

# The History of Class Struggle in Vermont: From Socialism to the American Plan

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*The Granai Clan was like many Italian immigrant families settling in Barre at the end of the 19th century. By 1912 Cornelius, one of 18 children, was working as a stone cutter for the Jones Brother Company. His parents were ex-followers of Guiseppe Garibaldi, peasant leader and soldier in the wars of Italian unification.*

Decades later, in an interview with a friend, oral historian **Roby Colodny**, for *Vermont's Untold History*, Granai recalled hearing stories about more than a dozen members of one Garibaldi expeditionary force that settled in Barre. Others immigrants called themselves Republicanani, followers of Mazzini, elder statesman of the Italian Republic. Whatever their previous affiliations, most considered themselves socialists. And many joined the two main unions for those who cut stone, the Quarry Workers and the Granite Cutters International Association.



Eugene Debs, three-time Socialist candidate for president, visited Barre, as did his successor Norman Thomas in the early 1930s. Fred Sutor, secretary-treasurer of the local Quarry Workers from 1911 to 1930, ran for governor as the Socialist Party candidate in 1912, and was later elected mayor of Barre on the Citizens ticket. According to Granai, everyone knew he was a Socialist.

So much has changed. Barre was Vermont's third largest city by 1900, right behind Burlington and Rutland. Although a single industry had fueled its growth, no one family or

company dominated the local economy or culture. And its population represented a diverse ethnic mix, from French Canadians to immigrants from Italy, Spain and Scotland.

During the historic 1912 strike of textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, organized by the Industrial Workers of the World, at least 200 children of the strikers were sent to the central Vermont city. On February 17, musical bands from Barre, Bethel and Waterbury greeted the kids as they arrived at the train station. They were “divied out” at a crowded Socialist Hall on Granite Street as people sang “son qui” (here I am), the famous duet from Tosca, Puccini’s opera about Italy’s struggle for independence.

Even Yankee farmers from the countryside took children in.

In the 1920s the case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti captured broad local sympathy, especially in the immigrant neighborhoods. The two self-professed anarchists had been convicted of murder and armed robbery after a controversial trial in which the judge consistently denied defense motions. As new evidence emerged, more people decided that it was a frame-up, part of the red scare that began during the war. Sacco and Vanzetti became a cause célèbre, and attracted worldwide attention and support.

“Barre was never so stirred up,” Granai recalled. “They were seen as victims of their beliefs...victimized by circumstances.” When a play about the two immigrant martyrs was performed at the old Barre Opera House, a thousand tickets were sold for 300 seats. But unlike the Lawrence Strike a decade earlier, there was no victory this time. Sacco and Vanzetti were electrocuted shortly after midnight on August 23, 1927.

The ideas and sympathies of the newcomers sounded “radical” to many of their Yankee neighbors. But their agenda was a campaign for bread and butter, a decent home and education for their children. Like many urban areas in the U.S., Barre witnessed frequent agitation for shorter hours, higher wages and improved working conditions, from “squat sheds” and provocations to lockouts and strikes. Silicosis-producing dust sent many granite workers to the sanitarium on Blakely Hill. Accidents due to drilling and dynamite blasting were common.

A 40-hour workweek, with Saturday afternoon off, was instituted in 1914. Two years later Robert Gordon became Barre’s first Socialist Mayor, winning by 100 votes over the editor of the Barre Daily Times. But the political dynamics were fragile. After war was declared against Germany in 1917 it quickly became a battle against militant labor as well, especially the IWW. Most of its top leadership was rounded up and put on trial. As the Red Scare and deportation of suspected foreign radicals began the city’s socialist movement faded.

A teenager during the war years, John Lawson attended local socialist meetings with his dad. He and his family had reached Barre from Scotland in 1911, and Lawson took it upon himself to revive the Party after the war. It was a lonely task. Most IWW members – called Wobblies – were either in jail or struggling to hold onto union support. Many businesses were tired of dealing with labor demands.



Based on Diego Rivera mural, Rockefeller Center, 1936

By the early 1920s, although the unions were still strong, the socialist movement was in decline and a new slogan was creeping into use - The American Plan. Cloaked in patriotism, the Plan was a business strategy designed to deny recognition, even to well-established unions, and tar almost any demand for better wages or working conditions as “bolshevism.”

