution to the revolution. Ameringer maintained a deterministic view of the events but admitted that Lenin had contributed significantly toward keeping the violence under control after the event. Ameringer's continued admiration for the Soviet government and his refusal to countenence the reports of tyranny coming out of Russia mark his writing

in 1933. He praised Russia as being the only land with "no capitalists, landlords, usurers, privately-owned oil companies, salesmen, or hordes of middlemen skinning the farmers."[9]

Ameringer's attitude toward the Russian Revolution changed only in the late 1930s. He began criticizing the Russian Revolution for being the event which drove the Russian nation into dictatorship. More important to Ameringer's change of view was what happened to Germany in the 1930s. Out of the bitterness of the Versailles Treaty, economic stagnation, and fear of communism, Germany had degenerated into a fascist society. He believed that the Russian Revolution destroyed the social democratic movement in Germany; Adolf Hitler was able to use the fear of communism in his rise to power.[10]

On the issue of war, Ameringer, though labeled by historians a "right-wing socialist," was more consistently Marxist than many of his American and European comrades. The Marxist theory on war held that a capitalist economy had to expand in order to continue to exist. This in turn led capitalist economies to be imperialistic. Ultimately, when differing capitalist economies came into conflict over markets, the result was war. Prior to 1914, this was the official position of the American Socialist Party. But confronted by the reality of the conflict, many of its leaders began modifying their views on war. The leader of the Socialist Right, Victor Berger, had by 1916 shifted from his earlier antiwar position to one which simply favored American neutrality. Many of the Left socialists urged a change in the Party's antiwar posture when the newly formed Soviet Republic found itself under continued German attack late in 1917. Even Eugene Debs called for a re-evaluation of the St. Louis platform. By contrast, Ameringer never wavered from his earlier posture of condemning all wars, "just or unjust." He believed that history

demonstrated that war was "filthy and unsanitary and they never settled anything right or permanently or justly."[11]

To be sure, like Berger, a measure of Ameringer's disgust with the First World War had to do with his own sense of German nationalism. In the years following the conflict, his natural sympathy for his native homeland was frequently in evidence. Throughout the pages of the Oklahoma Leader and Illinois Miner Ameringer expressed support for a Germany struggling to recover from the First World War and later condemned the occupation of the Ruhr Valley by the French "imperialists." He evinced a similar attitude during the Second World War. Ameringer wrote his autobiography in 1940 as an antiwar book: not by a pacifist, but as a man who retained strong emotional ties with the German people. Freda Hogan Ameringer recalled that Oscar's last year, 1943, was a difficult one. He could hear the warplanes flying over his home in Oklahoma City: planes produced in defense plants nearby and destined for the destruction of Ameringer's native homeland. So Ameringer's Marxist opposition to all wars was reinforced by the coincidence of the United States fighting two wars against Germany.[12]

Nearer to home, there was the ever-abiding problem of the distribution of land, its ownership, and its use. Like any good socialist in the West, Ameringer had to address it. This was particularly true in Oklahoma where land had been opened for homestead for only a few decades. Yet by 1930, only thirty-eight percent of the farms in the state were operated by their owners.

Farm tenancy and its attendant ills had grown up in Oklahoma almost overnight, with poverty, ignorance, misery, and exhaustion of the soil as its results. Socialists never came to a consensus on what to do on this problem. Among the national party the factional lines concerning what position the

socialists should take crossed in a confusing pattern beginning as early as 1900. Some traditionally left wingers like A. M. Simons developed a Revisionist position which held that the Socialists should develop a farm program. But a number traditionally on the Right sided with the Left and argued for a rigid stand against the middle-class farmer. Until 1910 the Party officially stood for the nationalization of the land. Opposing the national Party's position were the southwestern socialists, who maintained that the small farms and businesses were not really capitalistic if they were owned and operated by producers who performed useful labor.[13]

Ameringer confronted the land question when first arriving in Oklahoma in 1907, and he possessed a typically unsympathetic left-wing view of the farmer. The farmers whom Ameringer had observed in Germany and Wisconsin influenced this attitude. He recalled the farmers of Germany as fat and content; the farmers of Wisconsin were convinced capitalists and interested in maintaining the status quo. They owned the means of production and had a great deal more to lose than their chains. But Ameringer changed his opinion of farmers upon touring areas in Oklahoma where farmers were predominantly tenants. He did not become a Revisionist as a result of this experience, but saw that these tenants had far more in common with an exploited proletariat than they had with the traditional image of the yeoman farmer. The miserable conditions of Oklahoma farm tenants helped him make the transition in his thinking. From his artist's perspective, Ameringer saw them as both economically and culturally impoverished; their shacks had neither flowers, pictures, music, or books. Ameringer estimated that there were fifty thousand such families in Oklahoma ready to respond to the socialist gospel. They provided him with his most satisfying audiences in his personal history of "riling people up."[14]

Although these conditions changed his view of the farmer, Ameringer did not alter his long-term goal that ultimately the land should be nationalized. He understood that landownership in the United States followed the pattern of industrialization in America; control of the means of production passed into fewer and fewer hands. But the result for farming was different than for industry. Instead of unemployment, the real problem with American agriculture was the increasing number of tenants. The farmer passed from being the owner of his farm to a "rent slave." Ameringer observed and began to capitalize upon a conflict between the tenant and landlord. He wrote the preamble to the Oklahoma Renter's Union charter and dedicated it to the emancipation of farmers and workers through "united class conscious organization." Ameringer insisted that farmers would realize the full fruits of their labor only when they followed the route taken by their brothers in the shops and mines.[15]

