

# An American Marxist

**Daniel De Leon.** By Stephen Coleman. Manchester University Press. £25.

The contribution to socialist thought of Daniel De Leon has been neglected over the years. Most labour historians have mentioned him only in passing, usually in scorn and often inaccurately. Stephen Coleman's book, in Manchester University Press's "Lives of the Left" series, rectifies the situation. But who was De Leon?

By 1886 Venezuelan-born Daniel De Leon was 34 and living in the Hispanic quarter of New York. An ordinary family man, his main concern was to achieve secure employment as a university law lecturer. However, he was soon to come into conflict with the status quo and leave university life for good. He immersed himself in the radical movements of his day, finally emerging as a Marxian socialist in 1890. He joined the American Socialist Labour Party (SLP) which he was to dominate, transform and remain in for the rest of his life. He stood for socialism and nothing but, and his distinct brand of Marxism and party organisation is still extant today.

De Leon's major concern, states Coleman, was "to apply the orthodox position of Marx to the industrial conditions of his own time, and to simplify its reasoning and conclusions". He goes so far as to include him in the tradition of popularising socialist ideas of William Morris and Robert Tressell and to write that it would be hard to name any other source of Marxian education in the USA. De Leonist bodies also emerged in Canada and Australia.

In Britain De Leon's works were a major influence on the revolutionary minority which left the Social Democratic Federation in 1903-4. This minority formed the British Socialist Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Great Britain. Coleman quotes Jack Fitzgerald, a founder member of the SPGB, who thought the American SLP's journal *The People* "the best socialist journal published in English".

De Leon's standards were rigorous, and Coleman makes it clear that he imposed them on the SLP. For a start, membership of the party was not automatic. Applicants had to demonstrate an understanding of SLP principles before joining. Neither were waverers tolerated for long. That unity was not to be had at any price is demonstrated by the party split of 1899, when a halving of the membership was regarded by the remaining members as a gain in the party's strength. James Connolly was one of the more notable waverers to be ousted. Now more famed for his Irish nationalism than his socialism, he left the SLP fold with De Leon accusing him of introducing racial (national) and religious questions into party tactics and organisation.

De Leon's influence was such that principles would not be exchanged for a "broad-church" numbers-game. It was this principled stand for socialism and nothing but that influenced those who found the Socialist Party of Great Britain. But this is as far as it goes. There is another aspect of De Leonism that Coleman could have more clearly distinguished from this political influence: socialist industrial unionism.

"Socialists tend to die frustrated or deluded: frustrated that human emancipation has not been achieved, or deluded that it has". Such is the socialist's lot according to Coleman. But perhaps De Leon's life shows that frustration and delusion need not be mutually exclusive. There is no doubt that De Leon's political life was a model of socialist commitment and principle. The frustrating fact was that workers continued to be, in Coleman's words, "a recalcitrant force", persistently denying ballot success to the SLP. And though Coleman emphasises that De Leon was never

deluded into thinking that socialism had been achieved, it could be argued that he held illusions about how it could be achieved – illusions born of frustration.

By 1905 De Leon was rejecting the notion of a solely political transformation of society. He asserted the need for an economic wing to the socialist movement and put forward a three-stage theory of revolution: socialists winning the battle of ideas, victory at the ballot-box, and socialist industrial unions supplying the economic might to enforce electoral victory and workers' power. He also ventured a view of future socialist society that would be an industrial unionist administration. To this end he was a major influence on the formation of two industrial unions: the Socialist Trade and Labour Alliance and then the Industrial Workers of the World – both ultimately to fail.

Socialist unions were never to be the short-cut to a mass class-conscious movement that De Leon might have hoped for. How could they be when, unlike the political wing, an understanding of basic socialist principles was not a condition of membership? Coleman argues that De Leon was not wrong to condemn “pure and simple” trade unions. “His mistake was to attach too much importance to leadership, assuming that dishonest leaders imposed themselves on unwilling union memberships”. The fact is that these leaders had the support of the workers “and this would not be changed by retreat into socialist-run unions, but by hard and sustained persuasion of those who accepted the union status-quo”. In Britain industrial unionism was taken up with enthusiasm by the SLP and even by a short-lived minority in the early SPGB.

Coleman is quick to point out that De Leon's post-revolutionary plan, to replace a political state that would “wither away” with a work-based industrial administration, had its unsolved problems. What about those who do not work? For example, the retired, disabled and those in full-time education. Neither, Coleman states, were De Leon's views on socialism in one country nor his plans for a post-revolution labour-voucher system what one might expect from a consistent socialist. What about free access?

These were certainly lapses. But De Leon was a product of his times. Coleman claims that his industrial administration theory was borrowed from Edward Bellamy's utopian work *Looking Backward* and of course even Marx came up with a labour-voucher scheme in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. In final mitigation, Coleman points out that De Leon was unable to spend time working out an entirely coherent conception of socialism because he was too busy recruiting socialists.

Although Coleman can hardly suppress a glowing respect for this giant amongst pioneer socialists, his is not an uncritical account of De Leon's life and ideas. De Leon's failings as a revolutionary socialist are openly and clearly brought out and, in many respects, account for the greater part of Coleman's work.

Indeed this book, apart from its biographical content, should achieve the status of a handbook to the do's and don'ts of socialist strategy. As well as being a well-researched scholarly work, it is accessible and eminently readable. It only remains to add that a cheaper, paper-back version will be published later.

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