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Newsletter

Wisconsin Labor History Society

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25th Annual Wisconsin Labor History Society Conference Highlights . . .



- **When Socialism set the agenda in Wisconsin ...** In one of his last presentations before his death, 93-year-old Frank Zeidler shared his views about the heritage in Wisconsin. (See Page 7)
- **Harvey Kaye, author of popular book on Thomas Paine, relates how words written 230 years ago affect us today.** (See Page 5)
- **Labor leaders reflect on state of progressive politics and labor movement today.** (See Page 10)
- **Paul Blackman, lifetime achievement award winner, challenges conference, calling for debate on future of labor.** (See Page 6)

Frank P. Zeidler (1912-2006)

We all owe Frank Zeidler so much for the inspiration he provided by being a political leader with unique honesty, integrity and commitment to service. Perhaps his death Friday, July 7, 2006, at age 93 will inspire future politicians to show the same spirit of community leadership that made Frank so beloved among us.

Frank Zeidler was a true friend of workers and their unions. Never did he shrug off a request from the Wisconsin Labor History Society for support of our efforts. In May, despite his fragile health, Frank Zeidler appeared at our May 7th commemoration of the Bay View Tragedy and gave his usual inspiring remarks. Then, less than a week later, he came to the Turner Hall to spend nearly an hour and one-half in an open panel discussion on Socialism and its roots in Milwaukee. Fortunately, we

have transcribed his remarks which helped to provide much perspective and insight into the progressive movement in Milwaukee. *(A CD is being produced that will contain that final session.)*

Frank Zeidler always believed in the labor movement to provide the power and ideas needed to build a progressive community. He helped to bring together into a lasting coalition Milwaukee's labor and religious community.

He was very much a part of the Labor History Society, allowing us to name a scholarship award in his name. He was a generous friend to our Society. **K. Germanson**
NOTE: Interested persons may make a contribution to the Scholarship Fund through the Society's Legacy Fund. See <http://www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org/contests.html>

8-Hour day marches of 1886 linked to immigrant marches of 2006 at Bay View event

Huge crowd attends 120th anniversary commemoration; Zeidler speaks

Though the Bay View Massacre occurred 120 years ago, it forms the background and inspiration for the ongoing struggles of the current day, such as the campaign to protect the rights of immigrants.

That was made clear by speakers at the 120th Anniversary Commemoration of the Bay View Tragedy, held on May 7th at the Bay View Rolling Mills Historical Marker Site on Milwaukee's lakefront. The commemoration was held at the site of the May 5, 1886 massacre where the State Militia fired upon some 1,500 workers marching on behalf of the eight-hour day, killing seven.

This year's commemoration was held just a few days after a massive rally in Milwaukee on behalf of the rights of immigrants, and the organizer of that event, Christine Neumann-Ortiz, as keynote speaker, linked this year's marches with those of 120 years ago.

Neumann-Ortiz, executive director of Voces de la Frontera, said the commemoration highlights "the martyrdom of Wisconsin's immigrant workers who gave their lives in the struggle for the eight-hour day so that future generations could live in dignity."

She said that now, 120 years later, immigrant workers are under attack as Congress considers pending legislation that would create a permanent criminalized underclass of workers and criminalize millions of US citizens for helping an immigrant.

"Despite these attacks, the tradition of the American labor



Neumann-Ortiz

She said: "They came despite potential retributions from employers, false rumors of widespread raids, and the threat of thunderstorms and rain. Old, young, and the handicapped joined thousands more in a two and a half mile long trek.

"They marched seeking immigration laws that reflect American values of family unity, worker rights, due process, and a path to citizenship."

"... Our hope for a better quality of life for future generations is tied to this struggle, and I have nothing but the utmost faith that we will prevail. Solidarity."

Doug Drake of the United Steelworkers, who emceed the event, introduced Neumann-Ortiz, calling her "a symbol of the invisible in our society." He said that "through her work, those who are normally invisible, the hotel maids,

the restaurant cooks, the dishwashers, those who toil in foundries and tanneries have become visible to everyone. Their contributions to society have become clear to all of us."

In his introductory remarks, he noted that this year's ceremony marked the 20th straight year in which persons have gathered to honor the seven persons killed by the State militia during a May 1886 March for the eight-hour day. Some 200 persons, including many labor and public officials,

Steelworkers Representative Doug Drake opened the 2006 Commemoration of the Bay View Tragedy.



attended this year's event. He outlined the events leading up to the May 5, 1886 tragedy, noting that the marching workers came from recent immigrant backgrounds and had joined together to begin to improve their horrendous working conditions of the day.

"And the tragic events of May 5, 1886 are something that we have to bear witness to and make sure that the world does not forget," he said. The event, he said, "ended the bloodiest labor disturbance in Wisconsin history and thus began a new chapter in an ongoing struggle for a more just and more humane workplace and economic and social justice in our society."