Ameringer nevertheless recognized that socialist action on the issue would be premature. He realized that although these farmers supported the socialists as a protest party, they would not support immediate collectivization of the land. Even if they were impoverished tenant farmers, they had not given up on the "American dream" of someday becoming landowners. Knowing this, Ameringer shifted his emphasis to "use and occupancy." This meant that any farmer who remained on his farm and worked it would retain the title to the land. He could pass it on to his children if they in turn worked the land. Ameringer's apparent compromise on the land question was a tactic to buy time. It allowed him to continue recruiting Oklahoma farmers; at the same time he hoped that through continued efforts at re-education, and with the inevitable collapse of the capitalist economy, the farmer himself would change. Ameringer believed that soon the

farmer would develop a sense of class consciousness, shed his traditional individualism, and champion cooperation as a way of life.[16]

Ameringer constantly confronted the land question when speaking before farm audiences in the state. The question they most frequently asked was whether the Socialists would take the land away from the farmer when they gained control of the state government. Ameringer did not express his radical views on this issue when face to face with a farm audience. He instead deflected the question by responding that the Socialists were not concerned with the "farmer who farms the farm." That response concealed his ultimate goal for the eventual collectivization of all land. At the same time, by emphasizing the evils of tenancy, he could keep angry farmers interested in their new-found protest party. By this formula, Ameringer believed that in a few generations all privately held land would become the property of the state. But in the meantime all land not owned and farmed by the same person should be taxed so heavily that the owner would voluntarily sell his property to the state. Through this method all land held by non-operating owners would quickly revert to the state. In the Ameringer plan, the state would then resettle the landless tenants on this newly acquired land. The settler would pay rent until the original price that the state paid for the land was reimbursed, at which time the settler would gain the right of occupancy. Should he decide to quit farming, the settler could sell the improvements on the land, "for these are the products of his labor." But the land itself would revert back to the commonwealth. All public lands would remain state property. In this manner, Ameringer could continue to work toward his earlier radical position on collectivization and at the same time reassure small farm owners that they could retain title to their farms. Moreover, this formula provided hope to the tenant farmer of obtaining a more equitable arrangement.[17]

In his analysis of the Oklahoma farm problem, Ameringer was sharply at odds with some of the subsequent authorities who have examined the question. James R. Green, for example, has asserted that Oklahoma farmers had achieved a "proletarian perspective" in the years before the First World War. Ameringer would have disagreed. According to his observations, the perspective of the farmer was a highly volatile quantity which shifted radically from good times to bad. He argued that the farmer's radicalism evaporated with the arrival of higher farm prices. Ameringer claimed that it was an "undisputed scientific fact" that changes in economic conditions resulted in changes in the mental attitudes of men. Conditions changed in Oklahoma. The sod house and the dugout disappeared from the western plains; in their places appeared pleasant farm houses and thriving towns. Ameringer also noted that the discovery of oil brought a tremendous change in outlook of the people. Ameringer noted that "everyone talked oil, speculated and gambled oil." He noted that the "oil fever" affected all strata of the population; there was no room left for the discussion of economic problems, except from the purely individualistic and capitalistic viewpoint. He also admitted that the lease and royalty money helped to solve the social problems for tens of thousands of farmers--Populists, Socialists, or whatever.[18]

That Ameringer consistently maintained many of his early leftist views is borne out by this examination of his position on religion, violence, the Russian Revolution, war, and the land question. Part of Ameringer's own religion was faith in the inevitable progress of man. Ameringer found progressive ideology incompatible with Protestant Christianity in the course of his tenure as a Socialist in the Midwest. His failure to deal with this deeply ingrained ideology frustrated much of his work. His progressive ideology also influenced the manner in which Ameringer viewed

violence. He could excuse much of the political violence in the world because it was determined by the environment. Consequently he became sympathetic to the Russian Revolution, even though he lamented its effect on American radicalism. Ameringer saw both World Wars as capitalist wars, and consequently he opposed both. Not all of Ameringer's left ideology was able to explain economic events in the United States. But he observed correctly that the farms were passing into the control of fewer and fewer hands while at the same time tenancy increased. He maintained much of his belief in left-wing solutions, such as nationalization, even if they could not be applied immediately. Ameringer's left-wing position demonstrated itself in further issues, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ameringer, Bread, p. 16; NRS, April, 1914; ML, 4 April and 6 April 1912.

[2]Burbank, Red, pp. 13-43.

[3]OP, 13 January 1912; ML, 6 April 1912.

[4]NRS, March 1914, December 1912, and June 1913; Ameringer, Weaken, p. 232.

[5]Ibid., p. 454; Quint, Origins, p. 148; Ginger, Binding Cross, p. 255; Laidler, "European Socialism" in Egbert, Socialism, I: 70-73; AG, 26 February 1937.

[6]OL, 10 August 1922; OP, 23 March 1910; NRS, July 1914; IM, 13 December 1924; ML, 25 April 1913; Coleman, Coal, pp. 112-114.

[7]AG, 26 February 1937, 25 November 1938; Ameringer, Bread, pp. 14-15; AG, 4 September 1931.

