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Settlement Workers in Politics, 1890-1914

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SETTLEMENT workers during the Progressive Era were probably more committed to political action than any other group of welfare workers before or since. Charity organization workers also cooperated on occasion in political reform projects, but Robert Hunter, the itinerant radical settlement worker and charity expert, was probably right in 1902, even if he exaggerated, when he decided that the settlement worker and the charity worker had basically different temperaments. The charity worker was hesitant to get involved with reform, Hunter decided; he had a philosophy of "don't, don't" and was constantly troubled by the fear that his relief would destroy independence. The settlement worker, on the other hand, was more often the victim of unbounded enthusiasm than of moral questioning. "He is constantly doing, urging; he is constantly pressing forward, occasionally tilting at wind mills, at times making mistakes, often perhaps doing injury, but filled with enthusiasm, warmth and purpose, without much question."¹

Settlement workers were usually activists. The pioneer settlement workers in the United States had enthusiasm and purpose as well as a few doubts, but they had no political theory in mind when they established their outposts in the slums. Indeed they had

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little interest in politics. Influenced largely by the British settlement and university extension movements, young men and women like Stanton Coit, Jane Robbins, Robert Woods, Ellen Gates Starr, and Jane Addams set out to solve the problems of industrial America by living in an urban working-class district. They sought to re-create a feeling of neighborhood in the sprawling, crowded city. They wanted to share their lives and their learning with those less fortunate, but beyond that they were not sure. They were reformers, but not political reformers in the beginning.²

The early settlement workers, however, soon discovered that they had invaded a political world. When Jane Robbins, Jean Fine, and the other well-dressed, young Smith College graduates began the New York College Settlement on the Lower East Side in 1889, their first visitor was a local policeman who thought they were opening another house of prostitution. He stopped by to let them know that he would not disturb them as long as they made a regular monthly contribution to his income. The young settlement workers may have been shocked, but at least they learned that they could not reform the neighborhood without clashing with the existing political structure.³

Nearly every activity begun by the settlement workers was interpreted in political terms by the men and women in the neighborhood. Even the picture and art exhibitions that they fancied were bringing meaning and beauty into the drab lives of the workingmen seemed to one New York politician, "a cleverly disguised trick on the part of the eminent mugwumps in the University Settlement Society to get a grip on the district in the ante-election months." When the settlement workers moved from picture exhibitions and classes in Dante to attempts to improve the living and working conditions in their neighborhood, they became even more aware of the political structure and of political realities. Jane Addams and the other residents of Hull House started a campaign to clean up the streets of the nineteenth ward soon after they moved to the area. At first they thought that it was a lack of knowledge about the spread of disease and a dearth of pride in the neighborhood among the citizens that caused the filthy streets. Jane Addams began a campaign of education, but then an investigation by Edward Burchard, the first male resident of Hull House, revealed that Johnny Powers, the shrewd and powerful ward boss, used the position of garbage collector as a political plum. One of his henchmen collected the money, but little of the garbage. Jane

Addams's attempt to promote cleaner streets caused her to submit a bid for the collection of garbage in the ward, resulted in the mayor appointing her a garbage inspector, and led her eventually into two unsuccessful attempts to unseat Powers from his position as alderman from the nineteenth ward. In this instance of Jane Addams the settlement idea led inevitably to political action.⁴

Other settlement workers discovered as they tried to "recreate a feeling of neighborhood" in the industrial city that the precinct and the ward already provided one form of neighborhood organization. But not all settlement workers could agree with Jane Addams that they had "no right to meddle in all aspects of a community's life and ignore politics." Mary K. Simkhovitch of Greenwich House in New York argued that political parties did not express, in any vital way, the real interest of the citizens of the neighborhood, and that the settlement therefore ought to remain aloof from partisan politics. Robert Woods, the tall and taciturn head resident of South End House in Boston, agreed basically with Mrs. Simkhovitch. He argued that the settlement lost more than it gained by a partisan stand in local politics. He maintained that it was better to cooperate with the ward boss than to try to defeat him. Of course, the situation in Boston's ninth ward was somewhat unusual; James Donovan, the affable Irish boss, in part because he was badly in need of allies, seemed willing to cooperate with the settlement workers in making the ward a better place in which to live. Despite their statements, however, both Woods and Mrs. Simkhovitch on occasion took part in reform campaigns when evidently they felt the public's interest was being expressed by a political organization.⁵

