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Reviews

A Labor Warrior Enabled

- Reviews section -

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Kingsley has largely been overlooked even though he was politically active through such notable historical events as the Winnipeg General strike and the First World War. While there is a dearth of information on his personal life, his political life is fairly well documented.

The lack of scholarship on Kingsley prompted the journey of this book: a decade-long collaboration between Ravi Malhotra, a legal scholar specializing in disability rights law, and Isitt, a historian, each bringing their own expertise to the project. The book is organized chronologically, following Kingsley's life from his disablement in a railway accident in 1890, which resulted in a double amputation, through to his death in 1929.

An interdisciplinary approach is adopted where history is seen through the lens of critical disability studies. As such, the reader learns not only about Kingsley's political trajectory, but the ways in which his disablement shaped that trajectory and affected the course of his life.

Kingsley was born in 1856 in Pomfret, New York and moved frequently between New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Montana. By the time he took a job as a brakeman for the National Pacific Railroad Company in 1889 in Montana, he was married with two sons.

In 1890, at the time of his accident, brakes and couplers were manually operated, a very dangerous practice that resulted in thousands of accidents in that year alone. In Kingsley's case there was a defective drawbar and, due to darkness, he did not see the gap, fell and was run over.

Not initially expected to survive his injuries, he ended up with a double amputation. During a long convalescence, he spent his time reading Marx.

He sued the railway for \$85,000, a considerable sum, equivalent to \$2 million today. The results of the litigation are unknown, although settlements at the time were typically small, around \$5000.

The rise in industrial accidents in the late 1800s led to increased litigation although employers found that it was still cheaper to kill or maim workers than to protect them. The limitations of tort litigation would eventually lead to the workers' compensation systems we know today in North America.

The Life of a Radical

Unable to work and newly radicalized, Kingsley embarked on a political career. His personal financial situation remained tenuous for the rest of his life.

Estranged from his wife and sons, he moved to San Francisco and became involved with Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party. He ran for city council in 1894 and the House of Representatives in 1896 and 1898. He also ran in San Jose in 1898.

It was during this time that his legendary oratorical skills would become known and he would be sought out as a

speaker and sent on speaking tours in both the United States and later in Canada.

Kingsley was greatly influenced by De Leon's "impossibilism," rejecting the idea of reforms or "palliative measures" as detracting from the ultimate goal of workers taking power from the ruling class. Union activity was not viewed favorably — only political campaigns through propaganda were valued. Issues such as women's suffrage, immigrants' rights and indigenous rights were considered irrelevant distractions.

The authors consider the derision in existing literature towards Kingsley's impossibilism to be unwarranted. His pronouncements have been taken too literally, missing his irony, humor and sarcasm:

"What scholars have interpreted as a lack of depth in Kingsley's political analysis represents, in our opinion, a misreading of speeches and writings never intended to be taken literally, resulting in the erroneous portrayal of Kingsley as an intellectual clown of the early Canadian left — when in fact he was arguably its most serious thinker, as was widely acknowledged inside and outside the party at the time."

Kingsley was often at odds with others in the SLP who favored a more moderate approach. By 1900, he had a falling out with other SLP members over political issues and allegations of improprieties over party funds. There was an attempt to expel him, and tensions between him and De Leon.

Meanwhile Eugene Debs' Socialist Party was growing rapidly. After a speaking tour of Washington State, Kingsley joined with other ex-SLPers to form the Revolutionary Socialist League of Seattle in 1901.

In March of 1902, Kingsley was invited on a speaking tour of British Columbia by Nanaimo socialists. After coming to British Columbia, he lived there for the rest of his life, first in Nanaimo and later in Vancouver.

By 1902, several socialist formations coalesced into the Socialist Party of British Columbia. SPBC and later the Socialist Party of Canada would be Kingsley's political home through the end of the First World War.

A Clarion for Socialism

Kingsley ran a fish market in Nanaimo to support himself and his political activities in the province. In Vancouver, he ran a printing press for similar purposes. In 1903 he became managing editor of the Western Clarion.

Between 1903 and 1912, he was at various times editor, publisher and editorial writer there. The Western Clarion became the leading publication of the socialist left in British Columbia in those years.