[8]Weinstein, Decline, pp. 179-177; Ameringer, Primer, p. 29; Ameringer, Bread, pp. 14-15; OL, 26 April 1922.

[9]Shannon, Party, p. 19; AG, 25 November 1938; IM, 2 February 1924; OL, 25 January 1924; Ameringer, Primer, p. 29.

[10]Ameringer, Bread, pp. 14-15; OL, 26 April 1922.

[11]Shannon, Party, pp. 82, 119-120; Weinstein, Decline, pp. 119-176; IM, 21 April 1928.

[12]IM, 5 January and 12 January 1924; IM, 6 January 1923; NRS, October 1914; Ameringer, Uncle Sam, p. 78; AG, 15 March 1940; Interview with Freda Hogan Ameringer, 7 November 1981, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

[13]Rosen, "Peasant Socialism," pp. 165-185; Kipnis, Movement, pp. 127-129, and Bell "Marxian Socialism," in Egbert, Socialism, I: 285, 292; Ameringer, Primer, pp. 31-34.

[14]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 232-267; OP, 1 June, 12 January, 16 May, 9 March, 5 November, 16 March, 19 January 1910.

[15]Ameringer, Primer, pp. 21-29; Ameringer, Farmer, pp. 13-27; Raymond and Charlotte Koch, Educational Commune: The Story of Commonwealth College, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972) p. 110; Green, Grass-Roots, pp. 79-86.

[16]Ameringer, _Farmer_, _passim_; Burbank, _Red_, pp. 44-68.

[17]Ameringer, _Weaken_, pp. 232-233; _IM_, 21 April 1928; Ameringer, _Uncle Sam_, p. 78; _NRS_, November 1914; _OL_, 7 February 1922; _IM_, 19 February 1927; _AG_, 8 March 1940; _OP_, 12 January and 16 May 1910.

[18]Green, _Grass-Roots_, pp. xx-xxi; Ameringer, _Primer_, p. 28; _OL_, p. 27.

CHAPTER VI

PRAGMATIC RADICAL

As time progressed and radical movements in the Midwest disappeared, Ameringer adopted a pragmatism that permitted him to remain as a voice for radicalism many years longer than most of his old socialist comrades. He continued to write that socialism could be established in the United States through the triangular combination of labor unions, the political organization of labor, and cooperation. By examining these ideas it is possible to show how Ameringer continued to see the world as a leftist and at the same time seek to find a practical way to establish a cooperative commonwealth.[1]

Ameringer believed that labor unions were the first institutions in which to begin organizing the working class. In order to do that, socialists had to organize in a fashion that would build the largest basis possible among working people; Ameringer therefore supported industrial unionism. On the issue of trade unions there has been little disagreement among historians that Ameringer took a leftist position. That issue was the main axis around which the major factional groupings in the Socialist Party revolved. In socialist ideology, trade unions and the Socialist Party worked together as part of the "class struggle." The unions worked in the economic field for higher wages and better working conditions. The Party supplemented the union work in the political field, fighting for workers' rights through the use of the ballot. The Left worked toward changing the economic system so that the worker would receive a return on everything he produced, not

merely a higher wage. Although the Left never believed in reformism, they did hold that in the process of agitation, reform legislation would inevitably be passed for the benefit of labor--a way station toward the ultimate goal of a new society. The Right, on the other hand, directed its attention toward reform as a goal in itself: sick benefits, old age pensions, and accident and unemployment insurance for labor.[2]

Ameringer's struggle for industrial unionism went far beyond a mere discussion of the relative merits of craft or industrial unions. He opposed anything that hindered the development of unions among the masses, whether it be craft unionism, labor politicians, or other radicals. By craft unions Ameringer meant organizing unions along the lines of the craft instead of uniting all working men in one big union. His first battles with craft unionism began during the jurisdictional fight between the AFL and the Brewery Worker's Union in 1907. As editor of the Labor World, Ameringer wrote an editorial entitled "Union Scabs--and Others" and expressed the frustration of many labor organizers dedicated to furthering unionism. This piece stood as an early manifesto from the Left exposing the contradictions of craft unions. In the editorial Ameringer confessed that he understood and could deal with the professional or amateur strikebreaker: the first was a highly paid, competent worker in the employ of strikebreaking or detective agencies; the latter class consisted of riffraff, slum dwellers, rubes, imbeciles, and college students. But Ameringer believed that a "union scab", the lowest type of strikebreaker, was the inevitable offspring of craft unionism. The problem was one of education; Ameringer believed that craft unionists genuinely did not understand that crossing the picket line of another craft union was strike breaking.[3]

Ameringer explained the problem by recalling a bitterly fought strike by a molders' craft union. A usual practice of striking union members was

to assemble at the plant exit at the end of the working day and harass the strikebreakers as they passed through the gate with "insults, brick-bats, and rotten eggs." Ameringer remembered that during the incident a union official frantically pointed out that the striking molders were injuring as many craft unionists coming out of the gate as they were strike-breakers. With that illustration, Ameringer pointed out the contradictions of craft unionism. Both union and non-union men were scabs; the only difference was that one carried a union card and the other did not. This editorial was so popular that the Brewery Worker's Union invited Ameringer to New Orleans to participate in settling the jurisdictional dispute. Later the Industrial Workers of the World, most radical of all unions of the time, agreed with Ameringer's ideas and published the editorial in pamphlet form for wider distribution.[4]

