

Electioneering and Activism at the Turn of the Century and the Politics of Disablement:  
The Legacy of E.T. Kingsley (1856-1929)

This article is dedicated to the memories of Ross and Olive Skene Johnson. You were certainly right to try.

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**Abstract:** The lost career of Eugene T. Kingsley (1856-1929), an American-Canadian socialist who ran for the House of Representatives, the Canadian House of Commons and the British Columbia Legislature, has much to teach disability studies scholars. A double amputee who walked with a cane and artificial limbs, Kingsley was radicalized after an industrial accident in California and went on to become a central leader of the Socialist Party of Canada. In this article, I document his career and reflect on his legacy.

**Key Words:** socialism, amputee, Canada

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People with mobility impairments have typically been regarded as non-participants in the capitalist labour market and objects of pity by scholars of all ideological hues (Stone, 1984). Yet many people with mobility impairments have made important contributions in a variety of roles and capacities throughout history, even if they did not self-identify as having disabilities (Russell & Malhotra, 2001). In this paper, I excavate the lost story of one such individual: Eugene T. Kingsley, whose legacy spans both time and space. Almost entirely unknown today, Kingsley was born in upstate New York in 1856. He lost his legs in an industrial railway accident. While recuperating in an Oakland, California hospital, Kingsley was politically radicalized and joined Daniel DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party (SLP) to condemn a capitalist system that he saw as unjust and oppressive. He then began an extraordinary, if at first obscure, political career which included two unsuccessful runs for office in California for the House of Representatives in 1896 and 1898 and later leading his own political organization in Washington State. Moving to British Columbia, Canada in 1902, where he resided for the rest of his life, Kingsley gradually grew in stature. He became editor of an idiosyncratic but important socialist publication, the *Western Clarion*, as well as a printer and operator of a fish shop. He also became a leading member of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) and, remarkably, ran for office for both Canada's federal Parliament and the British Columbia legislature numerous times as a candidate for the SPC and later the Independent Labour Party. He was regarded as the pre-eminent leader and the most popular speaker of the SPC in the years prior to 1910 (McCormack, 1977). This article is a synopsis of selected aspects of Kingsley's thought and legacy.

Although there appears to be no existing record of Kingsley's reflections on his *own* impairments, I believe that his fiery anti-capitalist politics, articulated both in his day-to-day political activities and his electoral runs for public office, was a manifestation

of his experiences resulting from the impairment that shaped his life. Occasional comments and initiatives tantalizingly suggest that Kingsley's anti-capitalist dogma was a reaction to how workers injured on the job in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in North America were discarded and marginalized by a system that valued only people whose labour could be transformed into profits. In making this contribution, I insert disability politics into labour history, something which has been mostly absent from otherwise landmark social histories (McKay, 2008; Newton, 1995; Palmer, 2000). This analysis is derived from the social model principle that an inaccessible environment interacts with individual impairments to create handicaps for disabled people. It situates itself within the New Disability History that tries to reassess the life experiences of disabled people within a social model (Longmore & Umanksy, 2001; Oliver 1990; Rose 2005). Further, I make the point that throughout his career, Kingsley transcended the reform/revolution dichotomy in espousing completely revolutionary political and economic transformation through electoral means.

### The Early Life of E. T. Kingsley

Little is known about E.T. Kingsley's early life in antebellum upstate New York. However, his upbringing may be placed in the context of a relatively radical geographical space. The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, which unfolded in a location quite close to Kingsley's birthplace, is justly famous for its call by such pioneering luminaries as Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass for women to receive the vote and not be subjected to the notorious double standard whereby women's immorality was more harshly judged than male transgressions (Bratt, 1995-96; First Women's Rights Convention, 1995-96).

