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"An outcast among radicals; the life of William English Walling"

W.E.B. Du Bois, the first black to earn a doctorate from Harvard, proclaimed this man with deep Hoosier roots as "the real founder" of the NAACP. Labor historian Leon Fink described him as one of the most cerebral and well-educated American socialists in the early 20th century. Walter Lippmann said he was the only socialist of his era willing to provide critical analysis of the socialist movement. Until his political views were shaken from their moorings by the war in Europe and the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, he considered himself a revolutionary socialist. And although he later abandoned those revolutionary views, he remained a prominent advocate for workers, women, and minorities throughout the rest of his life.

The principal subject of this paper, William English Walling, was born in Louisville in 1877 to Dr. Willougby Walling and his wife Rosalind English. He spent his formative years in Indianapolis after his father opened a pharmaceutical company here.

Walling's maternal grandfather, William Hayden English, was a War Democrat who'd served as secretary of Indiana's 1850 Constitutional Convention, infamous for prohibiting blacks from moving to Indiana and denying civil rights to those who remained. After serving a term in Congress, English accumulated vast wealth by investing in Indianapolis residential real estate. He organized the First National Bank of Indianapolis, and later became controlling shareholder in the Indianapolis Street Railway Company. English returned to the political arena 20 years after leaving Congress when 1880 Democratic Party presidential nominee Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock asked him to join the ticket as his running mate. After narrowly losing the election to Garfield and Arthur, English became president of the Indiana Historical Society, and helped plan and finance the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument on the Circle where his English Hotel and Opera House stood.

At the time of his death in 1896, English was the wealthiest man in Indiana, with an estate valued at $6.5 million, over $200 million today. His wife had predeceased him, so English's vast fortune was left to his two children, Indianapolis lawyer and politician William Eastin English, and Walling's mother, Rosalind. The fortune Walling inherited from his grandfather English's estate gave him financial independence for the rest of his life.

The year of Walling's birth, 1877, was pivotal in the nation's history. Reconstruction ended, thus depriving the formerly enslaved of the protection of federal troops, and allowing domestic terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan to intimidate blacks from voting and participating in bi-racial governing coalitions.

Industrial barons, overseeing the greatest expansion of economic growth in human history, and aided by a decidedly pro-business Supreme Court, built vast fortunes and began sending warning signals to American workers that strikes would not be tolerated.

But winds of change were already beginning to blow. Utopian socialism had emerged before the Civil War when Robert Owen began an experiment in communal living on the Wabash River in New Harmony. Immigrants from Eastern Europe began flooding into American cities and factories, bringing with them the political and economic theories of radical 19th century German philosophers and revolutionaries such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

In 1887 an American author and political activist from Massachusetts, Edward Bellamy, published a wildly-popular utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, in which the author falls asleep only to awaken in the year 2000 to find a socialistic society where inequalities and private property have been abolished in favor of

state ownership of the means of production. Bellamy's vision inspired the formation of clubs across the nation dedicated to his political ideas.

Walling came of age during the turbulent transition from the genteel Victorian era to the period of rapid industrialization and urbanization that followed it, as depicted by Hoosier authors Booth Tarkington in *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie.*

A precocious student, Walling left his Indianapolis home at 16 to enroll in the University of Chicago, graduating with high honors in 1897. He was admitted to Harvard Law School, but left after deciding he was not temperamentally suited for the practice of law. He returned to the University of Chicago to pursue a graduate degree in economics where he studied under Thorstein Veblen, an early critic of capitalism who first introduced Walling to various strains of socialist thought.

Rather than pursuing a traditional profession, Walling drifted into Chicago's network of social workers. In 1899 he moved into Jane Addams' Hull House on Chicago's south side. He accepted a job with the State of Illinois as a factory inspector enforcing child labor laws. At a national conference of factory inspectors held in Indianapolis, he presented a well-received paper urging the enactment of stronger job safety laws, effectively launching his career as a social reformer.

Though he'd been reserved and emotionally distant, Walling was deeply moved by the unsanitary and dangerous factory conditions that later inspired Upton Sinclair to publish *The Jungle*. Walling's exposure to the cruelties unregulated industrialization inflicted on workers, especially children, caused him to begin considering himself a radical critic of American society, though not yet a committed socialist.

