

LaFollette, Gompers and Debs

By Wm. Z. Foster

THE present election campaign registers an important step in the development politically of the American working class. Indications now are that at least two or three millions of industrial workers, besides several more millions of farmers and other petty bourgeois elements, will quit their old moorings and create a new political alignment. What is important regarding the workers is not that they are walking into a petty bourgeois trap but that they are breaking away from the leadership of big capital. However, blindly and sluggishly, they are nevertheless moving towards the left.

The "Third Party" movement is a great united front. It comprises three important groups of the middle class, the trade unions and the socialists. These are typified respectively by LaFollette, Gompers and Debs, a combination of leaders which a year or two ago would have been considered well-nigh impossible. Let us see what are the aims of these groups and what has brought them into this campaign.

LaFollette: Middle Class Leader

The new third party combination is overwhelmingly dominated by middle class elements, of which LaFollette is the Messiah. His whole program of regulating the trusts so as to re-establish competition, reducing the tariff, clipping the power of the Supreme Court, electing "honest" men to public office, etc., etc., is conceived in the interests of the small manufacturers, small merchants, well-to-do farmers, professionals, and other middle class groups who feel themselves pressed on the one side by the big capitalists and on the other side by the working class. For Labor, save the thin fringe of aristocrats at the top, there is nothing in it.

In the LaFollette movement the function of the masses of workers and small farmers is to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for the middle class. The only movement that can further the interests of the industrial and agricultural workers, now or in the future, is one that attacks the capitalist system as such. This LaFollette does not do. On the contrary, he is a militant defender of capitalism. But he objects to the exploitation of the workers being monopolized by

just a few big capitalists. He wants the small fry to share in it, too. All his political life he has fought against every form of socialism, and before this campaign is over he will again declare his hostility in sweeping terms, in spite of the fact that the Socialist Party is affiliated to his movement. He is a militant enemy of independent political action by the working class, as witnessed by his destruction of the Farmer-Labor Party movement. He has dropped his plank for recognition of Soviet Russia, and in his Labor Day speech he left out entirely his demand for government ownership of the railroads. His "Labor Program" is hardly more advanced than that of the Democratic Party.

Typical of their political ignorance, masses of workers, totally in the dark as to their true interests, actually believe that because the big capitalist press is quite generally opposing LaFollette this is sufficient proof that he must stand for the workers' interests. But such political children are due for a rude awakening. LaFollette and his similars are loyal champions of capitalism. When the time comes that the working class becomes more and more class conscious and begins to move resolutely against the present ruling class, then the Coolidges, Dawes and their like will be no longer able to sway the masses and keep them chained to capitalism, and it will be the LaFollettes who will be found effectively defending the capitalist system, even as it was the Social Democrats of Europe who saved capitalism when it was threatened by the revolutionary workers. Such petty bourgeois reformers as LaFollette are the last bulwark of the capitalist system. They are false beacons to lure the labor movement upon the rocks of defeat.

Naturally great masses of trade unionists are following LaFollette in this campaign. They are petty bourgeois in psychology. Consequently, when the middle class elements, led by LaFollette, broke away from the two old parties and crystallized in the new movement they were bound to follow. But the surprising thing is that Gompers himself is going along with LaFollette. He did not do this willingly. Only under the severest pressure has he parted with his capitalist cronies in the Republican and

Democratic parties and embarked upon the present, for him, hazardous adventure.

Gompers: Labor Faker

For Gompers the situation became impossible. He was absolutely compelled to abandon his time-worn policy of using organized labor as a stupid tool of the two old parties. When the LaFollette movement began to take shape, masses of the rank and file, completely disillusioned with the capitalist parties and eager to find some relief from oppression, turned to it hungrily. But if it were only the rank and file that were involved, as, for instance, in the amalgamation movement, it would be comparatively simple to ignore their demands. But the situation was more serious. The revolt had spread to the bureaucracy.

For many years the bureaucrats in the unions had suffered from a sort of political starvation. The Gompers policy was so hopelessly bankrupt that it did not even open the way to the election fleshpots for them. Few indeed were those who found entrance directly to the pie counter. Enviously they eyed the British trade union leaders, with their easy-money Labor Party. But they were not willing to do any pioneer work themselves for such a bonanza. It had to come like manna from heaven. It came with the LaFollette movement. The bureaucrats, great numbers of them, saw in this the golden way to prosperity. They took to it like ducks to water. It had the old lure of something for nothing.

