

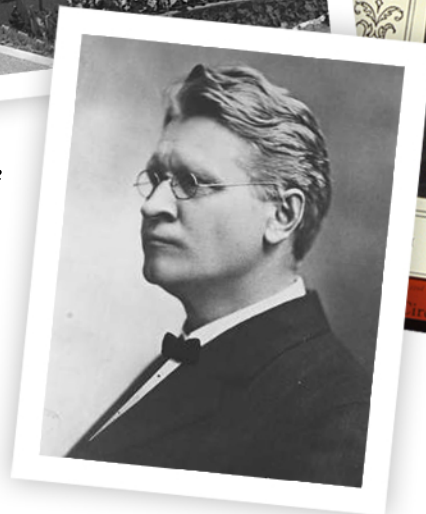
# The **M**aking of **M**ilwaukee Stories

Historical Time Period : 1900-1960

## A Bigger, Better, and Brighter City: Socialists in Milwaukee



*Socialists Build Milwaukee  
Park System*



*Emil Seidel,  
Milwaukee's Socialist Mayor  
(1910-1912)*



*Daniel Hoan,  
Socialist Mayor (1916-1920)  
makes the front page  
of Time Magazine*

### Connecting to “The Making of Milwaukee”

Video Chapters: #10 - Trouble in Town & #11 Socialists at Work

Curriculum Chapter: Gr. 5-12 - The Best of Times and the Worst of Times

## *A Better, Bigger and Brighter City: Milwaukee's Socialist Leaders*

When the first European settlers arrived in Milwaukee, about 1830, they found a beautiful, natural spot on Lake Michigan. There were clean rivers, abundant forests and rich soil. Milwaukee grew fast and by 1900 the pristine environment became polluted. Milwaukee's air was dirty because factories spewed out thick clouds of unhealthy smoke every day. Lake Michigan became polluted because Milwaukee's garbage was thrown into the lake, the very same lake that people used for drinking water and recreation. The city had a lot of crime and there were few parks where children could play. Many immigrant families lived in crowded, unsanitary houses where germs spread easily between family members. Life was hard. The average person born in Milwaukee in 1900 could only expect to live to the age of 43!

Milwaukee had even bigger problems than dirty air and water. Many of Milwaukee's elected leaders were corrupt. Politicians who were supposed to make the city a great place to live and work looked after only themselves and their friends. They did little to help the regular people of the city. For example, Milwaukee's mayor, David Rose, took money from almost anyone who wanted a favor from him. This is called graft and violates the idea that elected officials are not supposed to take money or gifts from anyone. Milwaukee citizens were very upset when they discovered that their tax money was sometimes used illegally by their leaders. Some city officials even stole things like coal and horses that were property of the city.

The people who had money to buy favors from Mayor Rose and other dishonest leaders were happy with the way they could cheat the system. But many people in Milwaukee wanted reform, or change; they wanted cleaner streets, air, and water. They wanted parks where their children could play safely, and where their families could go for picnics and concerts. They wanted Milwaukee to be a healthier place to live. Milwaukee citizens also wanted honest leaders. They wanted politicians who listened to all people and not just people who had money to buy favors.

By this time a group of people known as Socialists had immigrated to the United States. Many Socialists came from the country of Germany and some settled in Milwaukee. They believed that the people elected to run cities, towns and counties should use their power to create a better society. They wanted everyone to have access to a healthy, safe environment. And they thought the poor and working class people, the "little guys," should have government that cared about them as well as about powerful and wealthy people.

Not all Socialists in our country wanted the same things. Milwaukee's Socialists focused on good, efficient government. They believed the city government should provide the best schools, parks, health care, clean air and water, and public transportation. Because they were concerned with these things that made life better for all people, they became known as "Sewer Socialists".

Milwaukee's citizens eventually became very dissatisfied with dishonest leaders like Mayor Rose. In 1910, a Socialist named Emil Seidel was elected as mayor to lead our city. With that election, Milwaukee became the only large city in the United States to elect a Socialist mayor. Victor Berger, one of the main leaders of Milwaukee's Socialists, was elected to be Milwaukee's representative to the United States Congress that same year. Still other Socialists were elected to Milwaukee city and county positions.

Emil Seidel was a very honest leader. He developed a street light system for Milwaukee, made sure factories and schools were clean and healthy, and helped start Milwaukee Vocational School, now called Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). Although Seidel made positive changes for Milwaukee, he lost the next election and was no longer mayor. But in 1916, Milwaukee voters elected another Socialist mayor, Daniel Hoan. He was Milwaukee's mayor for the next 24 years.

Hoan also worked hard to give Milwaukee clean government. He used city tax money to build more housing for workers. And he created health programs to help all of Milwaukee's people live longer and healthier lives. In the 1930's, when the United States experienced the Great Depression, many people lost their

jobs and became poor. Mayor Hoan used money from the U.S. national government, in Washington D.C., to provide jobs for Milwaukee workers. These workers built roads and buildings; they created exhibits for the Milwaukee Public Museum; they painted murals in public buildings; and others even played instruments in the city orchestra.

One of the great things that Milwaukee did with U.S. government money was to put people to work building our public park system. Charles Whitnall, another Milwaukee Socialist, designed a master plan for a Milwaukee park system that formed a loop of parks and parkways around the city. With U.S. government funds, hundreds of people went to work building roads, golf courses, waterfalls, playgrounds, swimming pools and hiking trails. Today the Milwaukee County Park System boasts over 140 parks that boost the quality of life for all our citizens. One of Milwaukee's favorite parks is named Whitnall Park in honor of the man who envisioned these great public spaces for everyone to enjoy.

Although Daniel Hoan helped lead the city through one of its most challenging times, in 1940 Milwaukee's citizens elected a new mayor named Carl Zeidler. He was not a Socialist. Zeidler was young, good looking, and used his singing voice to help him win the election. But he was not mayor for very long. When the United States entered World War II, Carl Zeidler left his job as mayor to serve his country. In 1942, the ship that Lieutenant Carl Zeidler served on disappeared and is believed to have sunk. Carl never returned home.

Carl's brother, Frank Zeidler was elected mayor in 1948. Frank Zeidler was a Socialist just like Emil Seidel and Daniel Hoan. He served as mayor until 1960. Mayor Zeidler was a very honest man. He, too, worked hard for clean and honest government. Zeidler helped Milwaukee grow by annexing land, especially on the Northwest side of the city. He worked to build public housing for poor people. And he joined with others to help create the War Memorial, Milwaukee Public Television, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Just like the Socialists before him, Mayor Zeidler worked to make Milwaukee a good place to live for all people.

Today, Milwaukee's Socialists have faded from public office. But the Socialists left a tradition of clean government that we take pride in. Milwaukee citizens continue to demand that leaders who represent them are honest and fair. The Socialist mayors of Milwaukee helped to build, in the words of Daniel Hoan, a "better, bigger, and brighter city."