Although the precise date and details of the extent of the impairment have been lost, Kingsley experienced a railway accident that resulted in the loss of his limbs and forced him to abandon his career in manual labour (McCormack, 1977; Newell, 2008). While recuperating at a hospital in Oakland, California, Kingsley began to read Marx and Engels. He joined the Curacao-born immigrant intellectual Daniel De Leon's doctrinaire SLP which espoused the idea that capitalism could not be reformed but had to be entirely replaced by a revolutionary party that was controlled by the working class--one that could only emancipate itself through its own actions (Buhle, 1988; Campbell, 1999; McCormack, 1977; Newell, 2008). Hence, followers were often labeled "impossibilists" compared to those socialists who sought to use the power of the state to enact social reforms, such as pension benefits and workplace safety legislation, which impossibilists tended to see as a sop to stave off working class revolution (Coleman, 1990). In reality, the distinctions between impossibilists and reform socialists at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were quite fluid and Kingsley's career manifests this flexibility throughout.

Kingsley quickly developed a reputation in San Francisco as a sharp, street corner orator who agitated against the horrors of the capitalist system. The SLP was at the zenith of its influence on the American Left in the 1890s and had several branches in San Francisco that operated in English, French, German, Yiddish and Italian (Socialist Labor Party, 1896). Along with his comrades in the SLP, Kingsley also challenged the legal power of the state which, at times, attempted to restrict "subversive" free speech on the

streets of San Francisco. In October, 1895, the San Francisco *Call* reported how Kingsley and other SLP activists were arrested for obstructing the sidewalk while delivering speeches at an open air meeting. In keeping with the SLP focus on transforming society through popular education, Kingsley demanded a jury trial at which he was ultimately cleared (Arrested Socialists, 1895; Labor Council, 1895). In other speeches documented from this year, the tensions in Kingsley's political thought are evident. On one hand, Kingsley advocated a radical transformation of society. He remarks in one speech that his vision of socialism did not entail the piecemeal curtailment of specific monopolies but the total control of the government by socialists. Yet, he indicates that the solution for socialists is through the judicious use of the ballot box (Aims of Socialism, 1895). The combination of a maximalist political program with an emphasis on electoral change was emblematic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

None of the many articles mentioning Kingsley's political activities in the San Francisco *Call* ever referred to his disability or his use of artificial limbs and a cane. Yet by the 1890s, there was a well established tradition of prosthetic devices used to assist people who had accidents. As Slavishak has observed in his account of the marketing of artificial limbs to industrial workers in Pittsburgh, the increasing attention devoted to industrial accidents allowed prosthetics manufacturers to expand their horizons from military veterans to injured workers. Four key themes were emphasized: making men whole, the potential for elevated social status upon rehabilitation with a prosthetic, a product of American technological success and a body that could return to wage labor (Slavishak, 2003). Mihm documents how increased emphasis was placed on judging a person's suitability for business or marriage by their physical appearance, citing in particular an article on prosthetic limbs by Oliver Wendell Holmes in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Mihm, 2002). Williams-Searle notes the importance of masculinity in the construction of railway workers' identities (Williams-Searle, 2001). Given the lack of press coverage, one speculates that Kingsley was able to "pass" as able-bodied and be regarded as whole, an illustration of Erving Goffman's seminal work on passing (Goffman, 1963).

Kingsley was appointed an SLP organizer in California (McCormack, 1977). He was also selected twice to run as the party's candidate for Northern California districts in the House of Representatives. In 1896, he ran in California's Fourth Congressional District and in 1898 he ran in the Fifth District (JoinCalifornia, 2005-2011a; JoinCalifornia, 2005-2011b). Although he received less than four percent of the vote in both races, the fact that a disabled man ran for such an important public office is significant in itself. Eventually, Kingsley and De Leon developed political disagreements over the nature of trade unions resulting in Kingsley leaving the SLP. Kingsley took a highly dogmatic position that trade unions were inherently reformist and a distraction from the class struggle, while De Leon, although notoriously authoritarian and inflexible himself, had begun to orient himself toward anarchosyndicalist tendencies emerging in the United States (McCormack, 1977). Kingsley subsequently left for the Puget Sound area of Washington State where he joined a group of some five dozen former members of the SLP known as the Revolutionary Socialist League and espoused his purist form of socialism (Schwantes, 1979). In February, 1902, Kingsley was invited by socialist activists to give a speaking tour in Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island (Johnson, 1975). He

would settle in British Columbia permanently and go on to become one of the central leaders of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), spreading the message of socialism throughout the province and country.

