Organized Sport and Organized Labour: The Workers’ Sports Movement

Perhaps the most important, albeit the most generally ignored and least understood, aspect of working class culture is sport. Working people, in contrast to the labour establishment and students of the labour movement, have embraced sport with a passion. Male workers in particular and female workers to a lesser extent have in the process changed what originated as a privilege and preserve of the ‘upper classes’. This essay explores the reasons underlying the working class attraction to sport and considers the attempt to establish an autonomous workers’ sports movement during the first part of the twentieth century.

The fact that organized sport is of very recent origin is often overlooked. It developed in the elitist British public schools such as Eton and Rugby thanks to the efforts of middle class educational reformers and then spread around the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a byproduct of British imperialism. That sport ultimately moved not only horizontally across national boundaries to the international bourgeoisie but also vertically to the international working class was — like the proletariat itself — a direct result of industrialization.¹

Modern industrial capitalism destroyed the traditional order of society. For our purposes the most important consequences of this revolutionary transformation were the rationalization of the work process and the creation of a formal concept of leisure. Whereas in rural pre-industrial society no clear division existed between work and

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recreation, a sharp distinction between the two began to emerge with the onset of industrialization. As people were uprooted from the old social order, they were forced to decide for themselves how they would spend their few non-working hours. They usually chose the traditional pleasures of dance and drink; in their modern setting — the dance hall and the public house.2

Out of a desire to combat such pernicious pastimes, British clergymen introduced organized sport to urban working people in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This phenomenon is reflected in the large number of English soccer clubs that ‘sprang in their first instance from churches’ and the fact that twelve contemporary professional teams grew ‘out of church organizations and the “civilizing” concerns of parson-graduates of the public schools.’3 Working class sport, however, did not long remain confined to church oriented organizations but moved quickly to other urban institutions such as the pub and place of work. So rapid and thoroughgoing was this development that from 1883 on working class teams dominated what had begun as an ‘old boys’ competition and is recognized to this day as the premier British sports event, the Football Association Cup Final. (Rather than become contaminated by the masses, many of the British public schools eventually dropped soccer and took up more ‘gentlemanly’ pursuits). Industrialization and urbanization had a similar influence on other countries as well. In the United States, for example, the post civil war period of modernization witnessed the proletarianization of the once elitist game of baseball.4 If economic and social change provided the preconditions for the rise of mass sport, it was not until working people began to secure adequate leisure time that sports could become a working class reality. Thus, for example, the working class takeover of English soccer only occurred after the reduction of the work week, specifically the introduction of the Saturday ‘half-holiday’ in the 1860s and 1870s. In Germany too the beginnings of widespread working class participation in sports were tied to a gradual improvement in wages and hours. Similar developments in France around the turn of the century began to make cycling accessible to French workers.5

That more and more workers increasingly found time, money and energy to participate in sport was in no small measure related to the growth of organized labour. The direct pressure it could bring to bear through strikes, elections and parliamentary action combined with ruling class fear of revolution was responsible for many improvements in working class life. Just such a mix, for example, led to the wide-
spread introduction of the eight hour day immediately after the first world war and in turn to a massive increase in working people’s involvement in organized sport. Still, greater leisure only provided the opportunity, it did not compel participation. Why then were workers so readily attracted to sport when the opportunity presented itself?

One reason related to modern work itself. The intensity and sterility of work in the capitalistic production process increasingly tended to reduce job satisfaction to a minimum. To compensate for this growing alienation, there arose a corresponding need for physical fulfillment and psychological satisfaction outside the workplace. For many a working person sport came to fill this void. Through involvement in sport the individual might directly or vicariously gain a sense of self-respect and personal accomplishment missing at work.

Another factor in the attraction of sport was the feeling of community or group solidarity it offered. In this way it helped counteract the ennui associated with life in an atomised urban-industrial society. Just as sport gave the working man an opportunity for individual fulfillment, it also provided the basis for collective participation. In this way sport supplied social and cultural needs that had been displaced by industrialization.

More obviously sport was pleasurable, industrial work was not. The worse the latter, the greater the need for the former. In addition, it appears that strenuous physical labour may well have required strenuous physical release. Organized sport provided both and as time became available to working people they turned increasingly to sport.