In 1904, the SPBC broadened into the Socialist Party of Canada with affiliates in Winnipeg and Toronto. Kingsley was an organ-izer, gave speeches and did speaking tours including a tour of Eastern Canada in 1908.

He ran for office five times, three at the provincial level in B.C. and twice at the federal level. He was never elected, but the SPC was consistently represented by one to three members in the provincial legislature.

In 1907, some 60-plus members who were "pragmatists" split off to form the Social Democratic Party of Canada. Kingsley had a falling out with the SPC in 1914 when he took an anti-German stance and was perceived as having

abandoned internationalism.

This event essentially ended his position in the party and in the Western Clarion. Although the SPC was already in decline at this point, labor was on the offensive and pushing for One Big Union, and this culminated in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.

After 1914, Kingsley had an editorial role at the B.C. Federationist which, in 1916, produced his sixty-page pamphlet *The Genesis and Evolution of Slavery*. He became involved with the Federated Labor Party of British Columbia (FLP) becoming first vice-president and later president.

He also played a role in the short-lived paper *Labor Star* where he published Lenin's "A Letter to American Workingmen." Socialists and the left in general at the time were greatly inspired by the Russian Revolution and many visited Russia.

There was debate about whether or not to affiliate formally with Russian communists, a question that was not only about politics but also about autonomy.

The Workers' Party of Canada, which would later be renamed the Communist Party, was formed in 1921. Division on affiliation played a big role in the demise of the SPC. While revolutionaries went to the CP, the electorally minded went to the FLP (which merged with labor parties to form the Independent Labor Party in 1926, affiliated with the Canadian Labor Party).

Living with Disablement and Repression

Although Kingsley never spoke of his disablement, it clearly affected his life choices. He always chose to live in an urban setting close to where he worked.

By 1908, he had replaced his wooden legs with more advanced prosthetics. He was able to walk with a cane and many were not aware of his disablement.

Given the stigma at the time around the issue of disability, his silence is perhaps not surprising. More surprising is his silence on safety issues. Whether or not that is related to his one-plank impossibilist approach is not clear. The *Western Clarion* did cover industrial accidents with sarcastic notes about how capitalists never seemed to get injured.

During the war, Kingsley came under scrutiny by the Canadian state. In 1914, the War Measures Act required "enemy aliens" to register and by the end of the war, 80,000 had registered — and 9,000 were interned.

Ernest Chambers was chosen to head the Office of the Chief Press Censor in 1915. While socialist propaganda was not generally censored, authorities were monitoring for anti-conscription sentiment, which resulted in *Western Clarion* being banned in 1918. In 1919, the houses and offices of socialists were raided by police.

In 1920, the newly formed Royal Canadian Mounted Police began opening files on radicals. Kingsley was file 15 and Chambers declared him to be "an out-and-out red Bolshevik Socialist of pronounced literary capacity and unquestionably one of the most dangerous men in Canada."

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In 1926, Kingsley ran as an independent labor candidate in Vancouver without the backing of any party or organization. The authors assess that:

“Kingsley's low level of support in 1926 more likely reflected his diminished profile within the Vancouver electorate as well as his political isolation from the working-class parties of the day. During his previous candidacies in the United States and Canada, Kingsley was the leading figure in the Socialist Labor Party and Socialist Party of Canada; by 1926, no working-class party would identify with him. It is puzzling that [he] chose to stand for office in this context, but this is yet another mystery in his atypical political life.”

After his 1926 run, he retired politically before passing away in 1929. While he appeared to have been forgotten at the time of his death, he was commemorated as a fictional character in A.M. Stephen's 1929 novel *The Gleaming Archway*.

Able to Lead paints a vivid picture of a fascinating political figure whose oratory one would have liked to have experienced first-hand. The inclusion of cartoons and fliers from that time is a nice touch.

The limitations of this book are entirely related to the lack of documented information. The authors were extremely thorough in combing through all available references to Kingsley. We are left to wonder about Kingsley's thoughts and feelings about his disablement, but that will likely never be known.

Kingsley cannot easily be pigeonholed into the categories with which we are now most familiar — he was neither a social democrat nor a communist. It is unfortunate that his brand of socialism has been overlooked for so long.

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