In 1902 Walling accepted an invitation from a friend to leave Chicago for Manhattan's Lower East Side and take up residence at University Settlement. Like Jane Addams' Hull House, University Settlement provided a safe, culturally-rich environment for newly-arrived eastern European immigrants, including a large number of Russian Jews fleeing persecution by Czar Nicholas II.

A year after moving from Chicago, Walling attended the American Federation of Labor's annual convention in Boston. There he met Mary Kenney O'Sullivan, a trade union organizer from Chicago who lived at Hull House. Walling had met in London the previous year with an umbrella organization of women's trade unions. When he returned he began to generate support for a similar organization in the States. Together with O'Sullivan and other female union organizers they formed the Women's Trade Union League to fight sweatshop conditions in the ladies' garment industry. The WTUL later became the ILGUW.

While in Boston, Walling also befriended the much older labor leader Samuel Gompers and began a collaboration with organized labor and the conservative trade union leader that lasted for the rest their lives. Although the two at the time were ideologically far apart, Gompers was impressed with Walling's intellect and urged him to begin writing for the AFL's newspaper.

Searching for new challenges, Walling decided to become a muckraking journalist. He'd acquired a keen interest in Russia after befriending many Russian Jewish immigrants in Chicago and New York. In his new role as a journalist he decided to travel to Russia to assess the failed 1905 revolution's impact on Russian society. During his months-long stay in Russia he became acquainted with several leading Russian revolutionaries, writers, and intellectuals, including a 77-year-old Leo Tolstoy, who called Walling "one of the most remarkable Americans" he'd met.

Walling had first met Anna Strunsky at a meeting of socialists in New York about 1902. Strunsky was a brilliant Russian-born revolutionary socialist writer living in San Francisco who'd collaborated in several literary ventures with the radical and flamboyant author Jack London. Although the two seemed a perfect match, Walling wrongly assumed at the time that Anna was romantically involved with London.

After later learning that London had married another woman, Walling wrote Anna from St. Petersburg and asked her to join him there. Anna agreed to make the journey. The next year were married in a civil ceremony in Paris. Upon their return to the States, Anna shocked the elite, patriarchal Chicago society that Walling's parents inhabited by refusing to be known as "Mrs. Walling."

On a return trip to St. Petersburg in late 1907, the Wallings were arrested by Russian authorities. However, they were soon released after prominent members of President Roosevelt's cabinet, and his uncle's friend, Indiana Sen. Albert Beveridge, intervened. Upon his return to the states, Walling published his first book, "Russia's Message: The True World Impact of the Revolution," consisting of hundreds of interviews with Russian peasants and prominent Russian intellectuals such as Tolstoy and Vladmir Lenin. The book infuriated his uncle, who was put off by his nephew's strong embrace of radical politics. One reporter remarked that Walling's grandfather English would rise in his grave if he knew how his grandson was using his inheritance.

The following year, Walling experienced a blow to his revolutionary faith in the workers' collective ability to achieve social and economic change. After hearing of racial unrest in Springfield, Illinois, in August, 1908, the Wallings took a train from Chicago to investigate. They discovered that angry white mobs had terrorized Springfield's black citizens and destroyed many black-owned

businesses. Unlike the post-Reconstruction racial violence in the Old Confederacy, this attack had occurred in the north and in the Great Emancipator's hometown.

As an independent journalist, Walling wrote an article entitled "Race War in the North," in which he accused Springfield's white working-class citizens of having initiated "permanent warfare upon the negro race." He warned that if even northern whites were unwilling to treat the formerly enslaved with absolute political and social equality, the former Confederates in the South would have successfully transferred their race war to the North. Walling saw this racial hatred as complicating efforts to unite workers of all races and ethnicities in their common economic struggles against rapacious capitalists.

The aftermath of the racial violence and injustices Walling observed in Springfield convinced him of the need for a national biracial organization to combat the post-Reconstruction tide of racial prejudice that had led to a resurgence of the Klan in the South but also the Midwest. On the centennial of Lincoln's birth, February 12, 1909, three prominent white citizens: Mary White Ovington, a descendent of an abolitionist; Dr. Henry Moskowitz, a Romanian Jewish immigrant from New York City; and Walling, issued a call for a "national conference on the Negro question." They circulated it among an interracial group of progressive reformers, including Jane Addams, educational and social reformer

John Dewey, Clarence Darrow, novelist William Dean Howells, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Walling was instrumental in creating a permanent structure for what would become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He personally recruited Du Bois to handle the fledgling organization's publicity and edit its new journal, *The Crisis,* a name Walling himself suggested.