“The owners were represented by the Quarry Owners Association and the Barre Granite Association,” Lawson recalled. “Both were backed up by a common Board of Control which sat in Boston.” Through the intransigence of its President James Boutwell, the Board strove to preserve a “united front,” especially during a lockout that ran for months in 1922 and 1923. The Quarry Workers and Granite Cutters held out and some of the smaller companies eventually signed union contracts.

But the “united front” strategy was a partial success. Four months after the strike began scabs were brought in from sheds and quarries in Canada and Massachusetts. Some companies even promised them higher wages than the union was demanding. Once they arrived, however, the wages dropped.

By the time the strike ended, open shop working conditions had taken hold. The Rock of Ages Company was launched soon afterward, a rebranding of the older Boutwell, Milne and Varnum Granite Company, and actively promoted the American Plan. By purchasing other smaller companies - a strategy known as growth-by-acquisition - it became the best-known name in the granite industry. Rock of Ages wasn’t unionized until 1941.

### **Organizing in Hard Times**

IN THE YEARS after World War I, migration to larger Vermont communities accelerated, prompting a building boom in regional centers like Burlington. Milk production was on the rise, although the number of farms was dropping rapidly. Fruit production was also high, at least for a few years, but less butter, hay and other grains were being produced. Both manufacturing and agricultural diversity declined as tourism took a firmer hold on the economy.

At its peak, a trolley system carried over 16 million passengers around Southern Vermont - until the flood of November 1927. But that historic disaster, which hurt rail travel and reduced trolley passengers to less than 2 million, ended up helping the summer home and winter sports sectors of the recreation industry by spurring highway spending and the building of airports. In the early 1930s half of the state’s \$12 million annual budget was devoted annually to highway construction. During the same period only \$1 million was spent

yearly on education and health.

Increased specialization of labor, along with the growth of services industries and transportation systems, drew Vermont more deeply into the national money and credit network. In 1929 that structure collapsed. Unemployment skyrocketed as the standard of living dropped.

In Barre, a two-month strike by granite workers became a “straight out union fight for survival,” recalled Lawson. The strike officially began on April 1, 1933, shutting down six major companies within a week. The only exception was E. L. Smith, which paid above union scale and used workers from Canada. Lawson was president of the Graniteville local, while Granai consulted closely with the strike committee as a lawyer.

The union asked the sheriff and his deputies to let the strikers police themselves. “A police force was established by the wearing of white arm bands,” according to Granai. But at that point agent provocateurs rode in and workers fought back. In some cases the latter brandished shotguns for self-defense. Some strikers were jailed by anti-union judges. The protest was losing ground.

Shortly after the strike began, the sheriff had assisted in the use of 150 strikebreakers. But local residents backed the union, tradesmen and farmers distributed free food, and a federal arbitration board sought a compromise. On April 29, the Quarry Workers union rejected extension of the old contract for a second time. But the Granite Cutters accepted binding arbitration and the strike was almost settled by May 5.

Interpretations of why the National Guard was called in vary. As Granai remembered it, Governor Stanley C. Wilson didn’t issue the order. Rather, people connected with the Granite Cutters made the request “to get rid of agent provocateurs.” Lawson and others recall the situation differently. “Protests against the Guard were lodged by farmers, churchmen, the ACLU, the Vermont federation of labor, and a committee of Barre businessmen,” he insisted.

Whatever the reason, the Guard’s arrival created easier access for strikebreakers. Soon most quarries were back to business as usual. The workers had been demanding union recognition in the open shop quarries, but the presence of the Guard, combined with the action of the Granite Cutters union, left many people high and dry.

Members of both unions returned to work on June 1 and agreed to 1932 wages. But the hearings dragged on until August and many lost their jobs. Two of the three quarries now had open shops. One of the only compensations was that the federal government began to clean up the sheds. Suction machines designed to remove silica dust were in use before the end of the decade

French Canadian workers played a role in this and other strikes, often as scab labor. They had been coming to the state for mill jobs since the Canadian rebellion of 1837, when reformers rejected the political repression of Britain’s parliament. Vermont also provided better farming prospects, and a chance to work in lumbering or on railroad crews. Often called the “Chinese of the Eastern States,” these immigrants worked cheap and asked few questions. But their exploitation as strikebreakers hurt their relations with the Irish.