Finally, sport’s appeal was connected to its potential for providing an exciting and even titillating escape. This is to be understood not in the context of physical release but more in terms of a dream world far removed from the monotony of industrial work and the harsh reality of urban life. Like religion it could serve as a more socially acceptable opiate than drink or drugs. Yet, especially for males, sport was more effective than religion. It was ‘real’ with a reward not in the hereafter but in the here and now. Indeed, Marx might well have been nearer the mark had he referred to sport rather than religion as the opium of the masses.

Marx was not alone, however, in failing to consider the importance of sport. Few theoreticians or leaders of the labour movement initially recognized how effective sport might be in distracting
working people from their individual or group concerns, or conversely, in developing a sense of personal pride and class consciousness. Others, who saw sport as a useful instrument for socializing workers into pliant upholders of the status quo, were quicker to react.

Government, church and business, acting ostensibly from the highest motives, e.g., the physical and moral welfare of the working population, were not blind to sport’s potential for advancing the interests of the established order. A crucial factor, for example, which prompted the ‘muscular Christian’ missionaries to encourage sport in the urban slums and later a host of other religious sports programmes such as those of the YMCA/YWCA in the 1880s, the YMHA before the first world war and CYO during the Great Depression, was the recognition that the working classes were turning away from organized religion. Were this trend to continue, the church’s position in society would be seriously undercut. Similarly a modern government would be in a sorry situation without any army. So, in order to ensure a healthy supply of recruits and draftees, the state became involved in the well-being of the urban masses. Government subsidies for health, education, welfare and sports were part of this trend. In democratic Switzerland, no less, the military held the dominant role in school sports until 1972.9

Business relationship to sport is particularly instructive. In the interest of high productivity, employers wanted a healthy work force and sport came to be seen as a way of ensuring physically fit workers. Even more important, however, was the role sport might play in harmonizing labour-management relations. Increasingly sport was viewed as a way of combatting worker militancy and ensuring ‘industrial peace’. For example, one of the most famous British soccer clubs, West Ham United, was started in 1895 as the Thames Ironworks Football Club by the plant owner. The founding came shortly after a major strike and was part of a concerted programme to improve ‘cooperation between workers and management’.10 An analogous set of circumstances seems to have been responsible for the establishment of a baseball team in Paterson, New Jersey in 1896 by the prominent mill owner and Republican politician Garrett A. Hobart. And it was during this same decade that Andrew Carnegie took a leading role in establishing professional baseball and football teams near the Bessemer steel works in Braddock, Pennsylvania following a violent strike at this plant.11 A half century later an estimated
twenty million employees in the United States were participating in industrial sports programmes. Writing in the 1920s one American authority on industrial management argued that such programmes ‘saved the worker from agitators’ and ‘improved morale and teamwork.’¹² This attitude was present in all industrial societies. In Germany, industrial sports reached their peak in the late 1920s under the coordination of an employers’ organization known as the DINTA. Created by German businessmen in an effort to ensure a ‘harmonious’ relationship between employer and employees, the DINTA emphasized the establishment of Werksportvereine or company sports clubs.¹³

Where ‘industrial peace’ became the business of the state, it too could be found utilizing sport. During the 1912 miners’ strike in Great Britain, a government film showed workers and soldiers in a friendly game of soccer, i.e., a game between the strikers and strike-breakers. But the most intensive efforts to use sports as a means of controlling and pacifying labour were found in more authoritarian societies. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, for example, organized workers’ leisure through the government-controlled Dopolavoro and Kraft durch Freude programmes. Both consciously employed sport as a means of diverting workers’ attention and energy from industrial and political concerns while reinforcing the individual’s identification with the state.¹⁴

It was this use and abuse of sport by business and government, as much as the attraction sport exercised on the working class, that gradually brought about organized labour’s involvement in this area of popular culture. For a variety of reasons the labour movement had initially been reluctant to deal with sports. Among movement ideologues there appeared to be a certain intellectual bias against sports. Workers had more important things to do than engage in such frivolous pursuits. Besides, as late nineteenth century Swedes noted, sport was bourgeois, ‘an invention of the Anglo-Saxon upper class’. Others, temperance oriented like the American Knights of Labor, were hostile to sport because of its association with drink. Workers would do better to make use of movement libraries and improve themselves intellectually even if those who did seldom read what the theoreticians prescribed. Movement pragmatists also had reservations about labour organizations becoming involved in sports. It was a question of priorities. Resources were scarce and could sorely be spared from the political and economic struggle. Many felt that labour could ill afford the
‘luxury’ of its own sports movement when prior to the first world war labour agitation was barely tolerated in even the more democratic societies.\textsuperscript{15}