Subsequently, he said, workers throughout the world have celebrated May 1st as a "workers' holiday," commemorating the struggles of U.S. workers for the eight-hour day. This struggle continues today, realizing "the quest for justice is never over."

Always a popular speaker at the commemoration event,



In one of his last appearances, former Mayor Frank Zeidler outlined historical impact of event.

Former Mayor Frank Zeidler (who died two months later at age 93) recalled the 1886 event, noting that Gov. Jeremiah Rusk had assigned Colonel Treauer to lead the militia, a man who had Civil War experience and was used to ordering troops to fire upon other troops. It was clear that Treauer wouldn't be hesitant to issue an order to fire upon the marchers if they kept coming, he said.

The tragedy was part of a nationwide struggle of

workers, beginning in the 1870s, for better conditions. Workers labored 10 to 12 hours a day six days a week and they had to walk to work and it might take them an hour each way, and there wasn't much time to live. "Under those terrible conditions, naturally there was a concern to reduce the workday, but the resistance was great," he said. The newspapers of the day said businesses couldn't afford to reduce hours to eight, he added.

Even though the drive for the 8-hour day collapsed after the Massacre, the event stimulated progressive action that within two years elected a worker friendly Common Council and County Board. "They began a movement that brought many great benefits to the community," he said. Zeidler mentioned workers compensation, Social Security and other things that workers enjoy today came "as a



Jeanne Haase

result of that group."

He praised the work of the committee of the labor history society and other groups like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom as being the "building stones of world peace and world comity between people and also the improvements of the conditions of labor."

Jeanne Haase, of the Older Women's League and the Women's International League

for Peace and Freedom, discussed the historical perspective on the role of women and their contributions to the fight for justice, focusing on Jane Addams, famed for her Hull House work, and Helen Keller, who overcame twin handicaps of being blind and deaf.

"Too much of labor history has been omitted from the history books, and this includes two women, Jane Addams and Helen Keller."

"The truth is they did a lot more than what is popularly known," Haase said. "They fought valiantly for progressive causes; they were very concerned about the social and economic systems that were taking place in this country and they were champions of the working class."

Addams worked toward forming unions and coops as a way to assure people have a say in controlling their lives. She assisted in forming several unions for women, including one in the garment industry, lobbied for child labor laws, the eight-hour day and workers compensation, Haase said.

Helen Keller was "really a radical socialist," and this is

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Public officials present made brief remarks. They are (from left) State Rep. Christine Sinicki. County Supervisor Marina Dimitrejvic; State Rep. Jon Richards; State Rep. Fred Kessler and Milwaukee Alderman Tony Zielinski.

History books forget women

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omitted in most history books, she said. She was a life-long supporter of the labor movement, and even supported and joined some radical groups like the Industrial Workers of the world.

"History books have simply failed to tell us about that part of their lives," Hasse said. "Too many of these same texts have omitted facts about the labor movement and its courageous struggles. Our children need to hear these stories to better understand how their legacy came to be."

She urged the teaching of labor history and women's history in the schools.



Folksinger Larry Penn again led the group in labor songs. Shown in background are replicas of glags carried by workers in 1886.

Essay contest winners honored at conference

Two of the three top winners of the Wisconsin Labor History Society's 2005-2006 High School Essay Contest were present to receive their awards.

Paul Cigler, one of the WLHS Board members who judged the essay entries, said that the three winners' essays fit the criteria of the contest, and said all of them were "family histories [that] reflected strong connections of the families to the unions."

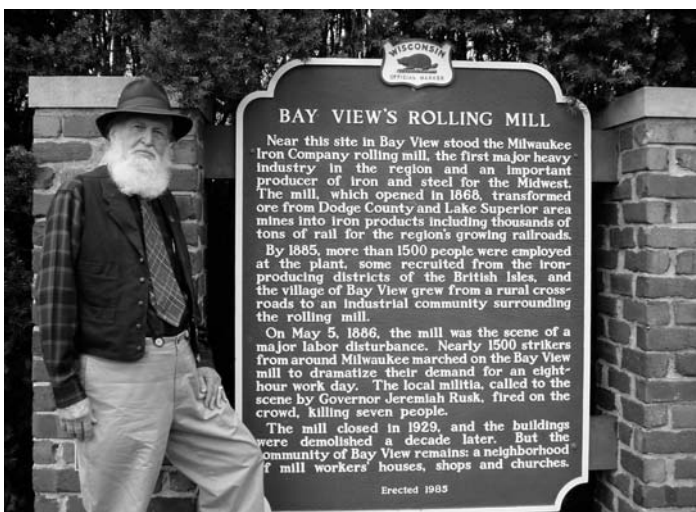
The first place winner, Maria D. Zauner, a 10th grader at Port Washington High School, thanked the Society for the award, and said she learned from the experience that "hard work really does pay off." She thanked her family, many of whom attended, for passing down the value of pride and honesty to her. She also thanked the members of Ironworkers Local 8, the local of her "grandpa Dave" and "uncle Larry," for providing the history of the local and its impact on her family.



