

# The Religious Foundations of America's Oldest Socialist Press:

## A Centennial Note on the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company

Susan Curtis Mernitz

IN MARCH 1986, AMERICA'S oldest labour and socialist publishing house celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. A century ago, an ambitious young publisher in Chicago named Charles H. Kerr founded the publishing company that bears his name. Within a decade of its establishment, the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company had been incorporated as a not-for-profit enterprise and had begun publishing works by labour activists, muckrakers, utopian writers, and socialists from the United States and Europe. In 1893, Kerr launched an experiment in cooperative publishing that has endured in an era of mergers and conglomerates in corporate America. In its early years of operation, the press published works by such leftist luminaries as Clarence Darrow, Josef Dietzgen, Mother Jones, Karl Kautsky, Wilhelm Liebknecht, William Morris, and John Spargo at a price that made them accessible to working people. Between 1900 and 1917, Kerr also published the *International Socialist Review*, which kept his publishing house near the centre of radical literary circles in the new century. Since that time the Kerr company has remained attuned to the interests of labouring men and women by preparing inexpensive reprints of classic socialist tracts and literature and by publishing studies by and about twentieth-century reformers, labour activists, and socialists.

Though it was honoured in 1986 as the oldest labour publishing house in the United States, when the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company opened its doors in March 1886 it printed primarily books on religion. Five years earlier, Charles Kerr, an energetic Wisconsin graduate eager to begin a career in journalism and publishing, had set out for Chicago and accepted a job with James Colegrove. As a fairly prominent publisher of radical Unitarian tracts, Colegrove offered Kerr a job as a clerk and sales agent and eventually worked him onto the office staff of one of the Unitarian periodicals that he published. Working on *Unity*, "a weekly Journal of Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion," Kerr began to cultivate an interest in ethical and labour issues.

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When Colegrove's business collapsed in 1886, Kerr opened his own publishing house and took over where his former employer had left off. In addition to *Unity*, Kerr published *New Occasions*, "a tribunal for the discussion of questions of practical interest to the people," as well as a wide variety of works by radical Unitarians in the West and Midwest. For the next seven years, the infant press published works by religious writers on issues of ethics and morality.

By the dawn of the new century, Kerr described his company as a "working class publishing house" that specialized in the "publication of Socialist literature." At first glance, it appears that Kerr had some sort of conversion experience in reverse — from sacred to secular devotion. On closer examination, however, it is apparent that the transition from Unitarianism to socialism came rather naturally and without a sudden change of heart. Indeed, his youth and his professional connections to the Unitarians helped pave the way for his later interest in working-class concerns. One hundred years after its founding, the Charles H. Kerr Company illuminates religious and moral shades that highlighted the labour movement in the late nineteenth century. It also helps explain the important shift in American culture away from Protestant categories and in the direction of secular values and standards of morality. The Charles H. Kerr Company became one of the disseminators of a cultural alternative to Victorianism.

Charles H. Kerr was born in 1860 in LaGrange, Georgia. His parents, Alexander and Katharine Brown Kerr, Congregationalist liberals and activists in the abolition movement, left Georgia when the Civil War began and raised their son in Illinois and Wisconsin. When Charles was eleven, his father accepted the chairmanship of the classics department at the State University of Wisconsin. Thus, the boy spent his formative adolescent years in Madison's liberal intellectual environment in the 1870s. His parents' religious social activism and the university's commitment to discussions of social problems probably made young Kerr sensitive to the injustices against wage slaves in a burgeoning industrial society. In 1881, with a degree and high honours from the University of Wisconsin, Charles Kerr launched his career in publishing.

It is not too surprising that a bookman interested in radical religious thought eventually would find his way into the secular territory of socialism as Kerr did. Both religious and socialist critics in the late nineteenth century focused their attention on the same problem: the brittleness of the Victorian work ethic in industrial America. Since the appearance of Washington Gladden's *Applied Christianity* in 1886, much of Protestant America had become aware of a budding social gospel movement that cast doubt on the validity of the old Victorian formula for success and salvation. Hard work, individual achievement, and self-control may have yielded prosperity and salvation for their fathers, but the generation coming of age in an era of huge factories and robber barons had begun to question the possibility of advancing within a company on the strength of individual effort. As Gladden himself wrote in 1886, he had seen "multitudes" of "worthy people" who worked and saved and prayed but

who did "not succeed in raising themselves." Protestants in the social gospel movement spread their message of social justice and social responsibility in popular national periodicals, newspaper columns, books, and addresses. In 1908, they codified their sympathy towards the labour movement in the Social Creed of the Churches, which endorsed the organization of unions, the right to collective bargaining, and the need for a shorter working day.