Nonetheless, despite these and other drawbacks a workers’ sports movement began to emerge during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Although a Socialist Gymnastics Union had existed in the United States as early as 1850,\textsuperscript{16} it was not until the 1890s that the foundation was firmly established. In 1893 nationwide workers’ gymnastics and cycling societies were formed in Germany; in 1895 a British workers’ cycling club was organized around the \textit{Clarion} newspaper, and a workers’ hiking association that would soon spread throughout central Europe was established in Vienna; 1897 saw the formation of a labour swimming society in Berlin; and a year later a Socialist Wheelmen’s Club was founded in the United States.\textsuperscript{17} Political and financial problems notwithstanding, the fledgling labour sports movement managed substantial growth. In Germany alone, the centre of the movement, there were over 350,000 worker sportsmen and women organized before the first world war. And in 1913 in Ghent the Belgian Gaston Bridoux succeeded in bringing together representatives of the Belgian, English, French, German and Italian labour sports federations to form the Socialist International of Physical Education.\textsuperscript{18}

The aim of the workers’ sports movement, while it might vary moderately from group to group, was basically the same everywhere. It tried to provide working people, especially the young, with the opportunity to participate in healthy, enjoyable physical activity and to do this in a positive working class atmosphere. Workers’ sports were to be consciously different from ‘bourgeois’ sports in that they were open to all — the classic example being the ‘Workers’ Wimbledon’ championships of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{19} But beyond presenting equality of opportunity to all workers, the labour sports movement set itself up as a humanistic \textit{alternative} to the excesses of ‘bourgeois’ athletic competition. Not only did workers’ sports seek to remove the class line from participation, it also sought to substitute socialist for capitalist values in the process and thereby help to lay the groundwork for a uniquely working-class culture. Such thinking contributed to the tendency within the movement prior to 1914 to emphasize less competitive physical activities such as gymnastics, cycling, hiking and swimming.
This situation changed dramatically in the inter-war period. The most obvious indication of a shift came at the refounding in 1920 and 1925 of the short-lived Ghent International of 1913. Initially it was renamed the International Union for Physical Education and Workers' Sport, and then five years later, the Socialist Workers' Sports International. These name changes symbolized the increasing importance of organized sport, and correspondingly competition, as opposed to simple physical activity. The International, moreover, was only reflecting national developments. In Germany the Workers' Gymnastic Society (ATB) became the Workers' Gymnastics and Sports Society (ATS). *The New York Call*, organ of the American Socialist Party, sponsored a baseball league. In Austria a workers' soccer association was organized.

The labour sports movement's decision to increase team sports and hence competition, was apparently a response to grassroots pressure from working people. Whether this demand for organized sport was a transfer of values acquired at the workplace to the leisure sphere or a kind of balancing act necessary due to the increasingly sterile nature of rationalized work is unclear. What is certain is that by giving workers what they were asking for, it contributed to a remarkable increase in the labour sports movement.

There were, of course, other important reasons for this growth. The introduction of the eight hour day and the breakup of the authoritarian Habsburg, Hohenzollern and Romanov states should not be underestimated. In this changed social and political climate, the labour establishment was compelled to take a greater interest in workers' leisure, especially as they saw their industrial and ideological opponents become increasingly involved in mass sports. The result was more organizational support for labour sports at a relatively propitious time.

Not surprisingly the greatest expansion of the workers' sports movement in the 1920s and 1930s came about in central Europe where the foundations were most substantial. For example, membership in the ATUS — the umbrella organization for all labour gymnastics and sports groups in Germany — skyrocketed during the Weimar Republic despite the death of 18 percent of the 1914 members during the first world war. At its peak (1929), the ATUS enrolled some 1.2 million working people and provided
athletic opportunities in over a dozen different sports. (Not included in this figure were another 250,000 people in communist sport groups that had been expelled from the ATUS in 1928). In 1926 the ATUS opened the most modern sports facility in all Germany, the 1.25 million mark Bundesschule in Leipzig. An affiliate, the Workers' Cycling Association (ARS), not only boasted 320,000 members (1929) — the largest cycling organization in the world — but also maintained a cooperative bicycle factory. A final indicator of the German movement's vitality were the sports festivals held by the ATUS in Leipzig (1922) and Nuremberg (1928), and by the communists in Berlin (1929), all of which attracted in the vicinity of 100,000 participants.22