The local's business representative, Dave Coates, presented her with a plaque for winning the essay and said there will be an honored spot for her on the local's

float in the 2006 Labor Day parade. (See Photo above)

Cigler presented the third place award to Courtney Ann Carreno (right), a senior from Beloit Memorial High School, who thanked the Society for the award and said she will be entering the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee to study nursing.



Utah Phillips visits Bay View Tragedy site

Famed folksinger Utah Phillips, in Milwaukee for a May performance at the Pabst Theater, asked local folksinger Larry Penn to take him to the site of the Bay View Massacre of May 5, 1886. Phillips posed before the historical marker site here, noting one of America's most important but often forgotten labor incidents.

Will Jones, UW prof, to WLHS Board

Will Jones, assistant professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was elected to the Board of the Wisconsin Labor History Society at its annual meeting in May. The current officers and other board members were re-elected. Jones has authored "The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African-American Workers in the Jim Crow South," and other studies.

Words of Paine stirred Revolutionists; make a theme for present day: Kaye

25th Annual
Conference
Report

Though it was 230 years ago that Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense* to help inspire the colonists to heroism in the Revolutionary War, his words still stir Americans today, Harvey Kaye said as he opened the 25th Annual Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society on May 13 at Milwaukee's Turner Hall.

Kaye, who is a professor of history at University of Wisconsin - Green Bay and a founder of the, said that Paine has remained "very powerfully engaged in the further development of American freedom, equality and democracy." He has authored "Thomas Paine and the Promise of America," published last year to high critical praise, in which he notes that Paine's influence has had a widespread and continuous impact on American policy.

Kaye noted that one of Paine's most memorable phrases, "These are the times that try men's souls," appeared in the darkest moments of the Revolutionary War, with George Washington and his troops literally shivering in the Christmas Eve cold along the Delaware River after a disastrous retreat from New York in the face of well-armed, well-trained British forces. Those words appeared in one of his "Crisis Papers" that he wrote during the War, and Washington ordered it read to his troops before their daring crossing of the Delaware on Christmas Eve 1776.

After the Revolutionary War, Kaye said Paine turned into an "inveterate champion of liberty, equality, and democracy." Paine's words in *The Rights of Man* contributed fundamentally to the formation of Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party (later to become the Democratic Party).

Among those finding inspiration for Paine's words, he said, were Utopians like Robert Owen and Fanny Wright, literary giants like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, and, it appears, even President Abraham Lincoln whose speeches show Paine's regard for "freedom and America's purpose and promise." Mark Twain, Kaye said, was "absolutely convinced that Paine was one of the most important men in history."

In the 19th Century battles against the corporate robber barons, key labor leaders found strength in Paine's life, he said. They included William Sylvis of the 1860s National Labor Union, Thomas Phillips of the 1880s Knights of Labor, and Eugene Debs of the 1890s American Railway Union.

Paine empowered American- and European-born alike. In the wake of the failed European Revolutions of 1848, liberal German refugees – like their British and Irish predeces-

sors – came to Paine's "asylum for mankind" hoping for the best, but prepared to continue the fight for the good society, Kaye said.

"And fight they did. Joining with native-born trade unionists and social democrats, they actively served in the campaign for the eight-hour day and improved living conditions for laboring people." Kaye added.

Paine's words were linked in with the struggles of the anarchists and other social activists of the late 19th Century, he said. Before his final sentencing, Haymarket martyr August Spies, an immigrant upholsterer, linked Paine to the struggles of the 1886 eight-hour day campaign.

As the nation faced the Great Depression, the words of Paine found their way into many popular works of art, particularly those with a social theme, Kaye said. They included the popular musical, "Pins and Needles," produced in 1937 by the Garment Workers Union; the "Ballad for Americans," an operatic telling of U. S. history that spotlighted Paine as one of those who had faith and courage to fight for liberty; and in John Steinbeck's book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which evoked Paine when speaking of the revolution to come.

During World War II, as this nation fought the fascist government of Germany and Japanese Imperialism, President Franklin D. Roosevelt pressed Paine into service, Kaye related, using Paine's "These are the times that try men's souls" remark and reminding the country how Washington used Paine to rally the troops during the darkest hours of the Revolutionary War.

Kaye said that currently there's a "sense that America's purpose and promise are in jeopardy. Yet, he said there has been an eagerness to "connect with Paine," even among conservatives who value his libertarianism. He said the conservatives are "poaching Paine's line's" when in fact their real ambitions and affections are for more conservative figures who have scorned history. Nonetheless, their use of Paine has heightened interest in him and his writings, Kaye said.

