



NIK KOVAC
ALDERMAN, 3RD DISTRICT
CITY OF MILWAUKEE

100th Anniversary of Socialists Winning Milwaukee Elections

Statement of Alderman Nik Kovac April 6, 2010

One hundred years ago today the citizens of Milwaukee woke up to election results that surprised the rest of the country at the time, and would surprise most Milwaukeeans today. On April 5, 1910 we elected a Socialist mayor, former patternmaker Emil Seidel, as well as Socialist majorities to the Common Council and the County Board.

The rest of the country – and some of Milwaukee – was unsettled by this boldness at the polls, openly wondering if it meant sedition or perhaps even revolution. In fact, the citizens of Milwaukee and their newly elected leaders had no such plans. All we wanted then, as now, was honest, efficient, transparent, frugal, and socially just government. For 38 of the next 50 years, that is exactly what this city received from Mayors Seidel (1910-12), Daniel Hoan (1916-40) and Frank Zeidler (1948-60).

The Socialists most immediate and noteworthy accomplishment, 100 years ago, was to root out municipal corruption, much of which came from the brothels in City Hall's shadow and from the privately-owned streetcar which stopped at its front door. With that task complete, Hoan and Zeidler then set about building public institutions which continue to improve our lives today.

Mayor Hoan will forever be remembered not just for his bridge, but also for expanding and improving one of the world's great park systems. Mayor Zeidler was a consistent source of integrity and justice during his three terms and beyond, and his main physical legacy is the human scale and geographically diverse public housing throughout this city. Both the park system and the housing authority are still winning national awards and setting examples for other cities to follow.

A century ago, the word "Socialism" raised eyebrows and suspicion. And if the rhetoric surrounding the health care debate in 2010 is any indication, that word still has the power to enrage and divide our chattering classes and voting blocs. But words often confuse, and labels can distort the substance of policy.

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When I hear the word Socialism, my first thought is not of revolutions, wars, or bread lines. We in Milwaukee have our own history, and our own meaning of that word. To us it means a half-century of good government. It means honest politicians and informed voters. It means beautiful parks, dignified housing for all, and well-run utilities free of corruption.

One hundred years from now, I hope this non-partisan version of City Hall will match that standard of serving the common good.

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