

Socialism in Upstate New York

A Story of Homegrown Movements

by: Zachary Dean, Antonio Melian, and Jack Manning



Research

In the 1910s, socialists were active in America. The Socialist Party of America was the largest third party in the country, gaining over 5% of the vote in the 1912 presidential election as well as having multiple members elected into the House of Representatives.

Socialists even had an organized presence in Binghamton, nominating candidates for mayor every election throughout the 1910s. However, the Socialist Party never won and their leaders remained obscure and unsuccessful. The story is the same in Utica, where Socialists never won an election. However, in Schenectady they elected a Socialist Mayor and state representative.

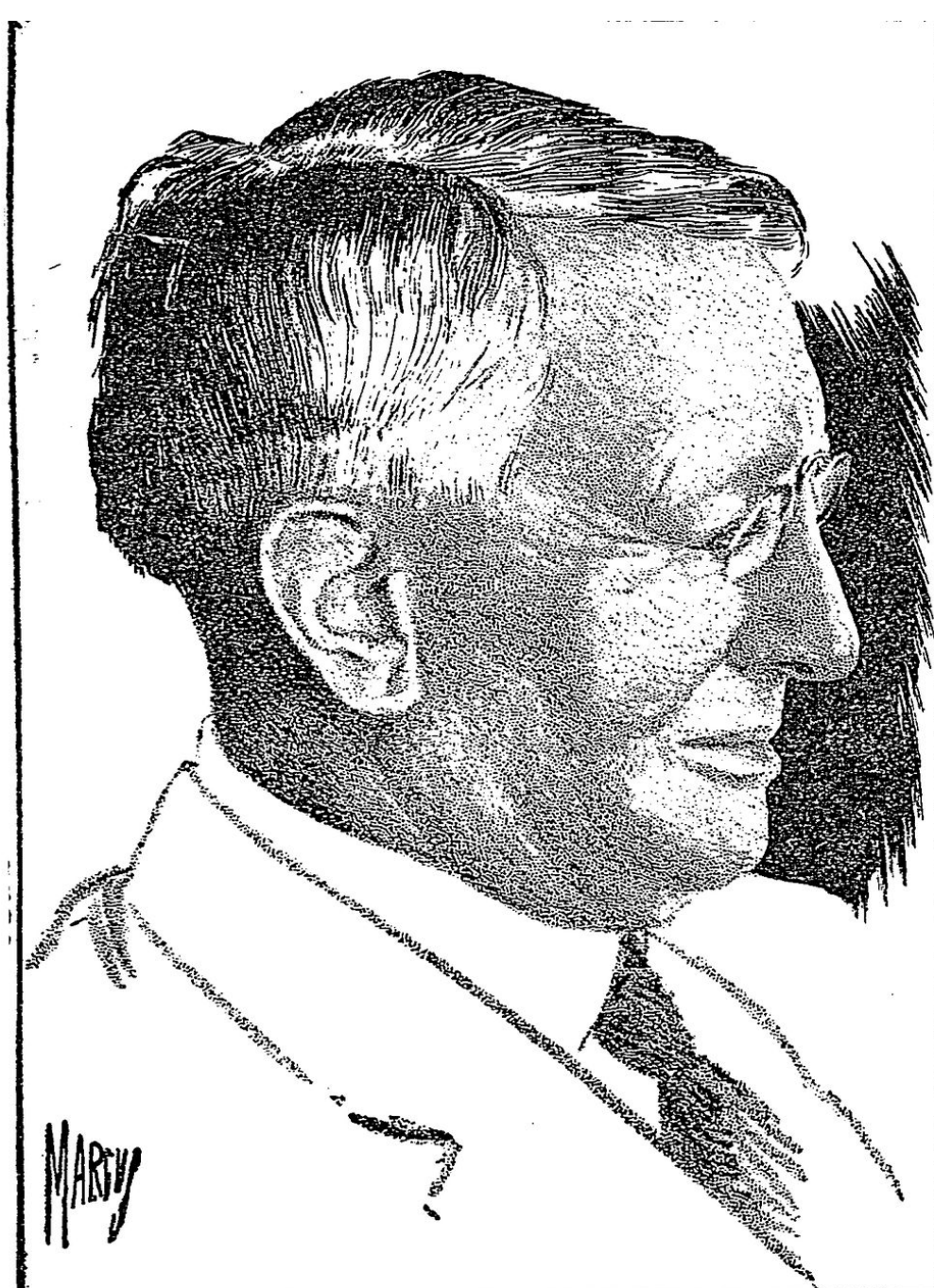
This begs the question: **Why did Socialism succeed in some upstate cities and not others?**



Binghamton: Crushed and Outdone

In Binghamton, the largest employer was the **Endicott-Johnson (EJ) Company**, led by **George F. Johnson**. The company invested in "Corporate paternalism," building their employees homes to then sell them at low prices, funding community events, and portraying the company as a family with Johnson as its patriarch.