Kaye concluded: "Sadly, we seem to have lost the political courage, conviction, and confidence that once motivated our efforts." Nevertheless, Paine himself would assure us that the struggle to expand freedom, equality, and democracy will continue – for as he proudly observed, "There is too much common sense and independence in America to be long the dupe of any faction, foreign or domestic."

Award winner calls for 'debate' to improve fate of unions

Paul Blackman receives lifetime honor

The Wisconsin Labor History Society's 2006 Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to a longtime Milwaukee labor leader who was called "another legend in Milwaukee."

That legend, Paul Blackman, former president of Smith Steelworkers Local 19806, received the annual award from Sheila Cochran, secretary-treasurer of the Milwaukee County Labor Council and longtime member of UAW Local 438 at Delphi in Oak Creek.

Blackman acknowledged the award, and said the receipt of such a "lifetime" award would not end his participation in the affairs of the community.

Citing the U.S. Constitution, as it was created in 1789, it counted African-Americans as 3/5's of a person, which was changed at the completion of the Civil War. Today, the "quality index" for African-Americans is 73%, showing that the quality of life has only improved in 217 years by 13 percent. "This is a bad time for an African-American, born in America, to be living in Milwaukee," he said.

He said he was saddened to see how the members of his old local had had to accept the end of their local without much chance to change their fate. "The industrial workers of this union have become expendable along with the brothers and sisters all over this country. The only difference between industrial workers and the people of Katrina is that we are not in 6 feet of water."

Blackman said the unions have "failed to curtail these corporations which have run amuck. The government that is presently in power is a pawn of these corporations and the leaders of the AFL appear to be old, weak, out of touch and have completely lost their way."

"Am I the only one outraged at the fact that from all appearances organized labor has lost its voice? Organized labor no longer sits at the table, organized labor's leadership is fumbling around. Where is the indignation? Why can't we have a debate? The Labor History Society, you have a podium!

"Let's have a debate ... let's have this debate and like Charles Dickens we can go from the worst of times to the best of times. Long live industrial workers and long live the labor history society."

In introducing Blackman, Cochran called him "an interesting character" with an historic background. She said he negotiated every contract of that onetime huge local union from 1972 until 1992, and she said that she, "as an African-American woman coming up in the labor movement," had few role models, but as she became active in her local, she knew about him.

As a sad note, she said, the MCLC had to accept the end of DALU 19806 as Tower Automotive shut the plant in April, closing down one of Milwaukee's longtime major employers. She said that local represented more African-American workers and did more to change the lives of them than any other. "The work that this local did and the work that it did under his leadership was phenomenal," she said, including his far-sighted leadership and input in the community.

Fox Valley labor, Rock County and UAW Local 95 honored

The Labor History Society also gave out two "Special Commendation Awards" for projects completed recently with presentations made at the 25th Annual Convention.

The Fox Valley Area Labor Council was cited for its more than 20 years of conducting outreach programs to the 27 secondary schools in the area, including the distribution of books and subscriptions to labor-related magazines, participation in mock bargaining programs in the schools, matching any prizes won by area students in the WLHS annual labor history essay contests and other activities.

Accepting the award (*picture at right*) from WLHS Vice President Laurie Wermter (right) were Hugh Sloane (center), AFL-CIO community services liaison with the



Fox Valley Council, and Rick Grissom, president of the GCIU-IBT Local 77.

The second award went to the Rock County Historical Society and

United Auto Workers Local 95 for collaborating in creating a middle school activity kit, entitled, "The History of Labor and the Rise of Unions in Wisconsin and Rock County." The kits contained age-appropriate lesson plans and reproductions of workplace documents, such as labor contracts and work rules, along with workplace safety equipment.

Socialism's impact on Milwaukee: clean government and social justice

Frank Zeidler makes last public appearance at WLHS conference before his death at 93

The history of Socialism and its impact on Wisconsin labor is too rich and important to be forgotten. That seemed to be the theme of a fascinating session at the 25th Anniversary Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society at Milwaukee Turner Hall on May 13, 2006.

Former Milwaukee Mayor Frank P. Zeidler joined Aims McGuinness, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee History Department, to discuss the Socialist movement in the city which was dominant in the first half of the 20th Century.

The 93-year-old Zeidler, who carried an oxygen tank with him, provided his consummate knowledge of the era and astounded the audience of more than 80. His words were as strong and articulate as ever, and he received a standing ovation at the end of the session.

McGuinness called Zeidler the "real thing" who was needed to discuss the history of socialism in Milwaukee, and the format included Zeidler fielding questions from the audience. He said the major questions to be answered were: why should we care about the history of socialism in Milwaukee and "how" should we remember it.

Why does racism now describe Milwaukee, once known for progressivism? An initial question wondered why Milwaukee which was known for its Socialist government and progressiveness from 1948 to 1960 is now known for its racial conflict.