#### E. T. Kingsley and the Founding of the Socialist Party of Canada

At the turn of the century, class divisions in British Columbia were extreme and famous coal barons, such as James Dunsmuir, were notoriously anti-union. In company towns, workers were obligated to pay exorbitant fees which ate into their meager earnings while living in housing which often featured poor sanitary conditions, spawning disease such as typhoid fever. Some workers labored as much as twelve hours per day, seven days per week. British Columbia mines were regarded as among the most dangerous in the world as companies regularly ignored safety regulations and they experienced a death rate that far exceeded their counterparts in the United States. As McCormack has observed, between 1889 and 1908, British Columbia experienced a shocking fatality rate of twenty-three men per million tons of coal produced (McCormack, 1977).

The British Columbia resource extraction economy, especially at a time when technology had yet to breach the large distances and intimidating geographical barriers separating the population centers of eastern North America from communities west of the Rockies, was heavily integrated with the American society and British Columbians often were more closely tied to political and cultural developments in Washington State than those in Ontario. Ormsby comments how the American Presidential campaign of William Jennings Bryan in 1896 created more interest in British Columbia mining communities, often populated by recent American immigrants radicalized by militant struggles against mine owners, than did the Canadian federal election contested by Wilfrid Laurier in the same year (Ormsby, 1958). Two speeches by the legendary socialist Eugene Debs to miners in Rossland, British Columbia cemented links between socialist currents in the two countries (Schwantes, 1979). Although an American immigrant, Kingsley, the hardy worker-intellectual, naturally fit in a British Columbia society populated by lumber and mining workers. He rapidly gained a reputation as a fiery speaker. He was appointed editor of the *Western Clarion*, paper of the SPC, and to a leadership position within the party upon its founding in 1904. After a short time operating a fish shop in Nanaimo, Kingsley moved to the then growing city of Vancouver on the British Columbia mainland. He remained there for the rest of his life working in a printing business that he would use to subsidize the *Clarion* until 1912 (Johnson, 1975; Newell, 2008).

The twenty-seven years that Kingsley lived in Canada until his death in 1929 were tumultuous ones from the point of view of the working class and extremely active ones for Kingsley. They encompassed race riots against Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian immigrants on the streets of Vancouver in 1907 (McDonald, 1996), the controversial rejection of hundreds of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu immigrants attempting to enter Canada on the *Komagata Maru* in 1914 (Parnaby, Kealey, & Niergarth, 2009), a bitter coal miners' strike on Vancouver Island in 1913 that saw the normally aloof SPC temporarily unite with several other left organizations including the iconoclastic Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to form the Miners' Liberation League (Johnson, 1975), the outbreak of the First World War in that same year and the eventual censorship

and suppression of dissidents such as Kingsley and his comrades in the SPC, and the famous Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 (McKay, 2008). These years also featured no fewer than *six* unsuccessful runs for office for Kingsley: three for the British Columbia legislature between 1907 and 1909 and three for the federal House of Commons in 1908, 1911 and, in his old age, in 1926. Kingsley never came close to being elected (Newell, 2008). However, unlike the American SLP, the SPC did manage to elect a small number of members to the British Columbia Legislature who in fact, for a time, held the balance of power in the provincial legislature. They included the Irish Canadian maverick, James Hawthornthwaite (Seager, 2000). Although Kingsley, who by this point had acquired the nickname “the Old Man,” was no longer a central leader of the SPC after 1911 (Johnson, 1975), he joined a proto-social democratic formation, the Federationist Labor Party (FLP), in 1918 and became its Vice-President (Johnson, 1975). He nevertheless retained a radical edge to his politics until his death.