Du Bois had previously risen to national prominence as a leader of the Niagara Movement. He was a bitter opponent of Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta compromise," under which in exchange for basic educational and economic opportunities, blacks would acquiesce to white political rule. Walling was undeterred by the controversy surrounding Du Bois, insisting he be given a prominent role in the new organization. Over the next few decades Du Bois brilliantly and effectively used *The Crisis* as a national platform to protest lynchings, Jim Crow laws, racially segregated public schools, and other forms of racial injustices.

The Socialist Party of America had been organized in Indianapolis in 1901. However, despite his unabashed socialist views, Walling did not formally affiliate until 1910 when he joined to fight those within the movement he thought were insufficiently radical. He agreed to contribute to a new left-wing publication, *The*

Masses, published between 1911-1917, and featuring articles by Jack London, Carl Sandburg, Upton Sinclair and other prominent socialists. Between 1912 and 1914 Walling also authored a trilogy of well-received books critiquing socialism, establishing himself as one of the most provocative and influential socialist thinkers of his time.

When he joined the Socialist Party in 1910, Walling considered himself a radical even within the American socialist movement. His relationships with Gompers on the right and Gene Debs and Big Bill Haywood of the International Workers of the World on the left gave him a unique perspective into the warring factions of the still-young American labor movement. It also showed the difficult challenges of unifying more radical industrial workers with the conservative trade unionists. Though sharing the goals of such then-revolutionary reforms as a minimum wage, 8-hour workday, a ban on child labor, and the right to universal quality public education, these factions often disagreed as to the best tactics to achieve those reforms, leading to fierce in-fighting.

Some more orthodox socialists such as Milwaukee's Victor Berger believed that capitalism would inevitably evolve into a higher economic and political system—socialism—but that only "fully-evolved" white workers would benefit. This so-called "scientific racism" –the belief that science could be applied to solve social and political problems--was anathema to Walling who believed in the

capacity of all individuals to transcend perceived biological limitations. Walling's became the most prominent voice among socialist intellectuals of his day to reject scientific racism, a concept that laid the groundwork for the eugenics movement about which Richard Gunderman spoke at our last meeting.

Walling feared that any racially exclusionary practices by unions would ultimately weaken American labor. He also presciently saw that if black workers were denied the right to full participation in the labor movement, employers would recruit them to break strikes and undermine working class solidarity. In retrospect, the racially exclusionary admissions policies of the early American labor movement prevented it from achieving the type of sweeping economic and political transformations that unions in Western Europe were able to achieve.

As his views began to evolve, Walling did not shy away from challenging other socialist dogma, such as the class struggle and allegiance to Bolshevism. He abandoned rigidly ideological approaches and the idolizing of long-dead theorists such as Marx, Engels, and Herbert Spencer. His increasing willingness to depart from socialist orthodoxy soon began to strain his already tenuous relationship with many of his socialist comrades.

In the face of the rising nationalism and imperialism in Germany, Walling also abandoned the traditional pacificism of most of his fellow socialists. Along

with a handful of other pro-War socialists, including Upton Sinclair, he founded the Social Democratic League of America to support the Allies in the European war. In January of 1918 he traveled to Europe under the banner of the SDL to meet with British and French socialists to explain to them how socialism was not incompatible with American war objectives, and to promote the Wilson administration's hostility to the new Bolshevik government in Russia.

Walling regarded the Bolsheviks as ruthless seekers of power lacking support from Russian workers and peasants. His more conservative views moved him closer to Gompers and away from Eugene Debs, who along with most socialists continued to oppose American involvement in the European war. Walling viewed the conflict in Europe as a just war against the greater evils of Bolshevism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, just as his American literary hero, Walt Whitman, who though a pacifist, had supported the American Civil War as a just war to end slavery. Walling and a handful of his fellow pragmatic socialists believed that the war in Europe would lead to popular uprisings against foreign despots and ultimately to a world-wide expansion of democracy and liberty.

