
A Story of Fifty Years of Devotion to Socialism

by William M. Feigenbaum¹

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Morris Hillquit, the matchless leader of American Socialism for so many years, was just over 64 years old, having been born in Riga, August 1st, 1869. For close to half a century he devoted all of his great ability and his whole energies to the cause of Socialism. Never once did his devotion flag; never once did he turn back.

Comrade Hillquit was a man of brilliant intellect. It has long been recognized that he had one of the keenest legal minds in the United States. He was a deep and profound thinker and student of economics, history, and of all the social sciences. He was a brilliant writer, with a style of crackling brilliance. He was a magnificent orator who did not sweep masses of men and women off their feet but rather carried them along with him by his logic, his warmth, and his wit.

A Man of Steadfastness.

But most of all Morris Hillquit was a man of steadfastness and courage, he was devoted to Socialism and nothing on earth could move him from devotion to his cause and his comrades. He was one of the greatest Socialists in all the history of our movement.

Hillquit, whose father and mother were cultured and educated people, had a good education in Russia, but when he was brought to the United States at the age of 17 he had to continue his education at night while working in a shirt factory by day.

From the very beginning of his life in this country he took an active part in the then weak Socialist movement. There was a weekly Socialist paper published in Yiddish and edited by Abraham Cahan,

¹ Although unsigned in the original, this biography was almost certainly written by veteran *New Leader* journalist William M. Feigenbaum.

known as *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. Hillquit later confessed that he was “business manager, associate editor, and official poet, under contract to furnish one inspirational poem per week.” The salary was three dollars per week, when he got it.

There followed years of law study, graduation from New York University, admission to the bar, and the beginning of his law practice. That practice was never far from the labor movement, with which he was associated from the beginning of his active life.

Early Days.

In those early days Hillquit was associated with Cahan and Meyer London and other pioneer Socialists, with whom Socialist activity was indistinguishable from activity in the labor movement. Most of the needle-trades unions were organized by Socialists in that way.

Hillquit also began to count as a force in party affairs. Unlike some of his comrades he readily adjusted to the American scene and had a “feel” for American politics and for the sentiments of the American workers far superior to most of his colleagues.

By 1898, when he was still under 30, he was already an important figure in the party.

That year the internal dissensions began that resulted three years later in the formation of the present Socialist Party out of the major faction of the DeLeon controlled Socialist Labor Party, the Social Democratic Party organized by Eugene V. Debs, the Social Democratic Party of Massachusetts that had won important election victories, and other groups.² Hillquit was an outstanding figure then, and from that time he was in the front rank as one of the national leaders of American Socialism, which he remained to the very end.

The Debs Campaign.

In 1900 Hillquit was one of the leaders of the majority faction of the SLP that met at a convention at Rochester, and he was one of the committee that negotiated with the Social Democratic Party for unity

² This is somewhat confusing and confused. It is doubtful that the SLP dissidents headed by Hillquit and Henry L. Slobodin were a majority in New York state and they were certainly a minority nationally, the Chicago SDP was chiefly started by Victor Berger with an assist from Debs, and the Massachusetts SDP was essentially the same organization as the Hillquit SLP dissidents.

in the elections that year under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs. In 1901 he was one of the leaders in the Indianapolis convention that formally organized the present Socialist Party.

From that day until the day of his death the story of Hillquit is in a real sense the story of the Socialist Party and of certain sections of the labor movement. He became a leading figure in the various executive committees.

From 1904 on he was a delegate to every International Socialist gathering, serving with brilliant distinction in Amsterdam in that year, in Stuttgart in 1907, in Copenhagen in 1910, and in the Vienna Working Union prior to the organization of the Labor and Socialist International in Hamburg in 1922; he was a delegate to Marseilles in 1925, to Brussels in 1928, and to Vienna in 1931.

Year after year Hillquit visited Europe and became intimately acquainted with virtually all the great leaders of world Socialism. He was in their confidence, and in many world conferences his wise counsel was welcomed. In the troubled period from 1922 to 1929, when Socialism was a powerful force in Central Europe, Hillquit rose to the stature of world statesmanship of genuine importance. Only the fact that his work was done with cooperation with Socialist colleagues who were important political figures, while he represented a party that was relatively weak, robbed him of the recognition his importance in those spheres deserved.

In many International Congresses Hillquit was known for his matchless oratory as well as his good humor, his good sense, and his warm heart. The great of the world — those in high places and those honored by persecution — held him in the highest esteem.

At Home.

But Hillquit's interest in world affairs did not blind him to the importance of work at home. Increasingly as the years passed his influence grew in the Socialist Party, in the unions, and in the country at large.

There is room here only to mention the splendid literary work of Morris Hillquit. He had a clear, sparkling style and his books and articles ranked high for literary value as well as content.

His work in the labor movement, especially in the needle trades, is a shining chapter in American labor history; someday it will be written and the world will know the matchless services of this great

man. In strike after strike he counseled with the workers; and his settlements were of incalculable value to them. In 1913, for example, he was counsel for the waist and dressmakers following a great strike in proceedings before an impartial arbitration board. He was pitted against the corporation lawyers of the highest standing; his victories over them were won with ridiculous ease.

His services to the needle unions continued to the very end; his very last work was to fly to Washington by plane to argue a code for the Cloakmakers. At the funeral ceremonies at Cooper Union it was related by David Dubinsky, president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, that Hillquit was the first to propose that a union draft its own code, and fight for it, rather than to fight against unfavorable provision in codes offered them. He left what was virtually his deathbed to argue the Cloakmakers' Code that he drew up and he won; many other unions took the hint and did accordingly.