More successful than Hull House, South End House, or Greenwich House in influencing the politics in their ward was Chicago Commons, founded in 1894 by Graham Taylor. After preliminary and unsuccessful attempts to cooperate with the boss in the ward the settlement men's club managed to defeat him, and then for nearly two decades the settlement effectively controlled elections for alderman in the ward. Instead of running an independent candidate, the settlement concentrated on getting good candidates nominated from the major parties. The settlement workers controlled enough votes so that their endorsement was tantamount to election. The Commons had the advantage of being located in a ward where the local political boss had little real power. But Taylor alone could not have made his settlement into a

successful political machine. He was aided by a group of young, politically oriented social workers who, unlike the settlement pioneers, consciously sought to make the settlement a base for political reform in the ward and the city. Such men as Allen T. Burns, who came to the settlement after graduate work at the University of Chicago, and Raymond Robins, who wandered into Chicago Commons in 1901 after he had been a coal miner, a fruit grower, a lawyer, and a minister, became experts at managing political campaigns. They made surveys, filed reports, checked for voting frauds, organized political rallies and torch parades, and distributed posters and handbills. Most important, they became acquainted with the people and the politicians in the ward and the city. For Burns and Robins, Chicago Commons and the seventeenth ward provided practical lessons in political reform that they utilized for years after they left the settlement.⁶

Chicago had no monopoly on politically active settlement workers. James B. Reynolds, an ordained Congregational minister, gave up his work for the YMCA in 1893 to become head resident of University Settlement in New York. As early as 1896 he urged a group of social workers to "Go into politics." "Be earnest, be practical, be active," he advised, "political reform is the great moral opportunity of our day." To Henry Moskowitz politics was more than a moral opportunity; it was a way of life. Unlike most of the settlement workers, Moskowitz, a Rumanian Jew, had grown up in a tenement on the Lower East Side. He was inspired by classes at Neighborhood Guild and eventually became a settlement worker himself at Madison House. He battled the boss in the ward, fought for better city government, and dreamed of the day when there would be a settlement in every neighborhood in the city to counteract the influence of the political machines. Like Raymond Robins, James B. Reynolds, and Graham Taylor, he believed the settlement could become the antidote to boss rule in ward politics and the base for political reform in the city.⁷

The politically minded settlement workers, whether they took an active part in local politics or not, learned a great deal about the nature of politics in the downtown wards of the great industrial cities. Many of them, especially Robert Woods and Jane Addams, contributed to a better understanding of city politics through their writings. They discovered, for example, that often the political machine depended on an elaborate structure of boys' gangs that duplicated in miniature the political organization of the

city. It was from these gangs that the ward heelers as well as the bosses got their leadership experience. The political boss often remained in power, they learned, through a combination of ruthlessness and genuine neighborliness. There was an element of truth in Johnny Powers's bald statement: "The trouble with Miss Addams," he announced on one occasion, "is that she is jealous of my charitable work in the ward." He was a friendly visitor all right; he gave away turkeys at Christmas time, provided free passes on the railroad, bailed men out of jail, and got the unemployed jobs. There was no charge, no forms to fill out (as there always were at the Charity Organization Society). The only thing expected in return was a vote cast in the proper way on election day. Despite the obvious corruption of the boss, no matter how he robbed the ward, he was known for his philanthropy rather than for his dishonesty. The settlement workers, however, learned from the politicians. Although they soon discovered they could not compete in handing out favors, they could emulate the politician's real concern for the problems of his constituents. They could be a little less critical of the present situation, talk less about their elaborate plans for the future, and concentrate, as the bosses did, on making their reforms "concrete and human."⁸