Even after his socialist phase, Ameringer continued his opposition to craft unionism. Only when American unions worked toward the organization of all industries would radicals gain enough strength to be represented in government. Craft unions which promoted the selfish interests of the labor elite limited that effort. Ameringer believed that the creation of broadly based industrial unions would stimulate the growth of the union movement in America and develop a greater solidarity of labor. Ultimately it would foster a political movement in order to insure the progress towards socialism. He stood by that conviction even when it was unpopular. In 1922 Ameringer opposed a unity conference called by the AFL. He refused to believe that there could be any compromise between the two opposing views of labor organizations. In response to the call for unity Ameringer pointed out the poor record of the craft unions in the United States in organizing working men, basing his evaluations on European models. He felt that their five million members was a pitiful showing compared to

the British Labor Party, which had organized the working class sufficiently to be represented in the British Parliament. During the period when the Congress of Industrial Organizations became identified with bloodshed and conflict during the 1930s, Ameringer used the American Guardian to champion their cause, because he believed that only industrial unions were capable of "preventing industrial capitalism from dragging all of us into hell."[5]

As a labor radical, Ameringer learned that craft unions were only one of the enemies of a united labor movement. Politicians elected in the name of labor who did not support its programs while in office were also a hindrance to progress. In 1910, during the streetcar strike in Oklahoma City, Ameringer illustrated what he meant by the "pseudo-labor politician:" Theodore Rossevelt carried a union card but broke a strike at Groton Dam; William McKinley campaigned as a friend of labor but crushed the Coeur d'Alene strike; Grover Cleveland, "friend of labor," stifled the strike in the coal fields of Oklahoma. Finally, Governor Lee Cruce of Oklahoma brought the militia into Oklahoma City to break the street car strike that was central to Ameringer's mayoralty campaign. So strongly did Ameringer feel that government and politicans were a hindrance to the development of industrial unionism, he made it the theme of his pamphlet entitled Life and Deeds of Uncle Sam. There he charged that the United States Government itself was a major obstacle to the progress of the American labor movement. According to Ameringer, the "capitalist masters" manipulated the government to suppress the strikers by using police, army militia, and injunction illegally and without regard to the millions of its citizens who made up the working class.[6]

Craft unionism and "pseudo-labor politicians" were only part of the problem of building strong industrial unions. Ameringer also believed that big union bosses like Samuel Gompers and John L. Lewis had destroyed the

broad-based participation necessary for an industrial union by their authoritarian organization under a one-man rule. As editor of the Oklahoma Leader and the Illinois Miner, Ameringer engaged in a running battle throughout the 1920s on behalf of the Kansas and Illinois United Mine Workers against the central control exercised by Lewis. Ameringer wrote that "Lewis seemed to me to give every indication of suffering from a rule-or-ruin complex." Ameringer helped organize the Illinois UMW in a rank and file rebellion that would eventually lead to his dismissal as editor and publisher of the Illinois Miner. When a similar situation developed in Kansas, Ameringer used the pages of the Oklahoma Leader to aid Kansas UMW President Alex Howat in resisting the Lewis organization. In 1921 the Kansas miners decided to strike for better conditions regardless of an industrial court law forbidding strikes. As a result of this action, the courts jailed Howat. Lewis used the opportunity to attempt to gain control of the Kansas union. Ameringer visited Howat in jail in Augusta, Kansas, and found him without a voice to speak to union membership because he was censured by both the national UMW and the courts. Ameringer took it upon himself to fight for the independence of the Kansas unions, toured Kansas on Howat's behalf, and used the Oklahoma Leader as Howat's advocate in his fight against Lewis. Later in 1929 Ameringer also aided the Illinois miners in a new rebellion against Lewis.[7]

Even though Ameringer sided with the more radical element on many issues, he was quick to censure their actions when their radicalism hindered the growth of the American union movement. Ameringer leveled criticism against the Communists in 1928 when they gained control of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. He observed that this union was nearly ruined before the "reds were ousted." Ameringer saw this attempt as a duplication of effort; like the craft unions, instead of united the working class, they

split it further. He criticized the Communists for everlastingly shouting "organize the unorganized" while in fact they were "disorganizing the organized." Ameringer showed little sympathy for the anarchists in the movement. While opposing the system of capitalism, Ameringer was not in sympathy with those who wanted to destroy the coal mine operators. He described a young writer hired to join the staff of the Illinois Miner, who upon arriving, went to Illinois UMW President Frank Farrington and inquired as to how he could help put the coal operators out of business. Ameringer wrote that he felt sorry for that young man, who had simply accepted on faith the prevalent delusion of his eastern radical friends "to the effect that coal diggers rejoice in blowing up the mine operators who gave them their living."[8]

Unlike Ameringer's radical stance on trade unionism, his position on the use of political organizations by labor was less clear. On the one hand, he sided with the Left and devoted himself to tactics aimed at winning electoral majorities at all government levels so that socialism could be inaugurated after the working class had gained complete victory. But on the crucial question of how to bring about the new social order, Ameringer wavered and showed himself the practical man which radical events forced him to be. He adapted his ideology to fit the changing opportunities. Both the Right and the Left of the Socialist Party devoted their time and energy to convincing the American people they should vote the Socialist ticket. But the Left had no illusions about reforming the capitalist society from within. They maintained that only when the entire country had been won for the working class could the gradual inauguration of cooperation and true public ownership begin. The Right, however, developed what its critics called "water and sewer socialism." They held to a belief in the evolutionary nature of social change and consequently supported reforms in

municipalities aimed at improving services such as the water and sewer systems. The Right reflected Berger's view that socialism was "partially here now, and more of it was coming every day." They considered improving services to a community as moving it closer to the inauguration of socialism.[9]

