

## Elizabeth Bjork – Research Project

### Obituary – Robin Myers

September 19, 1991 – Robin Myers passed away in her New York City home today. She was 75 years old, and the cause of death has not been confirmed<sup>1</sup>. Myers spent most of her adult life working for the Socialist Party of the United States, including a four-year tenure as national secretary. Myers was the second woman to hold the position, after Bertha Hale White, who served as national secretary from 1924-1945<sup>2</sup>. Like party chairman Darlington Hoopes, Myers supported continuing electoral action for the Socialist Party<sup>3</sup>. Although she broke with the party in 1958 after it merged with the International Socialist League because she said the infighting was too draining<sup>4</sup>, Myers always described herself as a socialist<sup>5</sup>. Born in New Jersey, Myers lived in New York City for most of her life. She took the last name Shepard after marrying, but the identity and whereabouts of her spouse and possible children are not known<sup>6</sup>.

### Selected Sources

Socialist Party (US). *Electoral Action for Socialism: A Policy for the Socialist Party*. New York: 1951. Microfilm, Arizona State University.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007. Accessed 29 November, 2017. Ancestry.com

<sup>2</sup> Michael Pierce, "Great Women All, Serving a Glorious Cause: Freda Hogan Ameringer's Reminiscences of Socialism in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 69 (Winter 201): 293-324

<sup>3</sup> Paul J. Henderson, *Darlington Hoopes: The Political Biography of an American Socialist*. (Glasgow: Humming Earth, 2005), 127

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>5</sup> Robin Meyers, "Interview with Miss Robin Myers," By Betty Yorburg. June 9, 1965, 1-53. Print, Columbia University, 46

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Social Security Applications and Claims Index

This pamphlet details the reasons behind the Socialist Party's decision to continue electoral action even though its chances for victory were generally low to non-existent. The writing is thoughtful and analytical, correctly arguing that the recent increases in welfare and progressive thought are due more to economic strength and the strength of the labor movement than any particular genius or altruism within the Democratic Party. Although the language is not accusatory, the pamphlet directly refutes the idea that the Socialist Party should drop its electoral efforts and support the Democrats instead. It differentiates Socialists from Democrats because of four major reasons. According to the pamphlet, Democrats support military action and a huge role for military spending in the US economy, and they also support the system of capitalism, where production is based on profit motives rather than societal utility. They also rely upon a more centralized and autocratic party structure, whereas the Socialists see themselves as wholly Democratic. Most significantly, the pamphlet argues that Democrats have used the welfare system and the best ideas of the Socialist Party in a system of pork barrel legislation; rather than addressing the root causes of poverty and attempting to restructure American society in favor of greater equality, the Democrats' version of welfare has been a system of appeasement rather than active change. The pamphlet also says the Socialist Party would effectively acquiesce to the existing political order if it were to give up electoral activity. I chose this pamphlet as my most important source because it succinctly defends the existence of the Socialist Party and because I believe Robin Myers wrote it. Her name appears at the bottom of the pamphlet, along with the names of four other members of the Executive Committee, and it closely corroborates the views she expressed in her interview with Betty Yorburg.

Socialist Party (US). *Your Questions Answered*. New York: 1952. Microfilm, Arizona State University.

As another political pamphlet, this document provides succinct questions and answers to define the platform of the Socialist Party. It also contains several amusing illustrations, which are hand-drawn cartoons intended to illustrate the platforms the pamphlet describes. My favorites are the “one world” illustration and the Stalin one because they so clearly convey the pamphlet’s intended tone. In the “one world” drawing, a cartoon figure with a globe for a head holds a picket sign that says “1 world” as a chain of shadowy figures holds hands in the background. The figure has a huge smile and seems jubilant about the prospect of international cooperation, although this is defined in the vaguest sense possible. The amusing illustration perfectly captures this sense of happy unity but empty platitudes. In contrary to the specificity of their domestic programs, the Socialist vision of internationalism is idealistic but wholly unformed. The Stalin illustration is similarly humorous, depicting a little socialist figure staring down Stalin’s massive portrait as Stalin smirks back. The description below the image clearly denounces Stalin, saying that socialism means democracy while Russia is a dictatorship and therefore completely incompatible with socialist principles. This description goes on to say that socialism stands for civil liberties while Russian communism directly opposes them. The socialist in the illustration reflects the resolutely anti-Russian tone of the blurb. I chose this image because it seems like effective political education, with a light tone but clear arguments.

Paul J Henderson. *Darlington Hoopes: The Political Biography of an American Socialist*. Glasgow: Humming Earth, 2005.