In part because of their vantage point in a working-class neighborhood and their close observation of local politics, settlement workers often put less emphasis than some reformers on the revision of a charter or the defeat of a corrupt politician. They could appreciate the usefulness of the boss even as they were in despair at his lack of civic pride. Jane Addams decided it was not worthwhile to oppose Powers after he had twice defeated her candidate. Most settlement workers soon realized that, even if it were possible to defeat the local boss, it was impossible to accomplish much in one ward. For this reason they were often active, though somewhat cautious, participants in a variety of municipal reform campaigns, especially in Boston, New York, and Chicago.⁹

Settlement workers seldom ran for political office in the city, rather they served as campaign managers, advisers on policy, statistics gatherers, and "brain trusters" for reform administrations. In Boston in the 1890s Mayor Josiah Quincy often depended on the advice and aid of Robert Woods in attempting to provide the city with public bathhouses, gymnasiums, and playgrounds. In Boston as in other cities, the settlements contributed to municipal reform by demonstrating the need for action, by initiating kindergartens,

playgrounds, and bathhouses, and by then convincing the municipal authorities that it was the city's responsibility to take them over and expand their usefulness. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Boston settlement workers played important roles in the nearly futile campaigns of the Good Government Association to bring honesty and reform into the city government. In the reform campaign of 1909-10, four young men closely associated with South End House virtually ran the unsuccessful campaign of James J. Storrow. One served as his campaign manager, another as his assistant campaign manager, a third as his personal secretary, and a fourth as the secretary of the Good Government Association. In the long run, the settlements' most important contribution to a better city government may have been through their education of a generation of young men in the tactics of municipal reform and the training of a group of experts in city administration.¹⁰

In New York, James B. Reynolds was a prominent member of the Citizens Union, and he was in part responsible for drafting Seth Low, the president of Columbia University and a member of the University Settlement Council, to run for mayor in 1901. Reynolds worked behind the scenes to manage Low's campaign and enlisted the support of his settlement friends, especially Lillian Wald of Henry Street Settlement, Henry Moskowitz of Madison House, and Elizabeth Williams of College Settlement, in the campaign. When Low was elected, Reynolds became his personal secretary and closest adviser. For two years the settlement workers, having a direct line to the mayor, used it to promote better housing laws, more playgrounds, and a city-supported system of visiting nurses in the public schools. Lillian Wald and the others at Henry Street Settlement were primarily responsible for the latter innovation. They had been troubled for some time by the number of children prevented from going to school because they had eczema, hookworm, or some other disease. Doctors had been inspecting the students in the city for several years, but no one made any attempt to treat the ill children. Low's reform administration only complicated a difficult situation, for it made the inspection more rigorous but did nothing to treat the rejects. Because she knew Mayor Low and many other officials in his administration, Lillian Wald was able to suggest a solution. She offered to supply visiting nurses who could work with the doctors and treat the sick children. Before she began, however, she made

the city officials promise that, if the experiment proved successful, they would maintain it with city funds. After only one month the Board of Estimate appropriated the money to hire school nurses and soon the experiment was being copied in other cities. Lillian Wald and other settlement workers often accomplished much because they were respected and listened to by at least some of the politicians who occupied positions of power in city hall and the state capital.¹¹

Sometimes the settlement worker's entry into the arena of municipal politics was concerned with opposition to a proposed measure rather than with a positive suggestion for reform. This was the case in 1905 when the settlements on the Lower East Side banded together to defeat a proposed elevated loop that would have connected the Brooklyn and Williamsburg Bridges. The settlement workers feared that the loop would cause needless blight and more congestion in one of the most crowded areas in the city. They favored a subway and suggested making Delancey Street into a boulevard. Lillian Wald, Florence Kelley, and Charles Stover, with help from housing reformer Lawrence Veiller, led the campaign that helped to defeat the measure. Stover, who had spent a lifetime fighting for more playgrounds in New York, called the first meeting and enlisted the support of many organizations on the Lower East Side. Sometimes the settlement workers had a difficult time convincing their immigrant neighbors of the need for opposing a ward boss or for supporting a reform bill, but this time it was easy to win their cooperation. The settlement workers organized mass meetings, sent out letters to influential people, persuaded newspapermen to present their point of view, and bombarded the city council with letters and petitions. Henry Street, College, and University Settlements handled most of the clerical work, gathered most of the names for the petitions, and helped arouse their members and supporters to protest the measure. They had a lot of help during the campaign. One source of aid they never suspected. Only after the measure was defeated did they learn that an unknown businessman, who feared the elevated loop would ruin his business, had spent fifty thousand dollars to oppose the measure. Whether it was bribe money or the aroused social conscience of the Lower East Side that caused the defeat of the elevated loop, the campaign illustrates how settlement workers could organize neighborhood opinion and bring that opinion to bear on public officials.¹²