Ameringer's ideology underwent a number of changes in the course of his career. These have given historians a confused picture of where he actually stood. His autobiography did not emphasize his close association with extreme radicals. Before association with the Berger organization in Wisconsin in 1907, Ameringer was known as a "Debs kind of socialist, a fighter for the poor and oppressed." According to Len DeCaux, who worked with Ameringer on the Illinois Miner, he expressed little interest in reformism. During that early period, Ameringer freely associated with the radical Left of the party and openly sympathized with the IWW. In association with the radical Covington Hall during the jurisdictional strike in New Orleans, Ameringer advocated bringing organizers into New Orleans and making it an IWW city. In these early street battles, he saw the futility of the right-wing policies of craft unionism and reformism.[10]

Only after leaving for Oklahoma did Ameringer seem to move closer to Berger's views. If Ameringer adopted a reformist attitude, it came about during the period between 1907 and 1915 as he lost the battles with the AFL in New Orleans and gained the friendship of Victor Berger. At thirty-four years of age and with a family in Wisconsin to support, Ameringer never wavered in his loyalty to Berger even after becoming disillusioned with his politics.

Ameringer described his relationship with Berger as something far deeper than that of mere political ally. Berger found a popular orator, campaigner, fund-raiser, and organizer in Ameringer. Berger provided a

framework within which Ameringer could expend his boundless energy and still meet the everyday needs of family support. In his autobiography Ameringer wrote, "We love each other as did Damon and Pythias, or David and Jonathan." During election campaigns Berger found Ameringer a good campaigner among the working-class bars in Milwaukee. While Ameringer enjoyed rubbing shoulders with the men he planned to emancipate, Berger remained aloof; he preferred to put Ameringer in the streets. While working for Berger in Milwaukee and later while campaigning for the Oklahoma party, Ameringer adhered to the party line expressed by the Right. This apparent yielding in the area of ideology was not a contradiction in Ameringer's mind; he believed that party unity was more important than ideological purity. The reality of the situation dictated that he work toward his goals within a party structure that he did not necessarily agree with. His relationship with Berger was a profitable one, for his friend was primarily responsible for Ameringer gaining a position of leadership in the Oklahoma Party. Under his right-wing party discipline Ameringer was less likely to express his own opinion. Berger's favorite phrase about socialism "coming every day" appeared frequently in Ameringer's editorials in the Oklahoma Pioneer. Ameringer worked to bring about the decentralized Oklahoma locals under the control of the central party in Oklahoma City as Berger had one in Wisconsin.[11]

By 1915, however, Ameringer was again allowing his earlier views to surface. By this time he had published six pamphlets that were widely circulated, and his position among radicals was increasingly recognized. Also his expulsion from the Oklahoma Party disillusioned him about the future advisability of a reformist approach, and the conservative socialist victories in Wisconsin demonstrated to him that the voters were supporting the Socialist Party because they had a better platform, not because they

were converting to its ideology. Ameringer noted that the Socialists captured the offices but failed to convince the people of the necessity for structural change. To capture a city for socialism meant to Ameringer that they would have to convince the majority of citizens that they wanted "the revolutionary kernel; the revolution must be reflected in the brains of the workers."[12]

An interesting example of this expression of his earlier leftist views appeared in the pamphlet Socialism: What It Is and How To Get It. The Political Action Committee of Milwaukee published the pamphlet; these Milwaukee socialists were the strongest advocates of "water and sewer socialism." Yet in the pamphlet Ameringer boldly proclaimed that "municipal and state ownership is not socialism." He agreed with the Left that even state-owned railroads and state monopolies exploited the working people. In order that the masses receive the full benefit of social ownership, "it is necessary that the state itself belong to the people." He thereupon demanded that the government be transformed into a government of the people. In this same pamphlet he sided with the Left on the manner in which socialism should be implemented in the United States. The Left believed that the only solution to the problem of monopolies was to confiscate them. In order for the Socialist Party to dismantle the great trusts like the railroads and oil companies, they would have to control the United States Congress. After gaining control of the government, Ameringer suggested immediately offering John D. Rockefeller a price for Standard Oil with the threat that if he did not sell, the government would shut down the oil business. Again, consistent with his view on the use of force, Ameringer believed that a peaceful transfer was preferable to outright confiscation. Ameringer reasoned that as economics primarily motivated Rocefeller, he would sell. But in nationalizing the railroads

Ameringer did not believe that the owners should be compensated, reasoning that the railroads had never cost the owners anything, since they had received millions of acres of free land. He proposed that the government run the railroads exactly as it would a bankrupt corporation in receivership.[13]