Walling's often deeply-personal criticisms of many of his former comrades hastened his estrangement from most American socialists. His appointment by President Wilson as an emissary to dissuade the new Bolshevik government from negotiating a peace treaty with Germany further alienated him from many of them,

who viewed any association with the Wilson Administration as a supreme act of betrayal.

As his relationship with American socialists soured, Walling grew closer to Gompers. Just after the War, they co-published a book entitled *Out of Their Own Mouths: A Revelation and an Indictment of Sovietism*, in which Walling argued that the Soviet scheme of compulsory labor, even more so than greedy capitalists, constituted the gravest danger to the American worker.

In 1924 Walling entered the world of mainstream politics for the first time, seeking the Democratic nomination for Congress from Connecticut where he maintained one of his three residences. Endorsements by the AFL, the Progressive Party, and Gompers himself proved unavailing, as he lost badly to the Democratic incumbent.

Two years later, in 1926, Walling published *American Labor and American Democracy*, now viewed as the authoritative history of the labor movement in the first quarter of the 20th century. He now envisioned a society in which income inequalities would be eliminated not by abolishing capitalism and nationalizing the means of production, but gradually by taxing corporate profits, raising wages, and expanding labor rights.

After Gompers' death in 1924, Walling continued to serve as a house intellectual and publicist for the AFL. But by 1930 his inherited fortune was nearly spent, his marriage to Anna had been badly strained, and his days as perhaps the leading American socialist intellectual were behind him.

He continued to enjoy a platform with the AFL that allowed him to write on national issues. His final book, "*Our Next Step,"* published with AFL vice president Matthew Woll in 1934, was intended as a guide to FDR's economic recovery program. His mission to expand worker rights was realized, at least in theory, with the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935, a law that offered federal bureaucratic protections for workers' right to organize.

Never content to simply sit back and reflect on his successes, and still spoiling to fight authoritarianism wherever it raised its head, Walling traveled to Europe in 1936 to help form underground labor movements against the fascist governments of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. He had hoped to secretly meet with German labor representatives fighting the Nazis but became ill and died alone in an Amsterdam hotel room on September 12, 1936. His ashes were later interred in the English family plot in Section 1 of Crown Hill Cemetery.

Despite his inherited affluence and privileged upbringing Walling, like his comrade Debs, dedicated his life fighting for what Hoosier writer John Barlow

Martin later called the "ceaseless quest for the better life begun by Robert Owen." Martin lamented that after leading socialists had passed from the Indiana scene, the ideas and ideals they had espoused were too soon replaced by the bigotry, hysteria, and intolerance of the Klan.

Walling's synthesis of socialism with anti-racism and core American democratic values were a harbinger of the progressive reforms of FDR's New Deal, which sought to humanize rather than displace capitalism. His commitment to internationalism and opposition to fascism and Communism also foreshadowed American support of its European allies in WW II and Truman's policy of containment during the Cold War.

Like Debs, Walling attempted to help American workers cope with the dislocations they were experiencing during the transition from the largely agrarian Victorian world to the urban industrial capitalism of the 20th century. Each espoused a uniquely American brand of socialism. Each believed that the broad economic and political reforms they sought could be accomplished without sacrificing the dignity of the individual worker, and that those reforms could happen wholly within America's existing democratic traditions. Each looked to Lincoln and Jefferson rather than overseas to Marx and Engles for inspiration and guidance. Each regarded critical dissent as patriotic and indispensable to American democracy. But while Debs found it more difficult to break with then-dominant

attitudes towards blacks, immigrants, and women, Walling believed that all workers must be included in organized labor's quest for a more just society. Each eventually came to believe that organized labor rather than any political party or social movement was more likely to usher in Robert Owen's model for the ideal society. And though neither Walling nor Debs succeeded in radically transforming America, their lives and careers must be assessed in the context of the tumultuous era in which they lived

So what conclusions can we draw from examining the life of William English Walling? Was he, as one historian has suggested, a traitor to the socialist movement who revised socialism beyond recognition and later became an apologist for the U.S. bourgeoisie? Was he, as another has written, a socialist who was never able to fully shake his Victorian roots and whose contributions are ultimately (and perhaps deservedly) likely to lapse into obscurity? Or, as others have argued, does he deserve praise as the leading socialist intellectual of his era, and perhaps even on a par with Debs, for his lifelong commitment to equality, anti-authoritarianism, and democracy?

I'll leave the answers to those questions to each of you, and to posterity.

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