In Chicago, Graham Taylor, Raymond Robins, and an energetic group of young settlement workers, who became experts at ferreting out the records of candidates, worked closely with the Municipal Voters' League and had some success in electing honest and well-qualified aldermen to the city council. Early in the twentieth century Hull House, which Henry Demarest Lloyd liked to call the best club in Chicago, served as the headquarters for a well-organized but futile attempt to promote the municipal ownership of street railways. The settlement at its best became a clearinghouse for reform and a meeting place for reformers.¹³

Settlement workers played important roles in several kinds of municipal reform campaigns. Many would have agreed with Jane Robbins. When asked why she was so interested in politics, she replied, "I never go into a tenement without longing for a better city government."¹⁴ Most settlement workers, however, soon learned that to improve the tenements and the working and living conditions in the city, it was necessary to go beyond city hall to the state capital and even to Washington. Much more important, in the long run, than the settlement workers' attempts to defeat the ward boss or elect a reform mayor was their influence on state and national reform legislation.

Robert Bremner notes the important role that social workers played in communicating to the public the great need for reform. This of course they did, but they also played a large part in the practical task of getting bills passed at Springfield, Albany, or Washington. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., describes the "subtle and persistent saintliness of the social workers." "Theirs," he says, "was the implacability of gentleness."¹⁵ But behind the gentleness many settlement workers were tough-minded realists who understood the way the American political system operated. It is true, of course, that they were also idealists who sometimes came perilously close to believing that, if they gathered enough statistics and found out enough information about the social evils in America, the solution would follow naturally. Yet a large number of settlement workers became experts not only at collecting statistics, but also at using them to influence public opinion and elected officials. They had learned their politics in the precinct and the ward, not from a textbook, and their experience served them well in Springfield and Washington.

The passage of a series of amendments to the child labor law in 1897 in Illinois may serve as a case in point. The amendments

were drafted by Florence Kelley who, more than anyone else, led the crusade against child labor. There was little publicity or fanfare in the beginning. Florence Kelley remarked to Henry Demarest Lloyd: "We want to get them out of committee before the editorial column raises its voice in defense of the infant newsboys and the toddling 'cash' who will both come under its provisions." Persuasion was more important than publicity in the beginning. Jane Addams led a contingent of social workers, labor leaders, and enlightened businessmen to the state capital to testify before the Senate Committee on Labor, to display impressive statistics, and to tell human stories about the results of child labor. Alzina Stevens, a Hull House resident and also a member of a labor union, got workingmen and women to write to the members of the Senate committee. George Hooker, a settlement worker and ordained minister, got the support of various members of the clergy in Chicago. When the amendments were reported out of committee, the settlement workers made sure they got the proper publicity in the newspapers. They also prepared pamphlets and scrapbooks filled with clippings demonstrating the need for better child labor laws and sent them to every member of the state legislature. The amendments passed; they did not end the problem of child labor by any means, but their passage illustrates the way settlement workers operated realistically in state politics.¹⁶

In New York a committee of settlement workers led by Robert Hunter organized in 1902 to protest against the incredible conditions of labor among children in the city. Florence Kelley, now in New York as general secretary of the National Consumers' League and a resident of Henry Street Settlement, along with young men and women like William English Walling, Ernest Poole, and Lillian Wald, took on the task of collecting information, arousing public opinion, and lobbying for better laws at Albany. J.G. Phelps Stokes, a wealthy young Yale graduate and resident of University Settlement, used the staff in his father's uptown office to turn out propaganda in favor of more effective child labor laws. The New York Child Labor Committee played an important part in the passage of a better child labor bill for New York in 1903; it also became the nucleus of the National Child Labor Committee.¹⁷