The Germans were not alone in demonstrating a dynamic workers' sports organization. In the successor states of the Habsburg empire, most notably neighbouring Austria and Czechoslovakia, the labour sports movement was also impressive. The various Austrian labour sports groups were organized into a single movement in 1919 (VAS later ASKÖ); this grew from less than 100,000 members at the outset to a peak of over 247,416 in 1931. One ASKÖ affiliate, the Workers' Swimming Association, gave free swimming lessons to more than 10,000 individuals during 1930 (14,083 in 1931 and 28,738 in 1932), while another 117,282 people participated in its evening swims at three indoor pools. In Josefstadt, a branch of the Vienna Workers' Gymnastics Society attracted 19,590 participants to the 510 gymnastics and sports days it organized in 1929; by comparison the Socialist Party in this district numbered only c. 4,600 members.23

Membership of the Czechoslovakian labour sports movement increased to over 200,000 between the wars. About 70 percent were organized in the Czech section while the remaining 30 percent were members of the German language group. In 1921, 1927 and again in 1934, the Czechoslovakian Workers' Gymnastic Association (DTJ) put on massive olympiads in Prague. It was not unusual for 35,000 individuals to participate in these exhibitions and for the four days of events to attract 100,000 spectators.24

Such monumental displays were uncommon outside central Europe but the labour sports movement was also to be found in many other areas. Belgium, England, France, Italy and the United States all had workers' sports groups prior to 1914 while in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Holland, Latvia, Norway, Palestine, Poland, Rumania, Switzerland, Spain and Yugoslavia such organ-
izations came into existence at a later date. This in itself suggests expansion and it is reinforced by an examination of selected national movements. Italy, for example, experienced a sharp increase in post first world war labour sports until their suppression by the fascists. The Belgian Workers’ Sports Association doubled from ca. 10,000 in the 1920s to ca. 20,000 in the 1930s. In Britain the National Workers’ Sports Association (NWSA) showed a small but steady growth after its formation in 1931. The French movement numbered only about 17,000 members during the 1920s but expanded to around 100,000 following the establishment in 1934 of a united Workers’ Sports and Gymnastics Federation (FSGT). In Denmark ca. 20,000 worker sportsmen and women had been organized by the 1930s compared with 27,000 in the Swiss SATUS and another 65,000 in Norway. Particularly impressive among the smaller countries was Finland where the Workers’ Sport Federation (TUL) increased to 41,200 members by 1938.25

A further measure of the flourishing workers’ sports movement in the inter-war period was the labour sports press. The German ATUS affiliates published sixty newspapers with a combined circulation of 800,000 excluding local editions. In addition, by 1932 the communist sports groups were printing eleven regional and four national papers of their own. The Austrian ASKÖ sections had a dozen publications with a total circulation of over 220,000. In Vienna, moreover, the socialist publishing house Vorwärts included a sports supplement in the mass circulation paper Das Kleine Blatt (200,000) which it also brought out separately as the Sportblatt with a press run of 60,000. While such a special daily sports paper or even sports supplement was unusual, it did become increasingly common for communist and socialist publications to give space to sports coverage. For example, newspapers and periodicals as politically and geographically diverse as The New York Call, Western Worker (San Francisco), Berner Tagwacht (Switzerland), Le Peuple (Brussels), AIZ (Berlin), Labour (London), L’Humanité (Paris), and Rude Pravo (Prague) carried regular columns and features on sports, while both the London and New York Daily Worker inaugurated a full sports page in the 1930s. This meant that the organ of the US Communist Party was devoting nearly one-sixth of its total space to sports.26

As impressive as any index one might use to measure the inter-war dynamism of workers’ sports was the movement’s internationalism. Even the weakest labour sports group came to accept
international competition as given. So, for example, the fledgling British NWSA entertained athletes from Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Palestine and Switzerland at its Dorchester Sports meet in 1934. British workers in turn were encouraged to travel to the continent to participate in labour sports events. The national workers’ sports festivals in Austria (1926), Belgium (1930), Czechoslovakia, Finland (1927), Germany, Holland (1930), Latvia (1927, 1930), Switzerland (1926, 1936), and the United States (1932, 1936) invariably attracted scores of foreign participants.  