The split of the Communist parties from the Socialist Party in 1919 dramatically altered Ameringer's ideas regarding politics, and he again sought answers to problems posed by a fractured movement from the radical parties developing in Europe. While he refused to follow his extreme leftist colleagues into the Communist parties, he also believed that the Socialist Party had ceased to be the party of the working class. By the early 1920s Ameringer began to look to the British Labor Party as an example of how trade unions could develop a strong political party. Although he did not become a Fabian socialist, he increasingly looked to England as a champion of the world's working-class movements as Russia and Germany turned into dictatorships in the 1920s and 1930s.[14]

By observing the British Labor Party, Ameringer felt he understood why American radicals failed to move from the organization of industrial unions to the organization of a party. He explained that the "inevitable" movement toward socialism had not developed to the point where the socialists could capture the government. The American radicals, unwilling to wait, destroyed the movement by prematurely pushing for revolution and by refusing to cooperate with each other. Using the British Labor Party as an example, he explained that preliminary to the English victory were years of patient educational work. Ameringer believed that the British party, contrary to the American radicals, learned the great truth that "working class solidarity was more essential than fine-spun theories." The American party, Ameringer regretted, was so afflicted with the "no fusion, no

political trading bacillus" that they refused to cooperate or compromise with the working class it pretended to represent. As a result, Ameringer believed that the socialists had isolated themselves into the status of "cults or sects." The major issue in bringing about change was whether the party represented the working class, not purity of doctrine. Ameringer favored the balance of the British party, which without disgarding its Marxian spirit, aimed toward the socialization of industry.[15]

Ameringer became so disillusioned with the Socialist Party that in 1922 he supported the farmer-labor coalition of the Democratic Party and criticized the Socialists in the pages of the Oklahoma Leader. At the Conference for Progressive Political Action, Morris Hillquit had expressed reservations about cooperating with the farmer-labor coalition. Ameringer took the side of the coalition against the Socialists and expressed regrets that the Socialists were not willing to work with other radicals. Ameringer continued to be disappointed with the socialists in America for the rest of his life. During the 1930s Ameringer spent much of his time in a campaign he called the Production-for-Use campaign and claimed that it, rather than the Socialist Party, was the only progressive movement capable of capturing the imagination and adherence of the masses. His major theme was that want and hunger in America could be abolished if the productive forces of the United States could be used to supply the needs of its citizens and not for "pirating" foreign markets. Ameringer wrote in the American Guardian that he would support Norman Thomas for president but also advised his readers that Thomas could not win. It was Siegfried Ameringer, Oscar's son, who appeared on the committee to re-organize the Socialist Party in the Sooner State; Oscar had little hope that the Socialists would be the force to bring about the new economic order.[16]

The theme of cooperation wove together much of Ameringer's ideology in his pamphlets and newspapers; he very much wanted to see the incorporation of his vision of the cooperative commonwealth in his lifetime. This vision was most profoundly influenced by Edward Bellamy, whose views as expressed in Looking Backward did not sharply diverge from those of the early Leftists. To these prophets, the cooperative commonwealth was a world evolved from industrial capitalism, competition, profit-seeking, toilers, and exploiters to one of cooperation, social-leveling, common ownership, happiness, and every man for himself in accordance with his natural aptitude. The theorists of the Left believed that when the working class won control of the government through an electoral victory, the socialist revolution would establish the cooperative commonwealth. In the pamphlet Communism, Socialism, and the Church, Ameringer compared his idea of the commonwealth with the vision early Christians had of the Kingdom of God, except that the socialists looked to the immediate future for the realization of their hopes. Part of that view was empirical: he observed in real life that in times of crisis, misery, and poverty, man sought comfort in universal brotherhood and communism.[17]

But Ameringer's vision encompassed more than utopian dreams. It included encouraging cooperation among farmers, urban workers, and miners. Throughout his three decades as editor of radical newspapers, Ameringer published editorials and feature articles on cooperation. In 1910 he advised Oklahoma Socialists that cooperation among radicals was an intermediate step between capitalism and socialism. He encouraged fellow socialists to engage in cooperative ventures. In response to this challenge Carter County socialists rented twenty acres to be worked cooperatively for growing cotton and estimated that "it should yield 150 to 200 dollars at current prices." Mannsville soon followed with a nineteen-acre

patch, and five other locals followed suit. Additionally, Ameringer advocated coops encompassing banking, insurance, education, and marketing. He believed that cooperatives were revolutionary in that they struck at the very root of capitalism because they supplanted industry for profit with industry for service. In a 1924 editorial in the Illinois Miner Ameringer conceded that capitalism did not seem to be digging its own grave. Nevertheless he encouraged miners to seek a cooperative way of life. He told them that people would get nearer to the cooperative commonwealth in cooperative efforts of an economic nature. In a 1936 article in the American Guardian, he advocated cooperation even when it did not seem profitable. He wrote that all classes of American society needed to come to the realization that the profit system could not go on; they should adopt cooperation through intellectual conviction, deep sympathy, or inherent idealism.[18]

For cooperation to be implemented in an industrial society, Ameringer believed, society would have to revert to an economic arrangement similiar to that of the pre-industrial age, where the owner and manager of the means of production would be the same. In the new order Ameringer proposed that all society be organized around economic units or industries. For example, Ameringer wanted to create a food trust for all farmers, millers, and meatpackers to create a cooperative system for the production and distribution of food. Likewise, large corporations like Standard Oil would be changed into a commonwealth of oil with all dividends and profits distributed equally among the owner-operators.[19]

