

# AMERICA'S SOCIALIST EXPERIMENT

For Release: May 26, 2020

## **Documentary Examines America's Boldest Experiment With Socialism**

*"America's Socialist Experiment" looks at a time when socialists led Milwaukee*

**(Milwaukee)** Selected as the site of the 2020 Democratic National Convention, Milwaukee, Wisconsin is the largest city in a key battleground state. It also is home to one of the most unique stories in American political history, one with special relevance today. The new PBS documentary, *America's Socialist Experiment*, tells the surprising tale of a heartland city that was led by socialists for nearly half of the 20th century.

The documentary will be broadcast nationally on most PBS stations, with its first showings in Wisconsin. PBS Wisconsin, which includes Madison and Green Bay, will air the film on Monday, June 8 at 9:00pm. Milwaukee PBS will air the film on Tuesday, June 9 at 8:00pm.

Referred to as "sewer socialists" for their focus on clean drinking water and public health, Milwaukee's socialist leaders were reformers who vowed to clean up a corrupt and filthy city. The documentary recounts how a party powered by immigrants and organized labor swept into power in 1910, electing the first of three socialist mayors. One of them, Daniel Hoan, served for 24 consecutive years, leading the longest socialist administration in U.S. history. It is a saga of other historic firsts. While city attorney, Hoan drafted the nation's first worker's compensation law. The city also elected the first socialist to Congress, Victor Berger, who was re-elected despite having been convicted of violating the country's new Espionage Act. And it's a story that is replete with fascinating contradictions. Milwaukee's socialists were frugal. They co-existed with a capitalist, free market economy and were derided by east coast socialists, who did not consider them sufficiently revolutionary. Yet, at the height of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade, Milwaukee voters re-elected their socialist mayor, Frank Zeidler.

The film was produced by Mike Gousha, distinguished fellow in law and public policy at Marquette University Law School, former Milwaukee television news anchor and reporter, and one of Wisconsin's most respected journalists, and Lynn Sprangers, an award-winning journalist who has served in executive capacities in sports, higher education and performing arts. For this project, Gousha and Sprangers teamed up with fellow Wisconsinites Steve Boettcher and Mike Trinklein, producers of more than 30 hours of national primetime PBS films, including *Pioneers of Television*, *The Gold Rush*, *Martin Luther*, and *Robin Williams Remembered*.

The producers of *America's Socialist Experiment* tell the city's story through the lens of those who know it best: local historians, political observers, family members, and life-long Wisconsin residents. They offer their perspectives on why Milwaukee's brand of socialism succeeded for a time, what it looked like in daily life, and why it ended. The film interviewees are:

- Jeanne Zeidler—daughter of Mayor Frank Zeidler and former mayor of Williamsburg, Virginia
- Dan Steininger—grandson of Mayor Daniel Hoan, co-founder of BizStarts Milwaukee, former CEO of Catholic Knights Insurance
- John Norquist—former mayor of Milwaukee
- Margo Anderson—historian, distinguished professor emerita, University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee
- John Gurda—historian, author of *The Making of Milwaukee*, who's written extensively about Milwaukee's socialist experiment
- John Nichols—national correspondent for *The Nation*, author of the *S Word: A Short History of an American Tradition...Socialism*
- Charlie Sykes—editor-in-chief of *The Bulwark*, political commentator, former Milwaukee radio talk show host
- Bud Selig—lifelong Milwaukee resident, retired Commissioner of Major League Baseball
- Sheila Cochran—retired Chief Operating Officer, Milwaukee Area Labor Council
- Howard Fuller—former Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent
- Marina Dimitrijevic—Milwaukee Common Council member (former Milwaukee County Board Chair)

Thirty underwriters provided funding for the film, including Marquette University Law School, Brico Fund, Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Richard & Barbara Weiss Fund at the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, and Marianne & Sheldon Lubar and Madeleine & David Lubar. The documentary brings to life a 20<sup>th</sup> century political drama that played out in what was then one of the nation's largest cities. It's the story of *America's Socialist Experiment*.

For more information about *America's Socialist Experiment* and to coordinate interviews with the filmmakers, please contact Lynn Sprangers at [lynsprangers@outlook.com](mailto:lynsprangers@outlook.com) or call or text 414-491-3601.