International matches in a variety of sports such as cycling, soccer and swimming became commonplace. Between 1926 and 1927 twelve Russian teams visited Germany as guests of the ATUS while three German groups travelled to the Soviet Union. Austrian workers’ soccer clubs made fifty trips abroad in 1928 alone. Such games proved increasingly popular; 35,000 people attended a contest between Austrian and German teams in the 1932 European Workers’ Soccer championships.

Still the most imposing aspect of the international labour sports movement were the Workers’ Olympiads. Organized as a counter to the chauvinistic tendencies of the more well known modern Olympic games and as an expression of international working-class solidarity, the first of these grand events was held at Prague in 1921. In sharp contrast to the Olympics in Antwerp (1920) and Paris (1924) where the ‘losers’ in the ‘Great War’ were prohibited from participating, the Prague games featured competition between worker athletes from erstwhile enemy nations. Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, England, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Switzerland, the United States, and Yugoslavia were all represented at this first, albeit unofficial, Workers’ Olympiad sponsored by the Czechoslovakian Workers’ Gymnastic Association. As one English observer noted, wars might be won on the playing fields at Eton but if peace were to be won it would only be ‘on the democratic sporting fields of the Workers’ International Olympiads.’

This theme was again prevalent at the first official labour olympiad organized by the ca. 1.3 million member Socialist Workers’ Sports International (SWSI) in 1925. Held in Germany under the motto ‘no more war’, the First Workers’ Olympiad attracted participants from twelve nations to winter games in Schreiberhau (Riesengebirge) and the main events in Frankfurt am Main. More than 150,000 people attended the summer games and, although records were downplayed and each athlete was required to
participate in a mass exercise demonstration, the world record in
the women’s 100 metre relay was broken. Impressive as these
figures were they paled before those of the next labour olympiad six
years later.31

The 1931 or Second Olympiad was in many ways the high point
of the workers’ sports movement. The SWSI, the games’ sponsor,
now claimed over 2 million members including 350,000 women.
And the Austrian hosts put on a display at the winter competition
in Mürzzuschlag and the summer games in Vienna that compared
favourably or better with the 1932 Olympics in Lake Placid and
Los Angeles.

‘Come to Vienna’ the prospectus proclaimed in four languages
— Czech, Esperanto, French and German. It promised a pro-
gramme that included a

children’s sport festival, meeting of the red falcons youth group, 220 contests in
all athletic disciplines, olympic championships, national competitions, friendly
matches, city games, a combination run and swim through Vienna, artistic
exhibitions, dramatic performances, fireworks, festive march, and massed
exercises.

The response was overwhelming. Tens of thousands of worker
athletes descended upon the Austrian capital and the social
democrats who governed ‘red Vienna’ did their best to accom-
modate their guests right down to reduced fares on public transport
and a brand new stadium. On the morning of the last day of the
olympiad some 250,000 people observed the ‘festive march’ of an
estimated 100,000 sportmen and women from twenty-six nations
through the heart of Vienna. That afternoon 65,000 watched the
soccer championship, 12,000 others attended the cycling finals and
another 3,000 viewed the contest for the water polo title.32

By design the conclusion of the Vienna Olympiad coincided with
the opening of the fourth congress of the Socialist and Labour
International, and one prominent observer could not resist making
a pointed contrast. Noting that while the political International
brought together at best a few hundred delegates, Julius Deutsch,
SWSI president, stressed that the international workers’ sports
movement ‘brought together the masses themselves.’33 In fact,
there was probably no other component of organized labour in
which rank-and-file interaction was greater. While congress
degrees generally stayed at hotels, worker athletes were regularly
housed with working-class families. International congresses might pass resolutions about understanding and solidarity but labour sports could, and frequently did, provide practical manifestations of these ideas.