The First Battle.

Prior to 1906 Hillquit was one of the popular party speakers and writers, wise in counsel and loved for his warmth of character. In that year he waged the first of the campaigns for which he became famous, the first battle to redeem the East Side from Tammany Hall and to win it for the workers.

What a battle it was! Hillquit revealed unexpected qualities as a popular campaigner. Flanked by such men as William Mailly, Robert Hunter, James Oneal, who came in from the West about that time, and others, besides the men of his own generation in the New York movement, Hillquit waged a fight that stirred the city. In that year Professor Franklin H. Giddings, head of the Department of Sociology at Columbia, advised members of his graduate classes to go downtown and work for the election of Hillquit if they wanted to do something for American democracy.

The election returns showed that the Tammany man had won, and he took his seat, but no one believed that the figures came within 5,000 votes of the actual results. That campaign began the upbuilding of Socialism in New York, and out of that growth came the building up of the unions to the strength they later won.

In 1908 Hillquit ran again, and again he beat the Republican by thousands, and was defeated only by Tammany arithmetic.

For nine years thereafter Hillquit served the party as counselor and friend, as committeeman and guide. In 1912, for example, he felt that a certain tendency represented by the syndicalism of the IWW was dangerous to the Socialist movement. Although it was supported by the then popular William D. Haywood, Hillquit did not hesitate to wage war upon it, and he led the fight in the 1912 convention at Indianapolis that led to a clarification of the party's position. His courage in facing unpopularity with his own comrades for what he believed right was as great as his courage in fighting the foes of his cause.

In that year he suffered his first breakdown from tuberculosis. He spent the fall and winter in Bermuda, returning to attend committee meetings, and the winter and spring in Switzerland. There, in August 1913, he spoke at the funeral of August Bebel, and his address was considered the greatest among those delivered by the greatest men and women of world Socialism.

Returning in the fall, he was greeted with wild enthusiasm by his comrades, and he plunged into party work again, and into the struggles of the unions. In 1914 he was on his way to Europe to attend the International Congress in Paris when war broke out and he returned, to take the lead in the party's anti-war campaign.

In 1916 he drew up the party's positions on terms of peace, and together with Congressman Meyer London and James H. Maurer he went to Washington to argue them with President Wilson. Later the party's peace plan, much garbled, reappeared as Wilson's Fourteen Points.

For Congress.

In the fall of 1916 he ran for Congress in Harlem, and again waged a fight that attracted the attention of the entire country. But this time it was Republican arithmetic that defeated him by a slender majority.

Two years later a city-wide Tammany-Republican fusion defeated him in Harlem as well as Meyer London on the East Side. A beneficiary of that fusion was a young congressman named LaGuardia, who accepted tammany support in the bipartisan deal to "save" the city from Socialist officials and for Tammany and the Republican reactionaries.

Then came 1917; America was dragged into the war and Russia drove out the Tsar. Hillquit was again in the front rank of those who fought for peace, and of those who rejoiced at the Russian revolution. His great speech at Madison Square Garden in March, with the refrain, "RUSSIA IS FREE!" will never be forgotten by those who heard it.

In the fall he was named for Mayor. In that year Hillquit outdid himself. His lungs were troubling him again, but he kept the information to himself. He was in danger of indictment or of lynching; but that did not matter. His comrades counted upon him, and he did not fail them.

Morris Hillquit led us in that campaign, and we who fought under his leadership will ever cherish the memory of the battle and of his inspired leadership. Night after night he went from place to place, speaking like the man he was, saying what was in our hearts to say, and we were proud to be his comrades.

Hillquit faced opposition that year that no one who was not in the struggle can ever imagine. Hatred, prejudice, threats of mob violence, even anti-Semitism; but he never gave one inch.

He found time for brilliant legal defense of victims of wartime fury and hysteria; he found time, as always, for debates with opponents of Socialism.

Then came another breakdown, this time more serious than the previous one. Again he went away in quest of health; again he followed with keen interest the affairs of the party and of the unions. In 1918 he again ran for Congress, but in absentia, and he did not return to New York until the fall of 1919, and then for only a short time.

It was in the winter of 1920 that he again threw himself into the struggle. In that year came the notorious [Thaddeus C.] Sweet ouster of the regularly elected Socialist Assemblymen of New York. And Hillquit left a sickbed at the risk of his health and his life to defend the five Socialists. The defense was masterly, it was courageous, it was brilliant. It will stand as a monument in the battle for free institutions.

And then again party work; the 1920 convention, and the struggle against the neo-Communism that sought to split and destroy the Socialist movement, and again Hillquit risked unpopularity to defend the position of Social Democracy. But the welcome he received upon

his return showed that despite differences of opinion his comrades loved him — as he deserved to be loved.

The Last Years.

And so the last few years hurried by. In 1924 he led the party in the LaFollette adventure; it is possible that he never had shown more brilliance, more persistence, more courage than then. His battle was in the LaFollette movement to accept the Socialist Party, and in the Socialist Party to accept the LaFollette movement.

Then more years passed. The party, the whole country and the world began to realize his greatness in its true perspective. His writings were read with eagerness, his lectures, debates, speeches listened to with joy. He basked in the love of comrades, a love that came to a climax in 1929, when the whole world celebrated his 60th birthday, and he gaily promised us “at least 20 or 25 years more.” In that year he was elected National Chairman of the party.

But alas! he was wrong. Illness struck him again. After the magnificent mayoralty battle of 1932 he began to fail rapidly, and so came the end.

And so cracked a noble heart.

Good night, dear soul.

May songs of Comrades sing you to sleep!

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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