In the 1890s, conflicts between capital and labour signalled open dissatisfaction with the old individualistic ethic. Across the country, workers began to support unions to fight collectively against low wages, horrendous working conditions, long hours, and exploitation. In Pullman, Illinois, the company town run by railroad magnate George Pullman, a strike by workers rocked the industry and the nation in 1894. Sympathy strikes and work stoppages by workers until then hesitant to protest unfair labour practices disrupted production in industries across the country. An army of unemployed workers organized by Joseph Coxe marched the length of the continent using their poverty and tattered appearance as living evidence of the disarray of work and success in America. In quiet Evanston, Illinois, a perplexed Mary McDowell, who would later move into a flat behind Chicago's stockyards and minister to the poor, wondered at the audacity of workers in Pullman who refused to labour when jobs everywhere had become so precious. A combination of anger and curiosity drove her to seek the counsel of a minister in Pullman to learn the reason for the dissatisfaction of the working class. The Reverend William H. Carwardine took the troubled young lady under his wing and helped her to see the deplorable conditions in Pullman. He transformed Mary McDowell from the respectable middle-class lady of the Browning Society into the dogged reformer and settlement house director who later helped organize the Women's Trades Union League and who supported the meatpackers' strike of the early 1900s.

The Reverend Carwardine in some ways also helped to transform the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company. In 1894, the Methodist divine approached Kerr with an exposé of conditions in the company town. *The Pullman Strike* represented a perfect link between Kerr's catalogue of radical religious tracts published between 1886 and 1893 and the growing number of socialist titles that would follow it. Written by a man of the cloth, *The Pullman Strike* provided a natural bridge between the sacred and secular critiques of a bankrupt Victorian work ethic in an expanding industrial capitalist society. By the end of the decade Kerr's catalogue included fewer religious texts and more discussions of the moral and ethical problems in industrial capitalism. In the early 1900s, Kerr promoted his company as a publisher of socialist literature.

Actually, a year before *The Pullman Strike* appeared, Kerr had grown rather impatient with the religious manuscripts that came across his desk, and he wanted to free himself from his reputation as a publisher of exclusively Unitarian works. In 1893, Kerr completely reorganized the press, transforming the commercial publishing house into a cooperative socialist enterprise. Hun-

dreds of socialists purchased stock in the company in exchange for a press that would provide good socialist literature at the cost of production. Each share of stock cost only \$10.00, making it affordable to women and men of modest means. Indeed, the idea was so popular that when the first 1,000 shares sold rapidly, the new stockholders voted to issue 4,000 additional shares at the same price to their sisters and brothers in the labour movement who wanted to support a socialist press.

By 1899 the transition from a Unitarian to a socialist publishing house was more or less complete. In the spring of that year Kerr referred to his company as a "Socialist Co-operative Publishing House" and put out the popular "Pocket Library of Socialism." Each month the "little red books" included essays by socialist writers on social and political topics. A few years later Kerr prepared a pamphlet entitled *What to Read on Socialism*, a catalogue that contained "the titles of nearly every important socialist book in the English language." In addition to works by Marx, Engels, and Debs, Kerr recommended short stories by Jack London that appeared in the *International Socialist Review* and discussions of Darwinism by the German popularizer Wilhelm Boelsche. Until 1917, when government suppression of opposition to war in Europe shut down the *International Socialist Review*, Kerr succeeded in using his press to advance the cause of socialism in the United States and the world.

Because of the debates among Protestants in the late nineteenth century over the meaning of work in an industrial society, Kerr's association with radical Unitarians probably helped focus his attention on the plight of workers in the 1890s. By the dawn of the new century, however, Kerr realized what many church members refused to acknowledge: churches and religion in America lacked the influence and the commitment to force changes in an unfair industrial order. In spite of the Protestant basis of the industrial work ethic, Protestant culture in *fin de siècle* America had begun to disintegrate. Kerr cast his lot with socialism, and his press provided a voice for the proletariat in the twentieth century. Like most Americans, Kerr and his socialist colleagues turned to secular — not ecclesiastical — institutions for solutions to social problems, and they demanded an alternative to Protestant Victorian culture, which glorified individualism, competition, and by extension, the capitalist order that oppressed American workers. Kerr's books, pamphlets, and periodicals represented a cooperative alternative that appealed to some workers in the early twentieth century. One inheritance from his Unitarian connection remained as Kerr moved his press in the direction of socialism: the denunciation of immorality and unchristian exploitation. Like the spokespeople for the dominant consumer culture that consolidated in the years following World War I, Kerr found in religion the resources to create an alternative to Protestant culture and to continue an experiment in socialist publishing that has endured for a hundred years.