The SPC, led by Kingsley for many of its early years, was from its founding a contradictory political organization, much like the American SLP in which Kingsley played a role in California in the 1890s. On the one hand, it possessed an almost evangelical belief that socialism would inevitably succeed and therefore any sort of compromise with the ruling class was to be avoided. Hence, the impossibilist slogan: *No Compromise, No Political Trading* that encapsulated the ideology of the SPC (Johnson, 1975). At the same time, on occasion, it demonstrated genuine creativity and flexibility to new conditions. Kingsley travelled frequently on speaking tours across Canada where he addressed large crowds to promote the SPC cause despite his physical impairments. Just as the SLP in California faced restrictions on their free speech, activists in the SPC were prohibited at times from the right to address crowds on Vancouver street corners. They responded by constructing a raft that they launched in English Bay (adjacent to downtown Vancouver) to serve as a podium for political speeches (Johnson, 1975).

One of the few references describing Kingsley’s impairments comes from an interview of SPC stalwart, Bill Pritchard. He recounts an election debate in which Kingsley, a large, bald man, participated. Pritchard depicts Kingsley as having artificial legs and holding on to a chair for balance. When a younger candidate commented that he would leave questions of history and economics to his bald friend, Kingsley replied:

“Ladies and Gentlemen – I’ve addressed hundreds of meetings on this side of the line and the other side of the line – I have never felt it necessary to refer to the physical characteristics of any of my opponents but this young squirt has taken it upon himself to make reference to my baldness – which is very obvious. I want to tell him that there are two kinds of baldness – bald on the outside (he pointed to his head – pointed to the fellow and said) – bald on the inside. You can see my kind of baldness every time I take off my hat – his kind of baldness is evident every time he opens his mouth” (Pritchard, 1969).

Kingsley’s printing business, housed in the basement of the now historic Flack Building in downtown Vancouver, played a fundamentally political role in allowing profits to be redirected back to fund the *Western Clarion*. There appears to be no historic record of how Kingsley managed to access the building. However, as his archived

correspondence with Hawthornthwaite indicates, the newspaper had a precarious status and Kingsley constantly had to worry about its financial state. In a poignant 1903 letter asking for two hundred dollars, Kingsley comments, “The *Clarion* goes under for 30 days and unless the comrades come to their senses, for good. I shall make no further appeal, in fact I’ve made none so far” (Kingsley, 1903, p. 2). In another letter, Kingsley expresses fear that the *Clarion* will bankrupt him (Kingsley, 1910). It is a testament to his dedication to his chosen political party that Kingsley was able to keep the newspaper afloat for so many years through subsidies from his printing company. I now turn to a discussion of Kingsley’s writings.

### The Writings of E. T. Kingsley

Some of the recurring themes in Kingsley’s political writings and speeches are apocalyptic imagery of the fate of capitalism which was expected to collapse within a matter of years and the portrayal of workers in currently existing capitalist society as mere debased slaves without a trace of dignity. Most poignant are references to the physical impact that capitalism has on injured workers. In order to fully understand Kingsley’s world view of a century ago, one must get a sense of his colorful language that conveys a world of class struggle that will be unfamiliar to most modern readers. A mainstream Vancouver newspaper headlined an article about a 1908 speech by Kingsley while a candidate for federal Parliament with the blunt title, “If Necessary Let Them Use Clubs.” It quotes Kingsley as stating:

“... [w]ithin the next eight years there will be the greatest upheaval on this western continent the world has ever seen. And if necessary the working classes will go forward with clubs in their hands to emphasize their needs. I hope not. But if necessary, then let them use clubs. The community as a whole must get control of the tools of production” (p. 2).