Published in 2005, this is a political biography of Darlington Hoopes, who was a close colleague of Myers and the Socialist Party's National Chairman from 1950 to 1968. Like Myers, he advocated for continuing electoral action and became party chairman when this platform was adopted in 1950. Trained as a lawyer, Hoopes served in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives before focusing on leadership within the national party. Although focused narrowly on Hoopes, the book nevertheless explains key political decisions within the 1950s Socialist Party because Hoopes was so centrally involved. The book mentioned Myers several times, characterizing her as a radical theoretician. It also includes a fascinating level of detail, describing how the party was so poor by the early 1950s that Myers turned off the telephones (129). The depth of primary sources is impressive, and I subsequently requested the personal papers of Darlington Hoopes via ILL but they have not come yet. Still, I enjoyed reading the excerpts of personal letters, especially those written to or from Myers. In one letter to Hoopes, she recounts the relief she has felt since leaving the party, explaining how all of its energy had become devoted to partisan infighting that did not interest her. I chose this book for its clear characterizations of the discord within the Socialist Party during the years Robin Myers served as general secretary.

My Dear Niece,

I would like to tell you a little about my experiences working for the Socialist Party. I know it probably is not something you hear much about – after all, the party has declined to the

point of obscurity. But I still see the need for a new type of socialism here in the United States, and I hope that young people such as yourself will become interested in reviving it<sup>7</sup>.

I became politically active in college, at the height of the Great Depression. I went to the New Jersey College for Women on a scholarship, and I met the most amazing community of people<sup>8</sup>. Although I had not been politically active before, I soon became captivated by the sense of radical urgency in the air. In those days, we really thought socialism had a chance, in the election of 1940 and beyond<sup>9</sup>. But then war came. Through the National Students Federation conferences I attended and my involvement in the American Student Union, I spent a lot of time organizing against the war<sup>10</sup>. After I graduated college, I started working for ASU full-time, but they folded after a few months because of irreconcilable splits between the socialists and communists<sup>11</sup>.

A lot of people do not understand these divisions, but they mattered a lot. As socialists, we were always very skeptical of totalitarian regimes, and especially after we began to understand the evils of Soviet collectivization, we really reacted against that<sup>12</sup>. Socialism, at least in the ways we knew it, was primarily individualistic. We were committed to absolute equality, and the system of Russian communism allowed huge disparities in income<sup>13</sup>. Like Nazism and imperialist capitalism, their system of communism was driven by violent power and enshrined in

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<sup>7</sup> Robin, Myers, Robin, "Interview with Miss Robin Myers," by Betty Yorburg, June 9, 1965, 1-53. Print, Columbia University, 46

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6-7

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8-9

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15-16

<sup>13</sup> Socialist Party (US). *Your Questions Answered*. New York: 1952. Microfilm, Arizona State University, 13

dictatorship. That is not what our socialism is about at all. We always support the civil liberties of every group. For us, socialism is fundamentally democratic<sup>14</sup>.

Even the American communists I encountered “were a machine kind of people”<sup>15</sup>. They were always cold and rigid in their ideology, and it was they who destroyed the basic unity among leftists in the 1920s<sup>16</sup>. As socialists, we have always had this underlying commitment to unity, and our decisions are made democratically and collectively<sup>17</sup>. But sometimes this structure lead to problems, especially when the party started declining. And we really did decline very sharply. Right around 1950, when I first became General Secretary, I had to turn off the telephones and disconnect the switchboards in order to save the \$20 per month. We were that broke<sup>18</sup>.

I saw a few main reasons for our decline. The first is simply that it is tough – really tough, in fact – to be a third party in the American political system<sup>19</sup>. In many ways, I think, we were a coalition-building party, but the party in power, whether Democrat or Republican, always had an interest in strengthening the status quo and keeping other parties from power<sup>20</sup>. But even while they demonized us, the Democrats took many of our ideas – it was just that their version of welfare worked more like a collection of bribes to various constituencies<sup>21</sup>. They were not – and still are not – committed to actually reforming American society. Oftentimes Democrats and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>15</sup> Myers, 29

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>17</sup> Socialist Party (US). *Electoral Action for Socialism: A Policy for the Socialist Party*. New York: 1951. Microfilm, Arizona State University, 2

<sup>18</sup> Paul J. Henderson, *Darlington Hoopes: The Political Biography of an American Socialist*. Glasgow: Humming Earth, 2005, 156

<sup>19</sup> Myers, 35

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>21</sup> *Electoral Action for Socialism*, 3

Republicans are similarly amorphous and they need other forces to push them toward the left<sup>22</sup>.  
And that is why I think we still need a strong Socialist Party.

Without electoral action of our own, I think we are in danger of acquiescing to the status of capitalism rather than attacking the roots of poverty to create a more just society. “Even if everybody in America believed in Socialism, we would still have capitalism, totalitarianism, recurring wars, poverty - in short, the hell on earth we now endure - unless we organized to put our political principles into effect<sup>23</sup>. I hope you will join the next generation of revolutionaries.

Love, Aunt Robin

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<sup>22</sup> Myers, 19

<sup>23</sup> *Your Questions Answered*, 15