

RAIVAAJA JUNE 26, 1924-- 1

HISTORY OF THE MAYNARD FINNISH SOCIALIST CHAPTER Written by Verner Niskanen

Since these festival stories have described the start and later development of the local Finnish settlement, it is probably only right that we learn of the might of the festival host and the birth of the Maynard Finnish Socialist Chapter.

The Maynard Finnish Socialist Chapter was formed on September, 24, 1903 with 25 members, at the same time joining the Imatra League as # 20, thus reaching the age of maturity, 21 years this fall. The chapter adopted the official name "Taisto" until 1904 when a new period in its internal and external history began.

Although the base for a worker's association had thus been laid, it developed very slowly. The surrounding populace did not know about socialism. No new members were forthcoming for a long time. The newcomer was regarded with fearful reluctance. The church and the temperance society who prescribed the local attitudes were ready to shoot their arrows to destroy the chapter and awaited triumphantly to hear the death knell of their new competitor. In spite of our difficulties, this waiting turned out to be premature.

In addition to this opposition, there was also the lack of a good meeting place. Believing in the light of victory, they stepped off with youthful vigor and a faith that could move mountains. However, at a meeting held in May, 1904, a decision to cease operations was brought up, since the town did not yet seem to be ripe for the new philosophy. The majority, however, were opposed to this step backwards. A decision was made to start to plow the fields with greater zest. To do so, some of the more literate members were asked to write letters to all the "progressive" groups in the Finn town, asking them to Come to a meeting from which better understanding and interaction might result. The outcome resulted in the members of the local dramatic society, the male chorus and the sewing circle, which were all independent groups, joining the socialist chapter, with only minor terms. Thus, the Workingmen's Society "Taisto" got new wind in its sails. The membership grew by several dozens and the activities became more organized and with more starting points.

When the early difficulties were overcome and we became convinced that "Taisto" was truly a "dangerous" competitor for other local societies, the question of joining the American Socialist Party was raised. At first there was opposition and the action was considered to be non-productive, even though at a delegate meeting in Cleveland in October, 1904, the basis for this activity had been formulated. On December 11, 1904 the decision to join was made.

The "Imatra" license was returned to their headquarters, replaced by the license of the American Socialist Party. This decision at first affected the activities badly. Those in the membership who had opposed the action, citing doubts about taxation and weakening the Finnish self-esteem, left the chapter. However, this moment was only temporary. The membership in 1905 was in the 80's, by 1906 it stood at 118. The after-effects of the General Strike in Finland drove many men and women,

who had been leaders in the worker's movement, to come as immigrants to even our Finn town. Some of them had been trained in the unions and they became sources of inspiration in the revival of the chapter's activities.

The Maynard Finnish Socialist Chapter, which had been our official name after joining the party, had at long last taken a prosperous step, both in philosophy and with tangible results. The usual evening meetings were attended by crowds. Socialistic thinking and activities became the subject of the day and were widely discussed and debated throughout the town.

EDUCATIONAL WORK

The chapter had been interested in educational work from the first. Worker's books and newspapers had been made available; speaker's- and educational-groups had been maintained; comrades had been assisted in procuring citizenship; membership programs with out-of-town speakers had been a primary activity. Once in May 1907, a two week evening lecture course with 26 entrants was arranged. Consideration was given to the children's Sunday school and to the Young People's Socialist League which were well running programs. When the winter of 1908 brought a depression of several months, some more spirited members of the chapter arranged large meetings of the unemployed where they presented their demands to the town government. Speakers were engaged, pamphlets were distributed to the English speaking public. The meetings turned into striking informational events.