When mills began to close in the 1930s, many Canadians turned to farming in Franklin,

Orleans and Essex Counties at the state's northern end. Others stayed in the Burlington area but avoided union work. By then the church in Quebec had declared unions atheistic. History's long march rarely moves in a straight line.



### **Epilog: My Socialist Family Ties**

THE ROMANS MAY have been the first rulers to exploit southern Italy, their behavior so brutal that it eventually sparked the revolt of Spartacus. But some believe the darkest period may be the 200-year rule of the Spanish dynasty, which subjected the Mezzogiorno to a long series of predatory feudal barons and viceroys. Officially, feudalism ended in 1806, but its passing also meant that peasants could no longer turn to a wealthy overlord for aid. They were on their own.

Over the next decades, absentee landlords gained in influence, allowing gross inequities and draconian contracts that exploited most peasants. Some became outlaws and thieves. As a result, when southerners resisted landlord abuse or complained to the government, they were called barbarians and savages. But artisans and storekeepers were often respected across class lines. Each trade had its own mastri and apprentices. They were more likely to take advantage of educational opportunities, and also among the earliest to join the exodus to America.

Born on April 17, 1891 in the small Calabrian mountain town of Parenti, Bruno Lupia was the oldest of three brothers and, in 1902, the first of my family to emigrate to the United States. His parents, Michelina Cardamone and Joseph Lupia, had three other children: Lorenzo, Luciano, and Rosa. Lorenzo came to the US a decade later as a teenager, possibly to apprentice with his brother. Luciano followed in 1921. Both of them returned to Italy, however. According to my mother, the former "got into trouble" for his politics and the latter failed in a restaurant business.



There was obviously much more to this story. After all, grandpa Bruno became a clothing manufacturer and philanthropist, influential enough to merit an audience with President Truman. And Lorenzo ultimately became mayor of his hometown. Not bad for a troublemaker.

Whatever the reasons, evidence suggests that Lorenzo had returned to Calabria by 1919, early enough to fight for Italy in World War I. After the war, he became (or remained) a hard-line Socialist, a “maximalist” who wanted a full-throated social revolution. By 1923, he was criticizing political faddism and the rise of fascism.

“People wake up anarchist in the morning, have a stroll, and become socialist,” he wrote in an article, “at noon comes De Cardona (a political priest), and we all are Popular; in the afternoon, after some drinks, from populist to ‘Democratic-Liberal,’ then ‘fighters’; at night we all dress in black shirts and we are fascist. Without ceremonies!”

Three years later, after a summary trial in November 1926, Lorenzo was “confined” to internal exile. His crime: As secretary of a “dissolved” section of the Socialist Party, he had conducted “active propaganda” throughout the district of Rogliano, defending peasants and challenging fascists. In other words, he was an organizer. But he was also part of the early anti-fascist resistance, and a new decree on public safety, following several attempts to assassinate Mussolini, had increased surveillance, clamped down on dissent, and established a system of “forced residence” (confino).

Once his appeal was dismissed, Lorenzo was sent to Lipari, an island where pigs still cleaned up rubbish in the streets and locals viewed the political prisoners sent there as a pampered “species of nabob.” On the other hand, he also met Carlo Rosselli and Emilio Lussu, democratic organizers and returned soldiers, and Francesco Fausto Nitti, nephew of the deposed prime minister.

When he returned from exile, rather than being intimidated by the time he had spent in prison, Lorenzo continued the struggle for social justice and freedom that characterized his life. As head of the local peasants and laborers organization, he helped to liberate land from the remaining baronies and fought “agrarian reform” that was being used against peasants and in favor of landowners. He “actively fought fascism with all his might and with the means at his disposal,” one local history noted.

In the first free elections after the fall of the fascist regime, uncle Lorenzo was elected Mayor in 1945, a position he held for the next thirty years, supervising community affairs with rigor, prudence and democratic principles. Unfortunately, due to a political split in the family, we never had the opportunity to meet.

**Greg Guma** is the Vermont-based author of *Dons of Time*, *Uneasy Empire*, *Spirits of Desire*, *Big Lies*, and *The People's Republic: Vermont and the Sanders Revolution*. He edited *Vermont's Untold History* in 1976.

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