Just as the child labor reformers in New York began to realize in the first decade of the twentieth century that reform to be effective would have to be organized on the national level, so settlement workers in several cities began to devote more and more

time to national organizations and national legislation. In addition to the National Child Labor Committee, they helped to organize the National Women's Trade Union League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a national investigation of women and children in industry, and a national Industrial Relations Commission.¹⁸ Men like William English Walling, Henry Moskowitz, and Paul Kellogg became experts at bringing the right people together and getting a program of reform organized. They worked behind the scenes and so have never received the attention from historians that they deserve. They used much the same tactics on the national level that they had perfected in the ward, the city, and the state. They gathered statistics, collected information, and then used their knowledge and influence to exert pressure on elected officials.

In 1906 when James Reynolds was in Washington lobbying for the passage of a bill that would provide for federal inspection of meat packing plants, he wrote to Jane Addams asking her to "secure a strong expression of public sentiment in Chicago favoring passage of the Beveridge Amendment." Sometimes public sentiment could be effective, but often more direct tactics were needed. The next year Mary McDowell was in Washington lobbying for a bill to provide a federal investigation of women and children in industry. She wrote to Anita McCormick Blaine, the daughter of Cyrus McCormick, asking her to get letters from "conservative employers who have good conditions and are willing to have this significant subject of women in industry freed from confusion." Again in 1912 when Allen T. Burns and Graham Taylor, Jr., were coordinating a social work campaign for the passage of a bill in Congress providing for an Industrial Relations Commission, they asked the settlement workers to get pointed letters addressed to members of the congressional committee from labor leaders and businessmen as well as from social workers and university professors.¹⁹

Despite the realistic political tactics on the local, state, and national level, most settlement workers were disturbed by the slow and halting nature of their attempts to humanize the industrial city. Reform administrations were rarely reelected, and reform bills were often bypassed or ignored. They talked sometimes of the need of a great cause to unite all local efforts. In 1912 when Roosevelt bolted the Republican convention, a group of social workers led by Paul Kellogg and Henry Moskowitz were ready

with a platform of industrial minimums. When the Progressive party adopted their platform, they convinced themselves that this was the great cause for which they had been waiting. Primarily because of the Progressive platform, Jane Addams, Raymond Robins, Henry Moskowitz, and many other young social workers flocked to the new party and threw themselves into the political campaign. They contributed to the religious enthusiasm; they also helped in the realistic task of organizing a new party.²⁰ Edward T. Devine of the New York Charity Organization Society could warn that it was "the first political duty of social workers to be persistently and aggressively non-partisan, to maintain such relations with men of social good will in all parties as will insure their cooperation in specific measures for the promoting of the common good." But Jane Addams felt differently. "When the ideas and measures we have long been advocating become part of a political campaign... would we not be the victims of a curious self-consciousness if we failed to follow them there?" she asked.²¹ To Jane Addams the settlement idea led inevitably to political action even on the national level, and there were a large number of settlement workers who agreed with her.

Of course the Progressive campaign of 1912 seemed in some ways more like a crusade than like politics, and the collapse of the Progressive party and the outbreak of World War I altered, if it did not end, the political interests of the settlement workers. After 1914 there was a little less optimism, a little less confidence that evils could be righted by gathering statistics. It was perhaps more important that after 1914 settlement workers and other reformers became more interested in international affairs and a little less concerned with domestic reform and politics. In the twenties it was not so easy for settlement workers to have confidence in reform, and a new kind of social worker emerged who seemed to be more concerned with professional status than with political action. Something of the settlement workers' interest in political reform, something of their realistic tactics remained, of course, in the twenties and thirties, and something of that tradition survives even today, but it was in the Progressive Era that settlement workers were most concerned with political action—it was a concern that developed from their experience.²² They could not always agree among themselves, but if they took the settlement idea seriously, they became involved one way or another in politics; first in the ward, then in the city, the state, and the nation.

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