

NEW DEAL CRITIC: Upton Sinclair

BIOGRAPHY:



Sinclair graduated from the College of the City of New York in 1897 and did graduate work at Columbia University, supporting himself by journalistic writing. *The Jungle* (1906), his sixth novel and first popular success, was written when he was sent by the socialist weekly newspaper *Appeal to Reason* to Chicago to investigate conditions in the stockyards. Though intended to create sympathy for the exploited and poorly treated immigrant workers in the meat-packing industry, *The Jungle* instead aroused widespread public indignation at the quality of and impurities in processed meats and thus helped bring about the passage of federal food-inspection laws. Sinclair ironically commented at the time, "I aimed at the public's heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach." *The Jungle* is the most enduring of the works of the "muckrakers" (see muckraker). Published at Sinclair's own expense after several publishers rejected it, it became a best-seller, and

Sinclair used the proceeds to open Helicon Hall, a cooperative-living venture in Englewood, N.J. The building was destroyed by fire in 1907 and the project abandoned.

A long series of other topical novels followed, none as popular as *The Jungle*; among them were *Oil!* (1927), based on the Teapot Dome Scandal, and *Boston* (1928), based on the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Sinclair's works were highly popular in Russia both before and immediately after the Revolution of 1917. Later his active opposition to the communist regime caused a decline in his reputation there, but it was revived temporarily in the late 1930s and '40s by his antifascist writings. Sinclair again reached a wide audience with the Lanny Budd series, 11 contemporary historical novels beginning with *World's End* (1940) that were constructed around an implausible antifascist hero who happens to be on hand for all the momentous events of the day.

During the economic crisis of the 1930s, Sinclair organized the EPIC (End Poverty in California) socialist reform movement; in 1934 he was defeated as Democratic candidate for governor. The nomination of an avowed socialist to head the Democratic party ticket was more than the California establishment could tolerate. Sinclair's radical candidacy was opposed by just about every establishment force in California. The media virtually demonized Sinclair through a concerted propaganda campaign based largely on smears and falsehoods. Sinclair's candidacy also set off a bitter political battle both within the Democratic party and with many groups who were opposed to various aspects of the EPIC plan. Sinclair was denounced as a "Red" and "crackpot" and the Democratic establishment sought to derail his candidacy.

Despite all of this, Upton Sinclair was very nearly elected Governor of California in 1934. He probably would have won, except for two last-minute political errors in judgment. When President Roosevelt announced in June 1934 that he would propose a national social insurance system in the next session of Congress, Sinclair quite reasonably declared that he would be willing to defer his plan in favor of the President's national solution. This was perhaps reasonable, but it was impolitic, as it undermined his strongest issue. Then too, Sinclair felt duty-bound to announce his opposition to the rival Townsend Plan because the Townsend Plan was based on a regressive sales tax. Since the Townsend Plan and the EPIC supporters were often one and the same people, this was in effect an attack on his own core constituency.

When the votes were counted, Upton Sinclair got 37% of the vote, the Republican candidate got 48% and a third-party progressive candidate took another 13%. Had it been a two-man race, or had Sinclair been less intellectually honest and more of a politician, he would likely have become Governor of California and the EPIC pension plan might well have become the California model.

SOURCE: Sinclair, Upton ." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2009. Encyclopedia Britannica Online School Edition. <<http://school.eb.com/eb/article-9067901>>.

PRIMARY SOURCE:

I am telling the people of America that we have ten million unemployed who will never work again while the present system endures. For the past year I have been telling the people of California that the burden of supporting their permanently unemployed million-and-a-quarter is driving cities, counties, and State directly into bankruptcy. I have told them that in some hundred and fifty mass meetings, attended by from one thousand to fifteen thousand persons. I have told them in some three hundred thousand pamphlets and some five million copies of weekly newspapers. And in August some four hundred and fifty thousand of them went to the polls and said that they agreed with me.

Just what is to be done? No more important question confronts the American people today. If we do not find an orderly solution, we are going straight into the course of horrors which we have witnessed in Germany. I have believed all my life in democracy, the right and ability of the people to govern themselves. I am now offering the people of my home State a plan and a technique of procedure which will remedy the depression by gradual stages in a peaceable and human fashion, without violence and the overthrow of our political, industrial, or social system.

The "EPIC" (End Poverty in California) movement proposes that our unemployed shall be put at productive labor, producing everything which they themselves consume and exchanging those goods among themselves by a method of barter, using warehouse receipts or labor certificates or whatever name you may choose to give to the paper employed. It asserts that the State must advance sufficient capital to give the unemployed access to good land and machinery, so that they may work and support themselves and thus take themselves off the backs of the taxpayers. The "EPIC" movement asserts that this will not hurt private industry, because the unemployed are no longer of any use to industry.

We plan a new cooperative system for the unemployed. Whether it will be permanent depends upon whether I am right in my belief about the permanent nature of the depression. If prosperity comes back the workers will drift back into private industry. No harm will have been done, because certainly the unemployed will produce something in the meantime, and the State will be that much to the good.

New Cooperative System

To meet the immediate emergency in our State and get the money to start our new cooperative system, we propose what we call an "EPIC" tax. That is an ad valorem tax on property assessed above \$100,000, which means about \$250,000 of actual value. This tax will fall almost entirely upon our great corporations and utilities, and to make it easier for them we shall make it payable at the option of the State, in goods and services. That will give us most of the raw materials and all of the utility services which the unemployed will need to get production started.

We have a great irrigation and power project known as the Central Valley Project. We propose to send fifty thousand unemployed into this work and ask the farmers of the Central Valleys to bring their surplus food crops, taking credits which will be good for water and power when the project is completed. The "EPIC" tax will give us the needed lumber, cement, rock and gravel, steel, etc., and light, heat, power, and transportation. The project will be carried out by our Public Works Department, and it will bring industry back to life in California.

SOURCE: Sinclair, Upton. "The Permanent Crisis" The Literary Digest. October 13, 1934.

<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/sinclair.html>