In the early 1920s Ameringer founded what he believed to be the first cooperative political organization in American radicalism--a movement more consistent with the teachings of Marx than others in the United States. The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League, which he organized at the Shawnee

Convention of 1921, was designed to be a working-class institution that had the potential of duplicating in the United States the success of the British Labor Party. It was composed of representatives from all labor groups in the state, including the Farmer's Union, the State Federation of Labor, the United Mine Workers, the Farmer-Labor Union, and some of the railroad brotherhoods. This 1921 version of a cooperative league stood in sharp contrast to Berger's philosophy. Berger had ruled that the Socialists of Wisconsin should not cooperate with other radical groups. Ameringer explained that Berger had adopted the position of Karl Liebknecht, who in the 1890s, had barred the Social Democrats from cooperating with any other political party in Germany. But the German Marxist later conceded he had made a mistake, revised that policy and repudiated the idea of non-cooperation. Ameringer criticized the right wing for not following the German party's example in its stubborn adherence to a non-cooperative stance.[20]

Unlike most radicals of his day, Ameringer was not satisfied merely to offer a nebulous vision of the future. He sought to establish in practical and realistic terms a model for the cooperative society. One of the last passions of his life was his effort to create a 5500-acre subsistence homestead in the Mississippi Delta where the Illinois miners might retire. Ameringer saw an opportunity to make a reality of his belief that unions, together with the consumer cooperatives and farm organizations, could create a new democratic culture for western industrial civilization. The idea of a colony took a number of years to develop and underwent changes as it progressed. In 1926 Ameringer conceived of a plan to settle unemployed coal miners on an agricultural community. The UMW had over 50 percent of its miners unemployed. Ameringer convinced the Illinois UMW

to make a $10,000 downpayment on a tract of jungle in the Mississippi Delta, leaving a net debt of $50,000. Problems began to hinder the project. In 1927 a flood submerged the entire project under water. The same year the Illinois miners got into a six-month strike which drained the Illinois UMW of funds, and they were unable to continue contributing to Ameringer's project. Furthermore, John L. Lewis won the fight for control of the Illinois UMW in 1929 and wanted nothing to do with Ameringer's cooperative plans. Finally, the financial crash of 1929 further hindered development of the colony. Ameringer's strong conviction on cooperation nevertheless overcame the obstacles, and he pressed the enterprise forward He did succeed in resettling some unemployed miners in 1929 but eventually had to finance the project by selling plots of land to individual farmers. Ameringer continued this project on his own for twelve years. He described the colony in 1938 as a "smiling valley dotted with white painted cottages, flower beds, vegetable gardens, surrounded by luxurious fields of corn, hogs and steers for meat, chickens for eggs, and a three-room schoolhouse."[21]

Ameringer's only regret was that he failed to make the project truly cooperative farming. Originally each settler was to own his own land but cooperate in the tillage of the soil. Unfortunately, the capital necessary for tractor stations and processing plants was not available during the Depression. He still argued that the ultimate solution to the land problem was that of use and occupancy and dreamed that someday the privately owned plots would truly conform to his ideal of a cooperative commonwealth.[22]

Ameringer's left-wing views changed little during his lifetime, but he did alter the manner in which he applied those views. He tried to bring about a vision of the cooperative commonwealth by organizing the working

class into industrial unions and the building of a labor party in the United States. His lifelong campaign against craft unions, powerful labor leaders, and anarchists can be understood only as a reflection of Ameringer's attempt to build a broadly based labor movement. He understood that socialism would come through the working class and that it had to be organized in a manner that would encompass the largest numbers. Ameringer was not a reformist like many on the Right, but instead saw the labor parties as an instrument to educate the people about socialism so that eventually they could control the government. A major theme reoccurring in Ameringer's works is his dream of cooperation among the working class. He encouraged it wherever he found it. Unlike most radicals of his day, Ameringer attempted to bring into reality his dream of a cooperative commonwealth in the Louisiana Delta. To demonstrate that cooperation was workable was for him an opportunity to strike a blow at capitalism.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ameringer, Weaken, p. 188; McAlister Coleman, "Oscar Ameringer Never Weakened," Nation (New York), November 27, 1943, p. 609; OP, 12 January 1910.

[2]Green, Grass-Roots, pp. 36-37; Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," pp. 81-82; Kipnis, Movement, pp. 188, 123-126; Bell, "Marxian Socialism," p. 275.

[3]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 189-192; Ameringer, Union Scabs, passim.

[4]Ibid.

[5]OL, 29 March 1922; Ameringer, Bread, p. 12.

[6]OP, 22 April 1910; Ameringer, Uncle Sam, p. 53.

[7]Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 221, 426; IM, 13 December 1924; Coleman, Coal, pp. 105, 114; Green, Grass-Roots, p. 409; OL, 6 December 1921 and 3 March, 9 March, and 21 April 1922.

[8]IM, 26 October 1928, Ameringer, Weaken, pp. 410-411.

[9]Kipnis, Movement, pp. 118-119.

[10]DeCaux, Labor Radical, p. 130; Hall, "Labor Struggles," pp. 51-52.

[11]Ameringer, Weaken, p. 393; Sally M. Miller, Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism, 1910-1920 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 23; Meredith, "Oklahoma Socialism," pp. 70-71, 83; OP, 2 March 1910; Burbank, Red, pp. 100-101.