Gompers was up against it. He went to the Republican convention with his supply list of petty bourgeois reforms, misnamed demands of labor. He was given five minutes to state the case of the working class before a hard-boiled committee. Then he was firmly thrust out upon the sidewalk empty-handed. The same fate happened to him at the Democratic convention, his old pals being too busy with the opera bouffe fight over the Ku Klux Klan to pay any attention to the "demands" of Labor. So Gompers, compromised by the stupidity of his capitalist friends, had to yield to the revolt of his own bureaucracy and accept LaFollette. But in his defeat he was able to extract a hard price from LaFollette. He forced the latter to give up his program as an issue in the state campaigns and to allow

Gompers to select the congressional candidates who should be endorsed.

And Gompers must go still farther. The so-called LaFollette movement must crystallize eventually into a party, however the trimmers may strive to prevent it. With bluster and bravado Gompers opposes this developing party. But he will have to yield to it sooner or later, or be driven out of office because of it—unless his growing senility does the job for him first. The bureaucrats have found the way to the political pie counter, and he will never be able to stay their eager rush.

Debs: Sentimentalist

All over the world the Socialist Party has shown itself to be a petty bourgeois movement. Like the organization in other countries, the S. P. here did not show in full its essentially reformistic character so long as the revolutionary elements remained affiliated to it. The militant left wing exercised a corrective influence upon it. But since the split in 1919, the S. P. has fully unmasked itself. Gradually it has dropped not only every semblance of a revolutionary program but even of the terminology. That this petty bourgeois party should be swallowed up by the LaFollette movement was a foregone conclusion. At Cleveland, under the leadership of Hillquit, it devoured LaFollette's bait, hook, line and sinker. It thereby dissolved itself, bid goodbye to such revolutionary traditions as it had, and frankly embarked upon a campaign of class collaboration. Hillquit called LaFollette the most outstanding and devoted champion of the working class, and Cahan declared the class struggle to be nonsense.

The most pitiful figure in this Socialist debacle is Eugene V. Debs. Debs has long been a militant figure in the labor movement, but his militancy rested principally upon sentimentalism. This sentimentalism has contributed largely to his undoing. When he got out of jail his place was to join the Workers Party and to cast in his fate with the Communist movement. He debated the matter at length with himself. But sentimental attachment to the S. P., in the life of which he had been such a big factor, kept him in that organization. It was his god. It could do no wrong. He advocated amalgamation, recognition of Soviet Russia, and the formation of a labor party; but when the



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S. P. fought against these measures he kept silent and made no resistance. And when the S. P. went to the last limit of surrendering to LaFollette, Debs not only followed it but gave it his blessing. Instead of exposing the petty-bourgeois reformer, Debs endorsed him, leading thousands of workers into his trap. Just at the moment when real leadership was needed; just when emphasis upon the revolutionary program was required, Debs failed. He began his career and lived the best years of his life warring against the trade union fakers. He ends his career in a close alliance with Gompers.

Debs tries to justify his position by arguing that the LaFollette movement will transform itself into a Farmer-Labor Party. What guilelessness! LaFollette is militantly opposed to a party of workers and poor farmers; so is Gompers; and Hillquit has not the courage to fight for one, even if he does give lip service to it. For many years Debs aggressively advocated dual unionism, a policy which did much to isolate the Socialist Party from the masses and to prevent its growth. Now, in a burst of opportunism, he goes to the other extreme and loses the organization in the petty bourgeois mass, gambling wildly upon the formation of a labor party. But Hillquit is not so gullible. He knows that the S. P. is bankrupt, that it never can hope to be the party of the masses. He is content to see himself and the other Socialist leaders become active spirits in such petty bourgeois party as may develop out of the LaFollette movement. He has abandoned Socialism completely, even as

has Abe Cahan. By his obstinate clinging to the defunct Socialist Party and by his blind following of Hillquit, Debs has finally wound up by losing completely the leadership of the left wing. He has destroyed his usefulness to the revolutionary workers.

LaFollette, Gompers and Debs joined together in a great united front. Ten years ago who would have thought it possible? Then these three men and their movements battle against each other. Politics does indeed make strange bed-fellows. But are these three so strange after all? The movements they stand at the head of are all petty bourgeois in character, even though two of them are slow to learn that fact. It is natural enough that in the present petty bourgeois upheaval against big capital all three should be united together. The power of economic determinism is a marvelous thing.

In this crucial situation the duty of the left wing is clear. Now that the masses of workers and poor farmers are breaking away from the two old capitalist parties they must not be allowed to fall uncontested under the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie. The revolutionists must emphasize now more than ever the futility of trying to reform the capitalist system. They must fully expose the follies of LaFollettism. They must stem the swelling tide of reformism. They must raise their demands for a Workers' and Farmers' Government and Communism by supporting the local, state, and national tickets and program of the Workers Party.

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