When union leaders tried to organize in Binghamton, they found that the results delivered by E.J. outstripped what they could offer workers, so they turned their energies elsewhere. Unions were critical to socialist organizing, so with their disappearance, Binghamton Socialists couldn't make inroads or gain any local support.



George F. Johnson

Johnson sent corporate spies into suspected socialist and left-wing organizations, sabotaging them from within and identifying their leaders.

EJ-aligned newspapers portrayed socialist and communist organizations as foreign agitators imported by Slavic immigrants. This was despite the fact that local leader and Socialist perennial candidate **Arthur Breckinridge** was a white Cornell graduate.

The SS Peter and Paul Church, the local branch of the Tsarist Orthodox Church in America was built on land donated by Johnson. Their Priest, **Nikola Borisoff** called "Bolshevism" a disease and fought against left-wing movements in his community.

Utica: Infighting and Failure

One of the greatest challenges that held back the Socialist Movement was the problem of internal factionalism. This issue plagued the national movement and is similarly reflected in the upstate cities..

In Utica, a mass meeting was held at the Maennerchor Hall to discuss the unfair treatment and execution of the radical Francisco Ferrer in Spain on October 13, 1909. This meeting revealed the infighting between different Socialist organizations in Utica.

The growing animosity between the compromising **Socialist Party** and the more radical **Socialist Labor Party** was highlighted as the Socialist Party members did not attend the meeting.

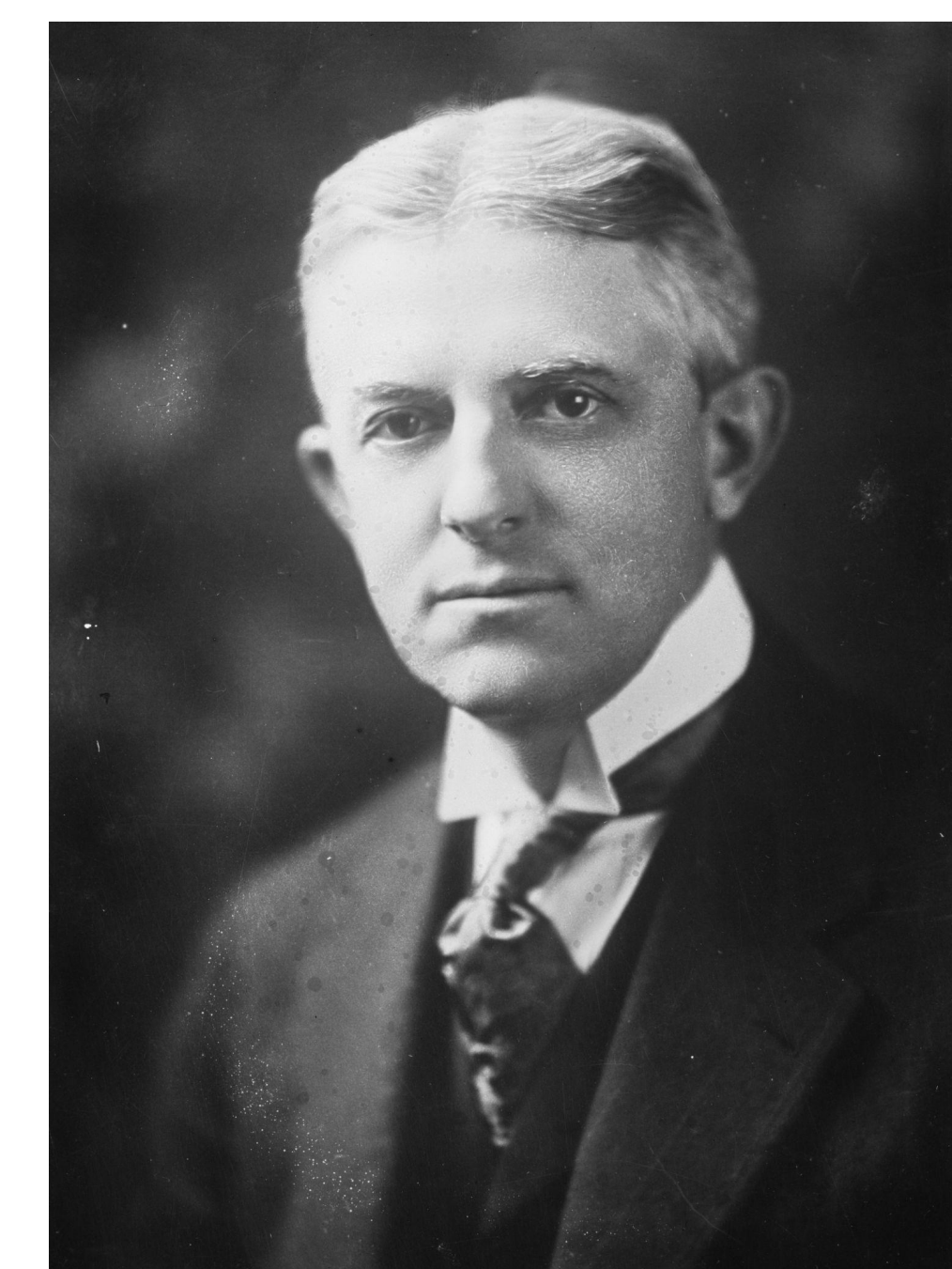
Utica socialists weren't able to achieve any meaningful electoral success.