"The decline of Socialism took place," Zeidler said, "when I left office and was replaced not by a liberal Democrat, but by a conservative Democrat."

He cited the fact that Milwaukee had a tradition of honest government, beginning with Emil Seidel, the first Socialist mayor, continuing through the long tenure of Mayor Dan Hoan (1916-1940), the second Socialist mayor. He continued: "The reputation of Milwaukee as a well-governed, clean city lasted for a long period of time. . . . That meant that contracts were put out without graft, that the Police Department was fairly much under control and that the needs of the people regarding shelter and other things were pretty well-watched and that labor itself was well-treated by city government."

When Seidel took over in 1910, Milwaukee was a very corrupt town, Zeidler said, and in two years Seidel cleaned it up. The basis of Socialism was that the public would

assume ownership of the basic means of production, and in Milwaukee that meant owning the water works, the sewerage plant and owning the streetcar company.

Why are Milwaukeeans wary of government now? A questioner said that while Milwaukee has a "great park system" and other good services, it is viewed badly now. Zeidler explained the population of Milwaukee has profoundly changed, and many of the newcomers to the community have differing cultures and traditions from earlier residents. He noted that many former residents of the city have moved to the suburbs and now vote conservatively.

What can be done to change the city to be more reflective of the progressive traditions of the Socialists? How can we balance the recognition for what progressives have done to fight racism, but also what have progressives and Socialists failed to do? These two questions brought a long response:

Zeidler said the Socialist Party lost lot of its clout in the 1930s, partly due to the loss of the support of the majority of the labor movement, upon which the Socialist party had piggy-backed its fortunes. When the Wagner Act was passed in 1935 giving workers the right to organize for the first time, the allegiance of labor passed from the Socialists to the Democratic Party of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"From 1935 on this became a liberal Democratic community in which the labor leaders were no longer Socialists," Zeidler said.

McGuinness noted that some Socialists like Berger were "white supremacists" and opposed immigration from China, while other Socialists included W. E. B. DuBois, the famous African-American leader. He also cited Oscar Ameringer, who was a disciple of Berger and later went to Oklahoma where he set up one of the most remarkable political movements for political and racial justice in a Socialist-union movement.

The question is, McGuinness said, whether to forget about the uglier parts of socialism and not take any lesson from that, or to recognize that these factors existed in an environment in which these people lived in the early 20th Century when white supremacy was a way of life.

Many people, nonetheless, took Berger's ideas and went in other directions, specifically to work against racism, he

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Socialists challenges outlined

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added. By the 1920s, Berger became a sponsor of anti-lynching legislation and over time began to shed his racist ideas, McGuinness said.

Zeidler responded by noting the the Socialist movement in Milwaukee had a strong philosophical base, including antiwar and pacifist feelings. During World War I Berger others were indicted for writing editorials for opposing the war. There was a reaction against the Socialist movement that developed because it wasn't militaristic, he said, and in the 1930s because it was not "vocal enough against Hitler."

Another philosophy was the belief in "class warfare," a belief that was shared by communists who wanted a more violent change in government, he said. Soon, the Socialists got tagged by the title of "communists," which further weakened them, he added.

In addition, the Socialists were identified with the International Workers of the World (IWW) and that group's more unpopular views, he added.

What was Zeidler's role in the Kohler strike? One incident highlighted Zeidler's support for labor, the so-called clay boat incident which occurred in 1955 during the Kohler Strike (the nation's longest strike in history). Zeidler recalled that the strike followed an earlier strike in the 1930s in which two strikers were killed. When the ship from Canada attempted to offload clay (used for porcelain fixtures) in Sheboygan, residents protested. The ship could not unload, and was diverted to Milwaukee, where the dock workers were employees of the City.

"If there's one tradition in Wisconsin history, it's that you can't cross labor in the Kohler business," Zeidler recalled.

When he heard the ship was coming in, he said he ordered the police to set up lines to ensure that no one got on or off the docks. "There was a huge outcry to unload the boat," he said.

He said he eventually got agreement with AFSCME District Council 48 Director John Zinos to unload the ship, since the point had been made. By then, however, the ship had moved off to Ontario, where it was unloaded and the materials were shipped by train to the Kohler plant. "The newspapers were in a rage for us not breaking that strike," he said. The city was sued and lost the case, costing the city about \$60,000, but, he added, "I wouldn't break that strike, and I thought in the 1956 election they would use that against me, but they forgot all about that in 1956 because they attacked me then on the question of race," he said.

How do you explain the growth of conservatism? Zeidler explained the growth of the suburbs is linked to the decline of socialism and the increase of conservatism. He said: "People got good jobs during the war and after the war and their ...status improved and they tended to move into the suburbs, particularly because they started the free-way system [which made it easier for people to get to work]. What happened was a separation of population in the city from people who had slightly improved their



Frank Zeidler in his last public appearance before his death with Prof. Aims McGuinness of UWM at WLHS Annual Conference at Turner Hall.

income and were able to move into the suburbs."