This article also provides a glimpse into his mannerisms that left such a deep impression on audiences across the political spectrum and made Kingsley so popular during his frequent speaking tours across Canada. Kingsley is described as:

“... a typical American, whose fifteen [sic] years’ residence in Canada has not spoiled his accent. He speaks in short sentences, and drives them at his audience with sharp forward jerks of his head. But the most curious of his mannerisms is the way, when wishing to make a point, he licks his first finger, for all the world like a baseball pitched preparing the famous spit ball. Tall and inclined to be stout, with keen small eyes, that seem to be continually raking his audience for possible hecklers, he is a good speaker with a forceful manner” (If Necessary, 1908, p. 2).

In the introduction to his 1916 book, *The Genesis and Evolution of Slavery*, Kingsley comments:

“The most reckless indifference to the welfare of the slaves of industry is manifested throughout the entire employing world, and not the slightest safeguard

is afforded the lives and limbs of the workers, if it can in any way be avoided. Politicians, professors and press writers lie like horse thieves about mundane matters, while pulpiteers weave entrancing fables about the heavenly beyond, for the purpose of chloroforming slaves into forgetting their chains and meekly submitting to the continuation of their crucifixion upon the altar of ruling class plunder” (p. 7).

The book uses the history and structures of exploitation from antiquity to the present day to analyze capitalism. Written without footnotes, it falls within the tradition of popular education of blue collar labourers that was a fundamental cornerstone of SPC philosophy. As McKay observes in his magisterial and path breaking tome of the turn of the century Canadian left, *Reasoning Otherwise*, working class education to foster the people’s enlightenment through an application of science to the world around them was viewed as a core constituent of socialist praxis by a wide range of left activists (McKay, 2008). *The Genesis and Evolution of Slavery* is classic Kingsley and evokes the sharp class contradictions of the period. His description of workers as slaves is common throughout his published writings and is intended to convey how debased employees are under capitalist wage labour. While brief, the reference to disablement is unmistakable. Kingsley was reticent about discussing any aspects of his personal life in his writings but the tendency for capitalist production to cause workplace injuries that require amputations, the very issue faced by Kingsley earlier in California that caused his own political radicalization, is identified here as a devastating flaw in the capitalist system.

An article published in the short-lived newspaper *Labor Star* (which Kingsley co-founded with Parmater Pettipiece at the end of the First World War, when there was a powerful labor radicalization in Canada) exemplifies the theme of class exploitation and the fluid dichotomy between revolutionary transformation and reformism in this period. He writes:

“So long as [government] can bamboozle or cajole the slaves into docility and quiet under the lash of exploitation, it cheerfully does so, no doubt because that is the cheaper way, but whenever that method becomes no longer effective, the lash, the knout, the club, the gun, the bayonet, the jail and the gibbet are used with equal cheerfulness and aplomb, for, no matter what the cost in brutality and blood, the property rights in human flesh must be held intact to the owners and masters and the game of profitability ruling and robbing slaves must not be broken up” (Kingsley, 1919).

Again, in the strongest possible language, Kingsley condemns the entire profit system and places the blame for this on the property system created by capitalism. Workers are chastised for their docility as wage slaves who will have to rise to the occasion and challenge the more brutal forms of repression that the state will use when it feels threatened (Kingsley, 1919). Nevertheless, the tension in Kingsley’s political thought is real. Writing well after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 replaced the Czarist regime in Russia, Kingsley stresses that in Canada and the United States workers have won the vote. Therefore, the tactics that were justified in Russia are not needed in North America so long as workers have the franchise (Kingsley, 1919). These statements suggest that the

boundaries between revolutionary socialism and reform were more fluid and unsettled than they would become in later years.

### Conclusions

In this paper, I have been able to capture only some of the highlights of E.T. Kingsley's long career. Spanning two countries and a series of political parties, Kingsley's life stretched from the antebellum times only shortly after the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 to the onset of the Great Depression. He was also a disabled man whose political radicalization stemmed from the horrific effects of industrial capitalism on injured workers. Yet in an era long before disability rights were established in law, Kingsley was able to work as a newspaper editor and political candidate, influencing thousands of his readers through his polemics on socialism and the class struggle. Kingsley has left an enormous legacy that future historians will have to analyze for many years to come.

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