

Seminar: Henry George as Working-Class Hero

On March 3rd the School played host to a seminar entitled "Henry George, the Irish and the American Labor Movement." Labor historian Edward O'Donnell, speaking on the topic of his Doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, focused on the New York Mayoral election of 1886. He

pointed out that Henry George was not the only labor party candidate running that year; in fact, there were over 150 labor party candidates running for various offices throughout the country. Henry George's "base of support was among the working class of that day," Mr. O'Donnell said, "particularly the Irish working class, who were the largest ethnic component of the wage earning class at that time."

It was remarkable that the Irish of New York City would break ranks with Tammany Hall — which was seen at the time as a bastion of Irish machine politics — and support an independent candidate. How and why, Mr. O'Donnell asked, did this happen?

For one reason, Henry George represented some what of Mr. O'Donnell called "the promise of America." Mr. O'Donnell delved at some length into George's background — the fact that he grew up in a very religious household, quit school to work at an early age, was largely self-taught and self-made and suffered the effects of destitute poverty all the while clinging to and strengthening his ideals, his vision of what could be accomplished, both in his personal life and in society at large. These and a number of other factors endeared him to the working class and the Irish working class in particular. In addition to marrying a woman of Irish Catholic background, the city of San Francisco, where he spent much of his early life, had a large Irish population. While in

San Francisco he wrote a series of articles for the *San Francisco Bee* on "The Irish Land Question" in which he applied the ideas in *Progress and Poverty* to the particular problems of land monopolization in Ireland.

While still in the West, George sent a few copies of *P & P* to Patrick Ford, the editor and publisher of an Irish Nationalist Newspaper in New York Called *The Irish World*, a periodical devoted to land reform and Irish labor activism. New York was at the time the center in the U.S. for Irish nationalist forces. Mr. Ford reviewed the book favorably and gave it a lot of publicity, and "as a result Henry George's name began to circulate among the Irish working poor even before George arrived in New York in 1879," Mr. O'Donnell said. *The Irish World* went on to publish *The Irish Land Question*. Henry George and his followers began to see Ireland as "the test case for his land reform ideas," Mr. O'Donnell continued. It was at this time Patrick Ford sent George to Ireland as a foreign correspondent for *The Irish World*. From Ireland Henry George sent back very impassioned dispatches referring to the British landlords' "reign of terror" and describing the squalid conditions of the vast majority of the Irish people. The American workers movement made the connection that "what the landlord is in Ireland, the robber baron is in America."

When Henry George returned from Ireland, he was greeted by a huge rally organized by the recently formed Central Labor Union of New York, a labor umbrella group comprised of over two-hundred unions. Shortly thereafter, the American Labor Party was formed. Henry George was quickly picked as its mayoral candidate. The Irish-American voters overwhelmingly chose George over Abraham Hewitt (the Tammany Hall candidate) because, according to Mr. O'Donnell, "they were given a real choice this time."

- David Domke