He said that once out in the suburbs where people tended to be more successful the former city residents adopted the more conservative views of the areas. "I know of several descendants of Socialist organizers and workers who became staunch Republicans," he said. He said the move was an economic one for people moving up the ladder.

Did Milwaukeeans believe in Socialism? A comment was made that Milwaukeeans voted for Zeidler and Hoan "not because they believed in socialism but because they thought the Socialists would run clean government and they wouldn't trust anyone else to."

Zeidler explained that the Socialists under Dan Hoan in 1932 captured control of city government, only to lose it in 1936 over a dispute over socializing the power company in 1936. Zeidler said the labor movement switched from socialism to the Democratic Party during the New Deal era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, "more in line with the idea of Gompers" which involved the philosophy that private employers had the responsibility of providing decent wages and not the government.

McGuinness said that before Emil Seidel was elected in 1910 the Milwaukee government was corrupt and had a reputation of "terrible city government." He said: "It's not as though there was this huge Socialist movement in Milwaukee. And Socialists took advantage of this dysfunctional city government and said "Look, we can provide something better. And it's in that spirit they win." In the two years of Seidel's term, Milwaukee became known for its good government, he said.

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Race became an issue in 1956 elections, prompting hate mail

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How did Mayor Zeidler get elected during the 1950s when the McCarthy era was present in Wisconsin?

Zeidler said he was elected by a series of flukes, partly due to fact in primary there was a long slate of candidates and he was listed first; secondly because his brother Carl, who had been elected mayor in 1940 and was lost at sea during World War II, was a popular figure; thirdly, he had support of the labor movement; fourthly, the Milwaukee Leader printing operation got out his pamphlets; and finally, he said he was the only candidate with a program.

In 1956, the issue was race, he said, and it was used against the Socialists, because the party had said everyone who came to Milwaukee would be treated equally, and "that was not very popular," he added.

McGuinness noted that Zeidler won in 1948, even after many Socialist Party leaders had "jumped ship" to the Democratic Party and also that Zeidler was extremely effective as a "hard-working" campaigner. He said it was extraordinary that he was able to win in spite of the lack of party support or newspaper support.

He said the Zeidler files in the Milwaukee Public Library contain many pieces of "hate mail," particularly in 1952 and 1956 races. "It's heart-rending to read the vicious racism of these letters, and that Mr. Zeidler is continually pilloried with the 'n' word and as a communist."

He added that it must have been "very lonely" for Zeidler to be a Socialist mayor in the City of Milwaukee in 1956, and Zeidler said the issue in that election was the question of why African-Americans were coming to Milwaukee from the South. This was the occasion for real estate people to tell Milwaukee homeowners that black neighbors would cause their property values to decrease, a process called "block-busting." There were also charges that the mayor was in favor of bringing African-Americans to Milwaukee and had (it was falsely claimed) even erected signs in the South urging emigration to Milwaukee.

Zeidler said that one of most important things the city did then was to set up a Committee on Community Relations, that covered a diverse sectors of the community that dealt with the race relations of the community. The party from 1956 to 1960 was focused on that problem.

Why are the Socialists not well remembered? Zeidler said the Progressive movement is well-remembered throughout the state, while the Socialist Party, which also accomplished much in Milwaukee, has been largely forgotten. He said that the Progressive movement grew out of Robert

M. LaFollette's problems within getting the Republican Party, and its focus on fair prices for farmers. The focus of the Socialist Party was for public ownership of key parts of the society.

In 1935, he said, the Socialists agreed to go off the ballot and joined with the Progressives and Democrats to save a law in support of Wisconsin's labor unions. It was called the Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation, whose offices were in the Turner Hall. It lasted until 1941, when many Progressives moved into the Democratic Party, and later were joined by many leading Socialists, including Daniel Hoan.

In 1946, when Robert La Follette was running for reelection, the old-line Republicans got behind Joseph R. McCarthy who won the primary and then the election. Zeidler said that when McCarthy first got elected, he had some liberal streaks, "and he worked with us on housing for the veterans and for the elderly." Zeidler continued: "In 1952, when he had nothing to run on, someone convinced him to run on the issue of communism. McCarthy, furthermore, never attacked anybody in Wisconsin."

McGuinness stressed the point that to understand progressives in Wisconsin, people needed to understand Socialists, since they were very much a part of the story here. He added that "the word 'socialism' has been completely been excised from the political vocabulary . . . and as a result it's not just the name that has been lost but the whole idea, such as the notion that government can actually do some good." He said this idea that government can do some good for people has been at the heart of socialism and is being lost in the current political rhetoric.