For a current catalogue of Kerr Company offerings, write Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, Suite 7, 1740 Greenleaf Ave., Chicago, IL 60626.

# Two reasons Canadians don't need free trade



## 1. Our jobs.

Free trade would kill jobs. By the hundreds of thousands.

Government studies say more than a million jobs across Canada could be in danger if we had free trade with the United States.

Why?

American-owned companies would close their Canadian plants. The goods Canadians want to buy could easily be supplied from American factories.

Canadian culture would be swamped. Workers by the thousands in our publishing and broadcast industries would lose their jobs.

Familial farmers would be forced out of business. Canada's marketing boards give them a chance to sell their goods for a fair price. Free trade would do away with them.

Free trade would ruin our transportation system. Truckers, airline and railway workers would lose-out to competition from bigger and richer American companies.

Sound frightening? We've only scratched the surface.

## 2. Our country.

We've made Canada one of the world's best places to raise our families and build our dreams.

Under free trade, the Americans would want what they

call a "level playing field."

That means they'd want to do away with things like our health care system. Our system of government pensions. Our unemployment insurance system.

Why? American business says these things give Canadian companies an advantage.

Free trade means making our way of life the same as the American way. It means deregulating our industries and selling off our public assets and services to private interests.

## Do we have a choice?

There is a choice.

Instead of depending totally on the US, we can expand our markets. We can trade with the rest of the world, as well as the United States.

We can plan the way we do things. We can make jobs our number one economic goal. We can make sure new investment goes into industries that will create jobs for Canadians.

Free trade, deregulation and privatization don't have to be the blueprint for our future.



CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS

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Published by the  
Canadian Labour Congress  
and your union

# Deux raisons pour nous passer du libre-échange



## 1. Nos emplois.

Le libre-échange absorberait nos emplois par centaines de milliers.

Les études réalisées par le gouvernement démontrent que le libre-échange avec les États-Unis pourrait mettre en danger plus d'un million d'emplois canadiens.

Pourquoi?

Les compagnies américaines fermeraient leurs filiales canadiennes. Les biens que les Canadiens achètent pourraient facilement être produits directement aux États-Unis dans leurs usines.

La culture canadienne serait anéantie. Des milliers de travailleurs et de travailleuses de nos industries de l'édition et de la rediffusion perdraient leurs emplois.

Les fermes familiales seraient ruinées. Dans un marché de libre-échange, les offices canadiens de mise en marche qui permettent actuellement aux agriculteurs canadiens de vendre leurs produits à des prix équitables devraient fermer.

Le libre-échange détruirait notre système de transport. Les travailleurs des transports routiers, aériens et ferroviaires seraient écrasés sous la concurrence des puissantes sociétés américaines.

Si tout cela vous fait peur, dites-vous bien que ce n'est là qu'une fraction du problème.

## 2. Notre pays.

Grâce à nous, le Canada est l'un des meilleurs endroits au monde pour élever nos familles et réaliser nos rêves.

Mais avec un accord de libre-échange, les Américains voudraient que nous ayons les mêmes règles du jeu qu'eux.

Cela signifie qu'ils voudraient que nous nous débarrassions de nos programmes sociaux, tels que nos régimes d'assurance-santé, de pensions et d'assurance-chômage.

Pourquoi? Les entreprises américaines disent que ces programmes donnent l'avantage aux entreprises canadiennes.

Avec le libre-échange, nous devrions adopter un mode de vie américain. Nous devrions déréglementer nos industries et vendre pour "pas cher" les biens et les services publics au secteur privé.

## Avons-nous le choix?

Bien sûr que oui!

Au lieu de dépendre exclusivement des États-Unis, nous pouvons élargir nos marchés. Nous pouvons faire affaire avec le reste du monde aussi bien qu'avec les États-Unis.

Nous pouvons planifier notre avenir. Nous pouvons donner priorité aux emplois. Nous pouvons nous assurer que les nouveaux investissements iront aux industries qui créent des emplois pour les Canadiens et les Canadiennes.

Nous ne sommes pas obligés d'accepter que notre avenir soit dicté par le libre-échange, la déréglementation et la privatisation.



CONGRÈS DU TRAVAIL DU CANADA

# Le libre-échange? Non merci!

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