



Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal, 1915-36 (Working Class in American History)

Cecelia Bucki

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In November 1933, the Socialist Party of Bridgeport, Connecticut won a stunning victory in the municipal election, putting slate roofer Jasper McLevy in the mayor's seat and nearly winning control of the city council. In probing the factors that led to this electoral victory and its continuation, Bucki uncovers a legacy of activist unionism, business manipulation of local politics and taxes, and a growing debate over the public good that revealed how working people viewed their government and their own roles as citizens. As a backdrop to the evolving national developments of the New Deal, this study stands at the intersection of political, labor, and ethnic history and provides a new perspective on how working people affected urban politics in the inter-war era. "Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal, 1915-36" explores how labor gained first a foothold and then a stronghold in local politics as broad debates over taxes, budgets, city services, and the definition of public good pitted previously unengaged working-class citizens against local business leaders and traditional party elites. In the heat of the Great Depression, the skilled AFL craftsmen who made up the bulk of the city's Socialist Party stepped in to fill a political void created by the crumbling of mainstream parties, the disintegration of traditional modes of ethnic politics, and the fiscal crisis of the city. Representing the concerns of ethnic working-class communities only weakly allied to the mainstream American parties, the Bridgeport Socialists rode into office on a wave of popular antibusiness anger and New Deal enthusiasm. Once in office, McLevy and his party were hamstrung by legislative measures that gave substantial control of finances to local business leaders. Bucki details the compromise politics of Bridgeport and shows how the local party, after splitting from the Socialist Party of America in 1936, became more narrowly focused and reformist, though still serving as the voice of the working class. The Bridgeport Socialist Party's remarkable move from outsider critic to occupant of city hall illustrates the volatility of politics in the early depression years. It also reveals the curbing influence of conservative business and political interests, not only on the Bridgeport Socialists, but also on the more radical prongs of the New Deal.

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