Zeidler explained that the Socialists in Milwaukee were based on supporting labor issues, in developing the area's marvelous park system (through such Socialists as Charles Whitnall) and public housing initiatives. "That's where they got the name 'sewer Socialists,'" and differentiates them from those Socialists who followed the more broad teachings of Karl Marx, he said. He added that the Socialists were "interested in environmental protections" and fought for clean air and water measures.

McGuinness summed up the meeting by saying it was important to look at history realistically and truthfully. "Milwaukee was never a paradise for Socialism and Socialists were never saints. These were human beings who were distinguished not because they were superhumans but they devoted their lives to making this city and this country and the world a better place. Keeping that memory alive is hard work and, in my opinion no one has worked harder and done that better in the history of Socialism than [Zeidler]."

The session ended with Frank Zeidler being given a prolonged standing ovation.

Rebuilding the Progressive Tradition -- Labor Can Lead

Unionists look to past for guidance in Panel Discussion

Labor unions have in the past supplied much of the muscle to the progressive traditions of Wisconsin and the United States, and despite many challenges in the 21st Century, there are hopes for regaining that progressive momentum.

Following earlier presentations at the 25th Annual Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society, Prof. Stephen Meyer of the University of Wisconsin History Department moderated the panel on the topic, "Rebuilding the Progressive Tradition."

All three panelists -- State AFL-CIO President David Newby, Milwaukee County Labor Council Secretary-Treasurer Sheila Cochran and Wisconsin Labor History Society President Ken Germanson -- agreed that labor had historically been at the forefront of many progressive initiatives in the state and nation, although often falling short in the efforts.

They and members of the audience were less in agreement as to how labor unions could regain the power and progressive traditions in the current day. Among the suggestions were to work more closely within coalitions that share labor's goals, to review labor's historic support of the Democratic Party and look toward third parties, to build on the current leadership's generally progressive nature and to create greater organizing efforts.

In opening the panel discussion, Professor Meyer noted that in the earlier presentation on Socialism, former Mayor Frank Zeidler talked about the role of government in meeting the needs of the people. The important thing about Socialism, he said, is that they "put the people first" in matters like the park system, health, and ending corruption. He paraphrased Thomas Paine, with the comment that "these are the times that try men's and women's souls," adding that "we live in very difficult times."

He asked the panel to discuss: What has been labor's role in the development of the progressive vision for the world?

David Newby, president of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, said, "The history of labor is the history of struggle, but it's not always the history of triumph and victory. What

we're dealing with today is survival, and not only the survival of an institution, but the only institution, the only organization, the only movement that can protect the interests of working people."

He said that currently it is important to rebuild the labor and the progressive movements, since "the two basically are synonymous." He said that what is happening today in our governments is a sign of the reduced power of labor. It is imperative to rebuild the labor movement in the midst of the worst attack on the labor movement since the 1920s and 1930s.

'These are times that try men's souls,' to paraphrase Tom Paine -- Stephen Meyer

Sheila Cochran, secretary-treasurer of the Milwaukee County Labor Council, raised the question of the definition of what progressivism means. She noted

that union leaders like herself and Newby represent such a diverse group of workers that it's often hard to get them to agree on issues of the movement and its vision. "In the capacity that I serve, and in trying to move people forward, it usually just boils down to the things that we can agree upon," she said. Personally, she said, she maintains her progressive vision based upon how she was raised.

She cited examples where organized labor cannot find agreement, such as a woman's right to choose. She noted further that in issues of race, labor still does not reflect its membership; yet, she agreed with Newby that labor is the only movement that will really "push that [progressive] vision."

"We're the only organized body that thinks about it and deals with it every day on an organized basis. Nobody else deals with the struggles of working people besides us," she said.

She said it's a personal struggle because she can't bring "that progressive voice" to the labor movement "without upsetting the balance of members left in the Milwaukee area." The real leadership is on the ground, she said, and "I still think there is hope for it."

Ken Germanson, president of the Labor History Society, agreed with Cochran in noting the base of the labor movement "comes from the people on the streets, in the shops, in the school rooms, and in the public employment."

He said the labor movement and working people have been the “tool” that has created the progressive society. He noted the passage of the “voting rights act” in 1964, so important to ensuring the rights of all Americans, came due to the support of the labor movement, even though there were segments of organized labor then who were not enthusiastic.

Sheila Cochran responded by noting that the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists was formed during that 1972 election, when so many African-American workers were not comfortable with the AFL-CIO position then on failing to endorse George McGovern against Richard Nixon. She described the current split in the labor movement as being “all about ego, and unfortunately it’s about male ego, and they’re using women and people of color.” Local unionists, she said, don’t have the time to debate Change to Win and the AFL-CIO over the machinations at the national level because of work needed to be done at the local level.

From the audience, Bob Haase, Milwaukee, a retired Ironworker, noted that the current split in the labor movement is “at the top,” and not among the memberships at local levels.