Deutsch, however, overlooked one important matter; the Frankfurt and Vienna olympiads were limited to SWSI affiliates. Labour sports groups associated with the communist Red Sport International (RSI) were excluded. Besides the Russians, these included some 250,000 Germans and 100,000 Czechs plus smaller contingents from other European countries and the United States. Barred from the SWSI olympiads, the RSI organized its own competitions, most notably the international spartakiada of 1928 in Moscow and 1931 in Berlin.\(^{34}\)

The division between the communist and non-communist sports groups — a reflection of political differences within organized labour — was not bridged until the third and final Workers’ Olympiad held in 1937 at Antwerp. While not of the same magnitude as promised by the 1936 counter-olympics scheduled for Barcelona but aborted by the military putsch, Antwerp nonetheless offered an imposing display of labour solidarity. Special trains arrived from across the continent bringing an estimated 27,000 worker sportsmen and women from seventeen countries. For the first time participants included representatives of non-SWSI sports groups, e.g., from the Soviet Union, France, Norway and Spain. The crowds came too; 50,000 filled the stadium on the final day and the ‘festive march’ attracted 200,000.\(^{35}\)

Still, if Antwerp had succeeded for the moment in overcoming political differences within the labour movement, it proved helpless against outside political forces. Of the three central European pillars of the traditional workers’ sports movement only the Czechs were represented in full. The German ATUS had been one of the Nazi’s first targets in 1933 and the ASKÖ had been suppressed a year later by the authoritarian Austrian regime. Thus the Germans and Austrians, the hosts of the previous workers’ olympiads, were represented at Antwerp by emigrés. Within two years a similar fate befell the labour sports movement in Czechoslovakia as Hitler’s armies occupied that country. The international movement attempted to carry on. A fourth Workers’ Olympiad was scheduled for 1943 in Helsinki but these plans were ruined by the second world war. Undaunted, the SWSI went into exile for the duration only to see its attempts to refound a labour sports movement after
1945 fall victim to the cold war. 36

Such external political factors go a long way towards explaining the absence of a significant labour sports movement in the world today. Nevertheless, without minimizing the importance of the general political climate in retarding or advancing workers' sports all the problems of labour sports organizations cannot be attributed to it alone. On the one hand, for example, there is no question that the pronounced increase of the German ATUS from a few hundred thousand members in the repressive atmosphere of Imperial Germany to well over a million in the more liberal climate of the Weimar Republic correlated closely with the changed political circumstances. Likewise, the tremendous growth in French labour sports during the first year of the popular front government was not unrelated to the improved political situation. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that even so the FSGT represented only a fraction of the 3.5 million organized French sports-persons. And while the 1.2 million ATUS dwarfed all other labour sports organizations, it is estimated that workers comprised about 80 to 90 percent of non-labour sports organizations in Germany, or roughly twice the number organized in labour sports clubs. 37

There are many possible explanations for the invariable minority position of workers' sports, be it in movement strongholds or in the relatively weak organizations outside central Europe. One basic handicap was that labour sports nearly always followed, frequently by decades, the establishment of 'bourgeois' sports clubs. So long as the older associations remained elitist preserves this was of little immediate consequence; paradoxically, however, as workers succeeded in democratizing sport, and business, church and government came to recognize sports' socializing value, it presented a major difficulty. Labour sports societies seldom had the 'name', facilities, or finances to compete on an equal basis with traditional, company or church teams. Access to public funds, fields and halls did not come easily and even in Weimar Germany government subsidies for 'bourgeois' sports were six times higher than for labour. 38 Nor can the media be ignored. Coverage of workers' sports was generally limited to the labour press, if that, while 'bourgeois' sport was reported on in the popular press, cinema and radio. Given the reality that only a minority of working people read the labour press anyway, it is perhaps not surprising that only a minority found their way into the labour sports movement. In general, it would seem that only the most class
conscious workers would forgo the ‘advantages’ of the bourgeois world for the frequently second rate status of workers’ sports. Moreover, it was not uncommon for bourgeois clubs to recruit the better worker athletes, often through financial inducements, thus weakening labour clubs, while strengthening their own and making them more attractive to other workers.39

Efforts to improve the quality of the workers’ sports movement and thereby make it more appealing to working people were not lacking. Yet they were hampered by three basic problems; the consciously political orientation of labour sports, an ambivalent attitude toward organized sport within the labour establishment, and tactical differences regarding the movement’s function.

The political aspect was manifested most obviously in the use of terms such as ‘socialist’, ‘communist’, or at least ‘worker’ or ‘labour’ in a sports club’s name. By contrast, rarely did ‘bourgeois’ or ‘nationalist’ societies use equivalent adjectives in their nomenclature. Rather they were regularly classified as ‘non-political’ even though they were de facto as political as the labour sports groups. This in turn gave them access to money and members denied to the ‘political’ labour sports movement. In this respect it is of more than passing interest that two of the more successful Austrian workers’ sports groups, the hiking and soccer associations, had neutral names, i.e., ‘Friends of Nature’ and ‘Association of Amateur Soccer Clubs.’

