

## NEW DEAL CRITIC: Norman Thomas

### BIOGRAPHY:



Following his graduation from Union Theological Seminary, New York City, about 1911, Thomas accepted the pastorate of the East Harlem Church and the chairmanship of the American Parish, a settlement house in one of the poorest sections of New York City. He became a pacifist and opposed U.S. participation in World War I. Then, in 1918 Thomas joined the Socialist Party, and, leaving his East Harlem posts the same year, was appointed secretary of the newly formed Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international pacifist organization. In 1921 he became associate editor of the influential liberal weekly *The Nation*, and the following year he was made executive codirector of the League for Industrial Democracy—a position he held for more than 10 years. He was also one of the founders of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Thomas joined the Socialist Party in 1918, and quickly rose to prominence. As a party leader, he violated all traditional images of normal socialist behavior by warring with the party's labor faction leaders. Quite simply, their ethics did not meet his standards. He found them unconcerned about the unorganized poor, too wedded to promoting only self-interest when organizing, and too ready to wink at racketeering within their ranks. The labor movement that might have shared his Social Gospel vision -- the Knights of Labor -- died before he rose to prominence in socialist circles. Thomas ran for governor of New York on the Socialist Party ticket in 1924; he ran for mayor of New York City twice (1925, 1929) and for president of the United States in six successive elections beginning in 1928.

While Thomas had strongly advocated and supported certain New Deal legislation, such as Social Security, he attacked the New Deal for failing to help America's most economically depressed people: sharecroppers. He helped to organize the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), an interracial group which demanded, among other things, that government payments for plowing-under crops or leaving land idle be split with tenant farmers, not paid solely to land owners. He helped raise money for STFU members who were beaten and evicted. And he traveled to Mississippi where STFU members were being terrorized, and where he and his fellow workers faced the same treatment. Thomas held that the New Deal stressed solution of economic emergencies to the neglect of moral issues.

SOURCE: Balanoff, Elizabeth. "Norman Thomas: Socialism and the Social Gospel." <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1908>.

**PRIMARY SOURCE:**

*All that I have said implies an importance in America of an immediate program of social insurance, unemployment relief, agricultural aid, and the guarantee of civil liberty, including the right of all workers to organize. It certainly implies that immediate concern for peace and an immediate program for preserving it, such as we have already discussed. But the essential feature of any immediate program for Socialism which is of value, and the one thing which will make an immediate program a sound beginning of the transitional period, is redistribution of the national income on a basis that will give to workers collectively the fruits of their labor.*

*...a Socialist administration ought to have begun with the socialization of banking. In rapid succession it would have taken over railroads, coal mines, and the power and oil industries. Then, as I have already indicated, it would have turned its attention to other monopolies. Any worthwhile agricultural program will compel the government to set up socialized marketing agencies and to take over and run as a public non-profit-making organization the dairy trust and probably the packing houses. In some cases it might not be necessary or desirable for the government to acquire all the existing property of, let us say, the power corporations of the dairy trust. It might condemn those facilities necessary for building up a great economical system in conjunction with resources and facilities already in possession of governmental agencies, federal, state, and local.*

SOURCE: Thomas, Norman. "The Choice Before Us: Mankind at the Crossroads" 1934. as rpt The American Spirit Kennedy and Bailey eds.