OWN HALL

On November 12 and 13, 1909 opening festivities were observed at its own hall, where the chapter's numerous activities were covered by a standard and controlled schedule. In 1916 the chapter purchased a 25 acre festival park, about one mile from the town center, with a swimmable pond, a pavilion, a cafeteria, and athletic fields. It is one of the best parks in the neighborhood where a crowd of thousands will gather in a few days. The chapter's real estate values, after a recent inventory, stood at \$22,000 and movable property at \$3,000 (its true value being considerably more). The chapter has a library of 500 volumes to which annually important works are added. We can also say that our possessions are not under the shadow of debt. You can see that we possess earthly junk for our own use. In connection with all this we might remind you of the Finnish cooperative "Kaleva" in our town. With its groceries, furniture, restaurant, bakery, dairy, and coal departments, it had sales of \$302,354.34 last years and a profit of above \$13,000. It holds a leading position in the Maynard business community and in my own humble opinion: the most progressive and well-managed Finnish cooperatives in the country. Its board of directors is largely made up of members of the Workingmen's Society "Taisto".

THE SUBGROUPS

The chapter now has the following very active subgroups: a dramatic society, a band, an orchestra, a chorus, an athletic program, a refreshment committee, a

board of directors, an educational committee, and the Young People's Socialist League. The chapter membership now stands at about 250.

The Maynard chapter has always had the benefit of a stable membership, resulting from regular and acceptable work conditions locally, which has not been the case in many other Finn towns. Thus, the dramatic society and the band members have largely been involved from the early days. This continuing aspect can be felt in their activities. The band and the orchestra have several members who have developed their skills with old guard musicians from Finland as well as the Apostle's Band and the Music Conservatory in Boston. There are many obstacles on the path of bringing the artistic aspirations of the poor to fruition ; rarely do they have the opportunity to enjoy the lively flexibility of live performances. The beginners in the drama group are inspired by the artistic labors of the experienced actors.

THE SPLIT

The Maynard Finnish Socialist Chapter has probably suffered less than any other chapter from the situation brought about by the split which occurred in the Finnish socialist movement about three years ago. With only two or three exceptions, all those who left the chapter, although having party comprehension and believing in the teachings of Marx and his lessons of the class struggle, were from the younger membership, having joined only recently. The number of objectors was indeed small and they place was soon filled by new members. The chapter membership is now greater than ever before and subscriptions to "Raivaaja", our party's voice, are at an all time high. This shows that the years of the split have not caused much grief.

UNION ACTIVITIES

A few years ago there was a union supported by 100% of the workers in the Maynard mills to which many of our members belonged. This union, part of the United Textile Workers, brought about noted improvement in working conditions. The union was so effective that the mill administration was forced to negotiate with the union officers on small details of the conditions. However, a shadow hovers over everything. When the union activities had speeded up, some "progressives" formed another union which had very little power. As you can imagine, a strong battle ensued between the two adversaries. During the winter of 1919, the older union went out on strike, hoping to get all the workers to join them, thus preserving the rights that had just been won by united efforts. After the strike was over and the workers on both sides had become more bitter, the mill owners got the chance to not recognize either union. Today at the Assabet Mills, the organized workers have but little say in matters. The United Textile Workers union still exists in town, largely made up of our chapter members. However, its activities are of little importance. The Amalgamated Union has fallen asleep; there is no evidence of its existence. Some attempts have been made to regain union power, most recently during this winter, but unsuccessfully, which proves that it is easier to destroy a worker's organization than it is to create one.

THE CURRENT SCENE

About 21 years ago when the Maynard Finnish Socialist Chapter was founded, attempts at spreading cultural awareness among the Finnish workers were very primitive indeed. The temperance society and the church were not able to provide answers to the numerous questions raised in repetitive world events and in everyday life. They could not calm the many conflicts that existed between the workers and the capitalistic world. The chapter was born to interpret these conflicts and we can proudly say that it has not only been a representative of socialism, but it has also plowed the land in promoting Finnish American culture.

It would be wrong to believe that we, like others, have had peaks in our activities, for there is no perfection in the world. Recognizing past errors, we have striven for the better and the perfect, with its basic reverberations.

Knowing that working men in America and throughout the world are gathering their strength from the destruction of the past war to an awaited moment for we have the great honor to write our history in red letters, stating that the work we have done for decades has not been in vain.