The consciously political was also to be found in other aspects of labour sports, e.g., the compulsory political lecture or discussion at the outset of a practice.40 Such ‘hard-sell’ techniques probably had a way of repelling the very people the movement was seeking desperately to attract, namely the young. Another source of weakness was the political division of the labour sports movement between communist and socialist groups. Not only did this tend to divide already scarce resources, but it also fostered the kinds of acrimonious political debate that repulsed even sympathetic, class-conscious worker sportsmen and women.

The irony was that the political and trade union arms of organized labour commonly viewed the workers’ sports movement as suspect for not being political enough. They had no objection to working people enjoying themselves at sport but if they were going to help foot the bill they wanted evidence of more than ‘fun and games’. As a consequence, the labour sports movement remained in practice something of a stepchild. When resources were prised
loose in order to improve quality and attract additional workers it was frequently with the proviso that the sports clubs be more consciously political. That a sports organization might be more politically effective by being less blatantly political seems to have been overlooked. In the process the very real political potential of workers' sports movement was not fully realized. One local Austrian group, for example, noted in 1930 that the basis for the indigenous fascist movement was provided by young workers conditioned in the bourgeois sport clubs. To combat this tendency successfully required much greater support for the workers' sports movement from organized labour than had hitherto been the case.41

Heightened activity in workers' sports during the 1930s suggests that the labour establishment was becoming increasingly aware of sport's importance in working peoples' lives. Labour's misfortune was that this recognition came in a period of economic crisis making it doubly hard to provide necessary assistance. In addition, fascism, the catalyst that sparked the awakening, was by then beginning to destroy the bastions of the labour sports.

An earlier, more intensive development of the workers' sports movement was impeded by theoretical and tactical disagreements. The most extreme position, exemplified by the Swedish Socialists, was that sport as a bourgeois English import should be rejected in toto. At the other end of the spectrum were those who, like the labour movements in the more democratic societies, regarded sport as a personal matter. Between these polar opposites were others who accepted sport provided it was workers' sport. Just as bourgeois sport was part of bourgeois culture, workers' sport comprised part of workers' culture.42 Whereas the former was characterized by exploitation and chauvinism, the latter would advance personal fulfillment and mutual respect. Upon these fundamental ideas advocates of workers' sport agreed; their differences arose over means.

The practical ramifications of the two extreme positions were the same, labour abstentionism and consequently weak workers' sports movements. The Swedes' initial rejection of all sport produced the smallest labour sports group in all of Scandinavia; the laissez-faire attitude towards sport by organized labour in Britain and the United States spawned the most insignificant workers' sports organizations in the industrial world. The Swedish situation came from depicting sport as decadent and discriminatory while the Anglo-Americans regarded it as democratic and open, and there-
fore saw little need for labour sports. In Britain this approach was so ingrained that even after the NWSA was founded it thought nothing of entering a show piece soccer team, the London Labour Football Club, in a top flight 'bourgeois' league.43

Such an attitude probably interrelated with the fact that countries with weak workers' sports movements usually had relatively weak or late developing political labour parties as well. Conversely every country with a substantial workers' sports organization had a significant political labour movement. The strong sense of class consciousness that was necessary for the one was apparently also an important precondition for the other.

Where the workers' sports movement did flourish it was not without internal problems. There were tactical disagreements about how the goals of personal fulfilment and mutual understanding were best attained. As noted earlier, prior to 1914 emphasis was placed on participation to the near exclusion of competition. With the introduction of popular team sports in the 1920s, performance became increasingly important. The result was a difficult balancing act that was not always successful. The commonly criticized 'bourgeois' overemphasis on records, spectators and victory showed signs of infiltrating workers' sports. More and more the labour press gave pride of place to the spectacle aspect of organized sport. In 1931 a front page headline in the Viennese socialist daily during the workers' olympics proclaimed 'Austria's Victories at the Olympiad.'44 Success in the battle for equal access to public facilities and revenues was not without its dangers. The state seldom provided support without a quid pro quo and the resulting compromises, as at the 1928 Workers' Sports Festival in Nuremberg, might affect the nature of the event.45

Perhaps such tensions were inevitable once it was decided to become involved in organized sport and not just an occasional outing. Workers' sports clubs might still compete only among themselves — although here too there was pressure for change46 — but if this was done with 'bourgeois' fanfare and hoopla some would justifiably question the movement's function. Were labour sports to become an imitation of 'non-political' sports, worker athletes might be excused for choosing the latter with its higher quality facilities, teams and spectacle.

