

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

John W. Quinley

June 2025

Hi Friends,

Yes, Sandburg was a socialist. This month's letter provides a nuanced look at what this meant in the early 1900s.

BTW, the play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg* has now been performed three times to audiences totaling nearly 350 people. The players received standing ovations each time. It will be performed at the Sandburg Home sometime this fall, and performances are planned for Greenville, SC, and Hendersonville, Brevard, and Asheville, NC.

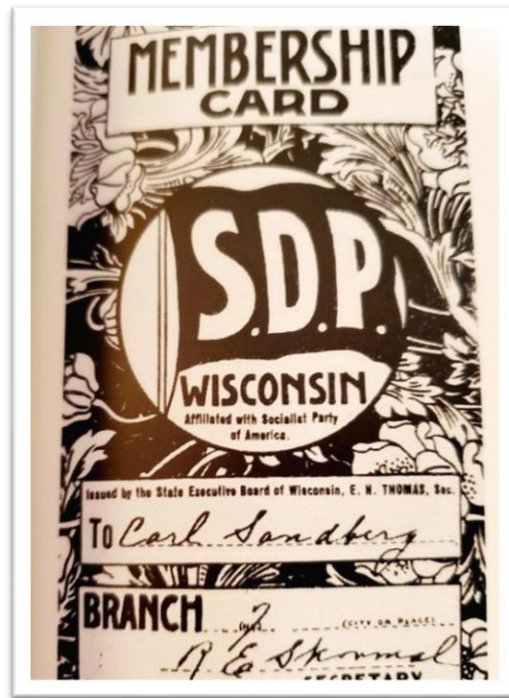
Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John

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Socialist Roots

Dear Readers,

In his widely distributed piece, "You and Your Job," Sandburg indicts the capitalistic system of his day:

I believe in obstacles, but I say that a system such as the capitalist system, putting such obstacles as starvation, underfeeding, overwork, bad housing, and perpetual uncertainty of work in the lives of human beings, is a pitiless, ignorant, blind, reckless, cruel mockery of a system.

During my talks about Carl Sandburg, there is often someone who asked, “Wasn’t he a socialist.” Yes, he was. And so was his wife and his brother-in-law, the world-famous photographer Edward Steichen.

Carl met his soon-to-be-wife Lilian Steichen at the headquarters of the Social-Democratic Party of Wisconsin. She was there to discuss her translations of socialist texts from their original German. He was there as an up-and-coming political organizer for the state’s southern district.

Carl and Paula were “true believers”; and evident from the content of letters they wrote during their courtship, politics, art, and romantic love were intertwined for them. She shared how the couple, working together for socialism was sure to do good, “all the good we have strength to do!!” by working “hard and joyously and well.” He replied that they would be held together by their passion “to work for socialism and help usher in the New Civilization.”

During the Sandburgs’ youth and young adulthood, America had transitioned from an economy based on agriculture and small market towns to one centered on massive industrial development and urban growth. Industrial jobs became subdivided into small unskilled tasks, which led to repetitive and monotonous work for factory employees—ten to twelve hours per day, six days a week, with no vacations. The traditional meaning of labor as a matter of self-fulfillment and economic mobility lost much of its meaning. Workers had less control over their lives outside the workplace as well, living in overcrowded, substandard company housing—often right next to the factories—and were compelled to purchase necessities at company stores. When labor tried to organize, Congress and the courts intervened on the side of business interests. Local, state, and federal forces squashed the efforts of striking workers as did ruthless private detective agencies like the Pinkertons.

These conditions ushered in the Progressive Era in American life and politics. Progressive policies took many forms, such as the good government movement, efforts to pass prohibition legislation, and government actions to bust corporate trusts. Other initiatives were pursued by American Socialism, which championed the growth of unions and their political causes (e.g., municipal corruption, the excesses of capitalists and inherited wealth, job security, a minimum wage, the prohibition of child labor, workman's compensation and unemployment insurance, industrial safety, women's suffrage, and municipal ownership of utilities).

The more moderate wing of the socialist movement supported incremental, democratic change within the capitalist system, while the radical wing called for direct action like massive strikes and even sabotage. Although there is debate among Sandburg scholars as to the extent of Sandburg's radicalization, there is a rough consensus that he was more revolutionary in his early days as a social activist; that he became more politically pragmatic during the WWI era; and that his concern for socialist issues continued throughout his life.

Sandburg was recruited to the Social-Democratic Party of Wisconsin in the early 1900s to organize local rallies, give soapbox speeches, and write political articles and editorials. Between 1912 and 1918, he published more than forty pieces and nearly a dozen poems in the *International Socialist Review* and wrote for socialist leaning presses in Milwaukee and Chicago. In a speech delivered in 1910, "A Labor Day Talk," he characterized society as "Prosperity, luxury and magnificence for the few and death, hell, disease, misery and degradation for the many." And he called for action:

Years ago we asked for old age pensions . . .

But the years went by, we were laughed at as agitators, and it is today as it
always was—old age is a time of life to be feared.

Years ago we asked for a minimum wage to apply among all workers . . .

But the years went by, we were ridiculed as impractical, and today millions of wage earners get pay so miserably low that they cannot live decently, cleanly, rightly . . .

We have learned that Labor will have to fight its own battles. From now on we trust OURSELVES. . . .

Sandburg quit the Socialist Party after America's entry into WWI in part because of the Party's opposition to American involvement, calling it "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight." When many of the policies he supported became reality during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency, he felt vindicated. Although he officially remained an independent, he supported liberal policies for the remainder of his life.

Thanks for reading,

Quinley is the author of the book *Discovering Carl Sandburg*, and play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*, and the print series *Letters from a Docent*. He is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com.