Carmen Clark, of Madison, said the early organizing of labor was based upon class-consciousness; now there is a great emphasis to debunk such consciousness on the part of working people. “But [the wealthy] teach class from soup to nuts and what fork to eat ‘em with,” she said.

She said that the “service industry,” with a work force largely of women and minorities, offers great opportunities for growth, since such workers bring much enthusiasm and interest into the labor movement.

Victor Greene, retired professor of history at UW-M, suggested closer relationship between the local labor movements and the Democratic Party, which at the local levels has become more liberal.

Art Heitzer, local progressive attorney, called attention to the recent marches supporting the immigrants in the United States, praising the AFL-CIO for being on the “right side” of the issue.

Newby said that he was “absolutely convinced” that the labor movement today, at least as far as its top leadership and issue positions, is more progressive than it has been since the mid-1940s. “What we’re dealing with now,” he said, “is the meltdown and annihilation of the industrial sector of our economy, and industrial unions have been the core of the progressive movement within labor.”

Newby said he doesn’t see how it would be able to save the industrial sector, because of the trade policy. It would take political action in order to change that policy, he said, “and now we’re at the point where we don’t have the power to make those changes.”

Cochran said there was hope for more progressivism, and that the hope lies in the AFL-CIO working in coalitions. “We have a lot of strength in progressive visions in those organizations outside of organized labor,” she said. She urged participating in more of those coalitions that share our views. Sometimes, she said, you have to take a stand, even when you might lose the support of some of the constituent organizations. She noted usually, such actions will bring other groups into the fold.

Newby said that the international policy of the AFL-CIO has changed a bit, noting that the Federation at its most recent convention passed a resolution opposing the attack on Iraq by the U.S. He said the ability to do “cross-border organizing” is difficult, but that there have been great efforts at supporting trade unionists in other nations.

Angela Powell noted that while the Republicans seek to “empower their base” through supporting certain issues, the Democrats rarely do so, citing the Clinton

Administration’s support of NAFTA.

She wondered why the labor movement “turn up their noses” at Third Party movements, and seem to act “like a battered spouse” when perhaps labor should at least “flirt” with the Green Party. She got applause.

Newby said he agreed with the point, but said that pragmatic politics called for a “winner.” He said labor should be nurturing the more progressive portions of the Democratic Party. It was noted that the Labor Party is still active and is holding regular meetings in Milwaukee.

Paul Blackman, the Lifetime Achievement Award winner and retired president of DALU 19806 at Tower Automotive, said the place to start on the “debate” to improve labor would be with the “structure” of the institution, since currently it would be difficult for a minority or a woman to ever become president. He noted that “all those people at the top” are not elected by the workers, but rather by delegates who are often appointed.

He said that progressives must seek to elect their own people, and not depend upon the Democrats to support progressive goals. He recalled that Democrats controlled both the Congress and the Presidency during the Carter years, and yet labor was unable to get a labor law reform bill passed. “If you really want to have labor people serve, you have to put up your own candidates,” he added.

The work that must be done will be at the local level

-- Sheila Cochran

New Program Inaugurated by the Society at National History Day in Wisconsin

It was happening all this spring—Wisconsin kids around the state were busy researching labor history for their National History Day projects. The 2005/06 competition year had a National History Day theme perfect for labor topics—“Taking a Stand in History—People, Ideas, Events.” Among labor topics the students investigated were:

Three Wisconsin milk strikes

Rosie the Riveter—women manufacturing workers during World War II

1954 Kohler (WI) Strike

the 1919 Steel Strike

the Bay View (WI) Massacre

the Lowell (MA) textile mill girls

the workers in the Manitowoc (WI) shipyards during World War II

Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers union

the Hortonville (WI) teachers' strike

Mother Jones, the renowned labor organizer of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Lewis Hine (a Wisconsin native) and his photographs of child labor

Harry Bridges, leader of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union

the Kenosha (WI) Comets, a women's baseball team

the 1899 newsboys strike in New York City

Nellie Bly, a pioneering woman reporter during the late 19th century

The kids were excited about their projects. Some said that they had gotten the idea for their labor topic while talking with a family member. Others said they selected their labor topic precisely because they did not know anything about it and found as they learned the labor story, they were excited to share the inspiring history they found with their fellow students.

The plethora of projects this year on labor topics by Wisconsin school children was prompted by the offering for the first time of a special History Day prize by the Wisconsin Labor History Society—the new prize is for the best student projects on American labor history within the scope of each year's national theme. The Society offered two prizes at each Wisconsin regional event—a \$50 junior prize and a \$50 senior prize—and two at the statewide finals—a \$100 junior prize and a \$100 senior prize.

For the rest of the story, photographs, and a complete list of the winners see next issue of newsletter, or at: www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org.

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NEWSLETTER
*For Society
Members
and Friends*

Wisconsin Labor History Society

(Affiliate, Wisconsin Historical Society)

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