The workers' sports movement needed to grow if it were to fulfil its cultural and political mission. But the requirements for growth, as well as the eternal paradox of growth itself, presented perplexing
problems. In a world where even in the best circumstances a majority of working people were permeated with bourgeois values, labour sports sought to provide an alternative cultural experience. To this end it organized the most attractive sports programme it could regardless of the level and based — whether olympiad or Sunday hike — on socialist-humanist values. This movement, which reached its apogee between the two world wars, was a very real attempt to relate organized labour to an important aspect of workers’ lives. Organized sport, like the working class itself, was a product of modern industrial capitalism. Indeed, it is almost as inconceivable to envisage sport without the working class, as it is to conceive of a working class without organized sport. Through the workers’ sports movement, organized labour tried to come to grips with this reality.

Notes


3. Walvin, op. cit., 56 and Taylor, op. cit., 137 respectively.


16. Wagner, op. cit., 44.


19. These were held at the Reading LTC; see George Elvin, ‘Workers at Play’ in Labour 1, 1, September 1933, 20-1, 10, June 1934, 239, and 2, 11, July 1935, 263.


21. See Horst Ueberhorst, Frisch, frei, stark und treu. Die Arbeitsportbewegung in Deutschland 1893-1933 (Düsseldorf 1973), 140-1; The New York Call, 6 April 1919 and succeeding issues; Jahrbuch der österreichischen Arbeiterbewegung 1927 (Vienna 1928), 284.


FSGT — Fédération Sportive et Gymnique du Travail — and the TUL — Työväen Urheilulitto — continue to exist down to the present. Indeed the FSGT has become a member of the French National Olympic Committee. See Sport et Progress de l'Homme (Paris, 1976), 16.

26. Timmermann, op. cit., 50-1; Simon, op. cit., 128; Jahrbuch der österreichischen Arbeiterbewegung 1927, 281; Festschrift, 58; Communist International, op. cit., 586; in July 1937 the US Daily Worker was a six page paper.


28. In addition to the sources already cited see the Hoover Institution Archives, European Socialist Parties, box 1 ‘Österreichische Arbeiter-Turn-und Sportfest’; Jahrbuch der österreichischen Arbeiterbewegung 1927, 281 and 1930, 437; The Labour Year Book 1927 (London), 422; Western Worker 1 March 1932, 4; Socialist Call, 4 July 1936, 5 and 22 August 1936, 9.


31. Ueberhorst, op. cit., 152-4; Simon, op. cit., 186-8; The American Labor Year Book 1932 (New York 1932), 211.


33. My emphasis; see Deutsch, ‘Die Garde der zwei Millionen’, 9; Fourth Congress of the Labour and Socialist International Vienna, 25 July to 1 August 1931 (Zurich 1932), 143.


35. For Antwerp see Berner Tagwacht (27, 30, 31 July and 2, 9 August 1937); Rundschau über Politik, Wirtschaft und Arbeiterbewegung 6, 31-33 (22, 29 July and 5 August 1937), 1128-29, 1170 and 1200-01. No winter games were held, apparently because a winter Spartakiada had been held the previous year in Norway at the same time as the winter olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen; see Simon, op. cit., 237. For Barcelona see Rundschau 5, 29, 31 (25 June and 9 July 1936), 1176 and 1262-3.


37. For France see ibid., 6, 43 (7 October 1936), 1552; for Germany Timmermann, op. cit., 54 and Ueberhorst, ‘Bildungsgedanke und Solidaritätsbewusstsein in der deutschen Arbeitersportbewegung zur Zeit Weimarer Republik’, Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 14, (1974), 280.

38. Ueberhorst, Frisch, frei, stark und treu, 213. In Austria it was sixty times higher; see Deutsch, Unter roten Fahnen!, 19.


40. Josefstadt, op. cit.


42. See for example Deutsch, Unter roten Fahnen!, 10; Hannak, op. cit.; Wagner, op. cit., 170; National Workers’ Sports’ Association, Labour and Sport
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