[12]Oscar Ameringer, "Go Easy," Wisconsin Comrade 3(May 1915): 1.

[13]Ameringer, Socialism How, pp. 30-31.

[14]Shannon, Socialist Party, pp. 126-149, 168; Roland N. Stromberg, An Intellectual History of Modern Europe (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966), pp. 313-314.

[15]OP, 5 November 1910; OL, 19 April and 26 April 1922; IM, 13 December 1924 and 15 June 1929.

[16]OL, 11 April 1922; AG, 4 September 1936 and 3 July 1931; Shannon, Socialist Party, pp. 215-216.

[17]Bellamy, Backward, pp. 1-5; Kipnis, Movement, p. 112; Ameringer, Church, pp. 4, 19-20.

[18]OP, 3 February 1910; OL, 10 January 1922; OP, 16 February and 16 March 1910; OL, 10 January 1922, 13 December 1924; IM, 13 December 1924; AG, 4 September 1936.

[19]Ameringer, Primer, pp. 31-34.

[20]OL, 29 April, 18 April, and 10 January 1922.

[21]Ameringer, Weaken, p. 431, Coleman, "Never Weakened," pp. 608-609; Coleman, Coal, pp. 154-155, 287; AG, 21 October 1938.

[22]Ibid.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

A biographical sketch and an ideological analysis of Oscar Ameringer provide an opportunity to correct the traditional view that he was a right-wing socialist. That Ameringer would begin his career as a leftist and moderate his views towards the end of his life can be explained as the result of the changing nature of American radicalism itself. Contrary to many of the European movements, the radical causes that Ameringer committed himself to would eventually fail. As a consequence, and for practical reasons, Ameringer joined forces with the Right and later with the farmer-labor groups but maintained his leftist "world view." Throughout the three decades Ameringer attempted to implement that view, he maintained a surprising degree of consistency.

Historians have yet to come to a consensus in explaining the rise and fall of American radicalism. Ameringer would have agreed that the Russian Revolution and its impact on American society marked the beginning of the end. Not long after the event, Ameringer noted that in Oklahoma atheism and anarchy were increasingly associated with socialism. Although the seeds for the reaction against socialism had existed before the Russian Revolution, only afterwards did socialism become an unacceptable movement to most Americans.

A sketch of Ameringer's life shows that he had developed an early disposition toward radicalism even before immigrating to the United States. But it was only later, with his exposure to the Marxism of the German

Social Democrats that Ameringer found an ideology and a framework by which to comprehend the conflict he witnessed in American society. The European socialist movements also provided a model and a guide. Ameringer invoked the example of his European counterparts often in the years when there seemed to be no interest in socialism in America. Perhaps it was his experience as a European immigrant that provided the resolve to continue on when many of his comrades had fallen by the wayside; he saw radicalism from a European perspective.

To prove that Ameringer was more Marxist than Revisionist is difficult, given the nature of American Marxism. However, an analysis of his economics demonstrates that Ameringer did utilize many of the ideas of Marx and disagreed with those of Bernstein. His view that economic forces were the underlying causes for human action never changed. He also tried to explain the effect of industrialization on American society in terms of class conflict. Other favorite concepts were the labor theory of value and the contradictions of capitalism in American society.

Ameringer assumed a clearly leftist position on the issues of religion, violence, the Russian Revolution, war, and the land question. He was militantly atheistic and believed that religion was a tool of the capitalists. Contrary to some of his own statements, Ameringer was not a pacifist; rather he sympathized with violence when it was a result of the working class reacting to the oppression of the capitalists. Ameringer took the position of a pacifist only when the issue of the world wars arose. He opposed all capitalist wars. Consistent with his view of violence, he supported the Russian Revolution many years after most of his comrades had turned against it. The land question posed a problem for Ameringer, since he believed that all means of production should be nationalized, including the land. But he also understood that farmers of the

Midwest were not ready for collectivization. Therefore Ameringer advocated "use and occupancy" as a method to keep farmers in the socialist movement and at the same time allow them time to shed their traditional individualism and adopt cooperation.

Finally, Ameringer was a leftist in his view of how socialism should be implemented. He held fast to his conviction that socialism would come about because of a triangular combination of labor unions, political organizations of labor, and cooperation. He never altered his strong support of industrial unionism. To Ameringer, labor unions existed to organize and educate the working class. He believed that after industrial unions had established a strong basis in American society, the next step should be that of organizing them politically into a labor party. He had no illusions about the benefits of reformism but rather regarded their future labor party as an instrument for further education and a way to take over the government. Tying them all together was the necessary ideology of cooperation. Throughout his life, he was obsessed by the task of persuading the members of the working class to cooperate with each other. He worked for cooperation politically, economically, and socially. In the end, he was one of the few modern radicals to carry his ideas of cooperation into actuality by his creation of a colony for miners and farmers.

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VITA

O. James Hazlett

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: OSCAR AMERINGER AND AMERICAN SOCIALISM

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Norton, Kansas, October 30, 1947, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Vernie C. Hazlett.

Education: Graduated from Norton Community High School, Norton, Kansas, in May, 1965; received Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics from Kansas State University in 1969; received Master of Arts in History from Oklahoma State University in 1982.

Professional Experience: Lieutenant in the United States Army, 1970-1971; administrative manager, Bryan Manufacturing, 1973-1976; accounting manager, Telex Computer, 1977-1980.