Schenectady: Success and Local Support

Born in Iowa, **George R. Lunn** was a pastor and social activist who used his platform to support progressive causes.

After being expelled from his church for his left-wing views, Lunn ran on the Socialist ticket for mayor of Schenectady in 1912 and won. Schenectady was dominated by **General Electric**, which employed many of the city's workers.

Despite Lunn's Socialist policies, G.E. president **Charles A. Coffin** and General Manager **G. E. Emmons** supported Lunn's administration, believing that he was the "best man for the job" and that his administration would make the city government more efficient and productive.



George R. Lunn.

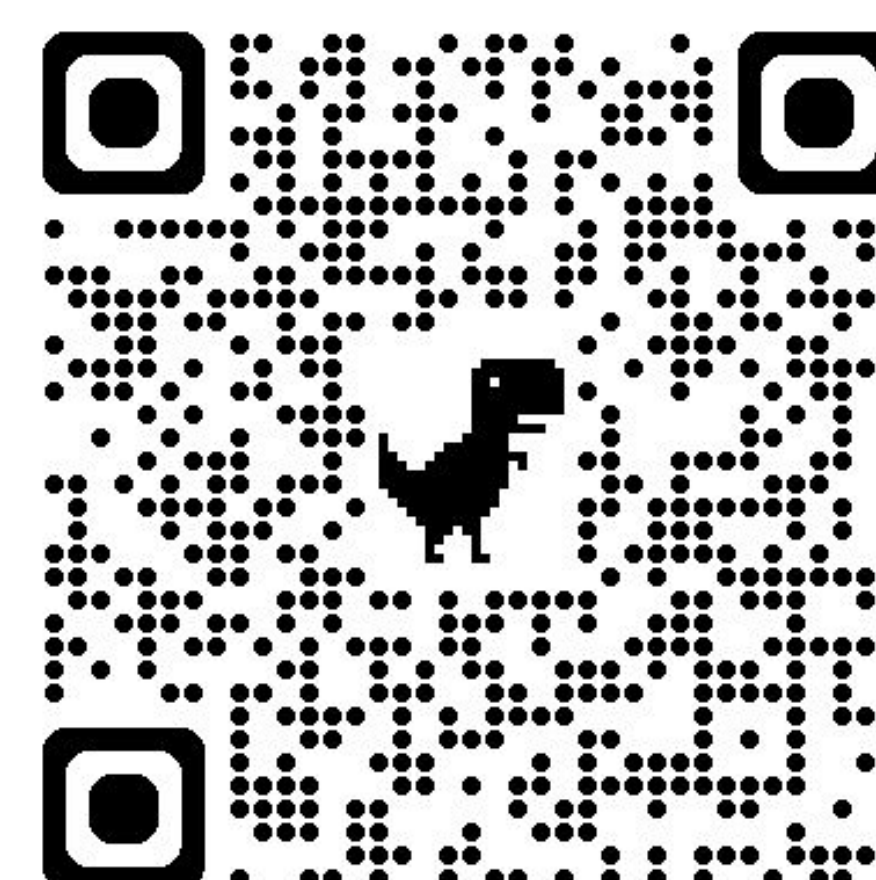
Union College in Schenectady, which at that time was closely associated with G.E., regularly invited members of Lunn's administration on campus to discuss the merits of Socialism.

Throughout his term, Lunn came into conflict with more radical Socialists in the party, causing multiple prominent members of his administration to resign.

After being defeated by a conservative fusion candidate who rallied small business owners and the middle class in 1913, Lunn left the socialist party and became a Democrat.



Podcast Teaser



Methodology

We examined local historic newspapers in the three cities/counties we examined to learn how socialists were viewed in that period by the people and the media. We also reached out to Gerald Zahavi, a history professor at Albany University, who shared a number of sources on socialism in Binghamton and EJ's reaction to it.

Although socialists had, at best, limited success in the 1910s, these stories are a valuable reminder that socialism has a long history in the United States. We wanted to share that history, and thus have produced a podcast elaborating on the stories outlined here. A teaser for that podcast can be found to the left.