
AMERICAN ORIGINS OF THE PEOPLE'S FRONT

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WHEN the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, in the summer of 1935, developed the policy of the People's Front, it marked a great turning point in international labor history. The toiling masses in the capitalist world, long demoralized by the reformist policies of the Second International, were in retreat before the onrush of fascism, then freshly victorious in Germany and Austria. The People's Front, by drawing together the fighting forces of the workers, lower middle class and poorer farmers under the leadership of the proletariat, forged a new and powerful weapon of class struggle along Leninist lines. It gave the masses new hope, a militant policy and an effective organization in their desperate struggle against fascism and war. The great fights they are making in Spain, China, France and other countries are proof that these masses in every country are at last finding in the People's Front the means to defend themselves from the fascist barbarians who would rob the people of all their democratic liberties and deluge the world with a bloodbath of war.

But enemies of the Communist Party, from Lovestoneites and Trotskyites to open defenders of capital-

ism, commonly argue that the People's Front is a policy alien to the masses in the U.S. They claim that its characteristic form of a united front of workers, farmers, and the lower middle class against big capital is both an ineffectual weapon and also an artificial combination of classes which has no basis in American life. They allege that the Comintern is simply trying to ram the People's Front policy down the throats of the American toiling masses.

But nothing could be further from reality. The People's Front is the central mass Leninist tactic of today, based on the natural, historic alliance of workers and middle classes of farm and city. It is no less necessary and applicable in the United States than in European countries. Moreover, the united front class grouping that constitutes the People's Front is no stranger to this country. The fact is that under the fierce pressure of advancing monopoly capitalism, carrying with it terrific exploitation and suppression of the farmers, lower middle class and working class, these three classes, for a full half century past (not to go further back into American political history), have made determined and repeated efforts to consolidate their struggle

on the basis of the class forces which today constitute the People's Front, as against their capitalist class enemy. The People's Front has deep roots in American mass tradition.

Indeed, it can accurately be said that the American masses spontaneously developed the class combination of the People's Front even before this was done to any considerable extent in the industrial countries in Europe. In doing so, however, these antecedents of this American People's Front movement bore very much an incipient and transitory character, lacking the definite organization and ideology of the modern People's Front, such as we see it today in Spain, China, France, and in its development in the U.S.A. The history of the Farmer-Labor movement in this country is the record of the early stages of the evolving American People's Front.

The Bryan campaign of the middle nineties was a striking example of the native American tendency towards the People's Front. It was based definitely upon the characteristic class alliance of poorer farmers, petty bourgeoisie and proletariat. This great movement of the toiling masses had no elaborate theory behind it, but developed spontaneously in answer to the problems presented by the given situation. The three classes that made up its decisive forces were forced by dint of joint interests to combine themselves in a common front to resist the powerful attacks of their common enemy, finance capital. Of course, the Bryan movement was very confused in program and social perspective, the classes comprising it lacking definite organization and

being deeply infected with capitalist illusions. The essential thing for us to note, however, is that its class composition was basically the same as that of the modern People's Front.

During the World War period and in the years immediately following there was also a widespread outcropping of the People's Front tendency, expressed by the formation of various state and local labor and farmer parties which entered more or less generally into cooperation with each other. One of the most outstanding examples in these years of this movement was the Non-Partisan League in the Dakotas. The Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota represented the same tendency, but more highly developed.

A further striking example of the natural direction toward the People's Front class combination in the U.S. was given during this general period by the formation of the Farmer-Labor Party in Chicago in 1920. Prior to that convention there had been developing a whole series of local labor parties in Chicago, New York and various other cities; there were also many farmer parties growing throughout the West and Northwest; and at the same time there grew up the "Committee of 48," which had a strong mass petty-bourgeois following in many states. These three movements, without benefit of definite theory and without any "interference from Moscow," naturally combined their forces into one Farmer-Labor Party in order more effectively to fight the big capitalist interests. They had no great difficulty in arriving at a common program of demands. At the Chicago 1920 convention these three

class affiliated groups definitely represented the People's Front in embryonic form.

The big Conference for Progressive Political Action of 1922-1924, which had some 4,000,000 organized supporters, also bore the characteristic class features of a People's Front combination of workers, farmers and middle class. It was a striking example of the constant recurrence of the People's Front trend among the American toiling masses. An important difference between the C.P.P.A. of 1922-24 and the Bryan movement of the 'nineties was that in the later organization the workers played a much more prominent part ideologically and organizationally, having in the meantime made definite strides towards winning the proletarian hegemony in the budding Farmer-Labor Party movement, a hegemony which is a central feature of the modern People's Front. The broad C.P.P.A. movement climaxed in the LaFollette presidential election campaign of 1924. And this broad alliance of workers, farmers and middle class validated once again the native urge toward the movement now in nationwide formation—the People's Front.

Again in the election campaigns of 1932 and 1936 we see the same class forces of workers, petty bourgeoisie and farmers uniting their forces together in great masses behind Roosevelt. It is true that Roosevelt also had the support of considerable sections of middle capital and some even of big capital; but this does not change the basic fact of the crystallization, in that movement, of the class content of the modern People's Front. In the whole great mass movement in sup-

port of the New Deal the pronounced People's Front three-class line-up is unmistakable.

The above-cited incidents and movements from recent American political history give only the barest indications of the antecedent phases of the People's Front tendency in this country. The examples referred to could be multiplied and greatly elaborated upon. But skeleton as they are, they nevertheless serve to demonstrate conclusively the historical trend of American workers, farmers, petty bourgeoisie to combine together against their common enemy, big capital. The People's Front is not an artificial importation from Moscow. It has a long and legitimate American parentage. It springs naturally and spontaneously into being in the process of the American class struggle. The whole history of the American Farmer-Labor Party movement is a graphic proof that the workers, farmers and lower middle class have joint interests and that they do and can struggle shoulder to shoulder. It demonstrates conclusively that the People's Front is a natural growth, rooted in American political conditions, and that as the pressure upon the toiling masses becomes greater, the People's Front tendency among them becomes ever more definite and better organized.

Above I have stated that the People's Front tendency was more pronounced in the United States than in many European countries. In Germany, France, Austria, England, Belgium and various other countries where the Social-Democratic Parties long held mass sway they characteristically neglected to set up organized

movements with the peasantry; and, although they had many middle class leaders, they nevertheless neglected to develop alliances with the petty bourgeoisie itself as a class. The European Socialist Parties based themselves almost exclusively on the working class and they pursued a policy of collaboration with the big bourgeoisie. They seldom or never built up the far-reaching combination of workers, farmers and petty bourgeoisie that has played such a characteristic role in American election struggles and which foreshadowed the modern People's Front. About as far as the European Socialist Party contact with these classes went was to carry out more or less fugitive parliamentary alliances with them. The one outstanding exception to this narrow policy was in Russia, where the Bolsheviks, under Lenin's leadership, systematically cultivated an alliance between the workers and the peasantry, promoting in that alliance the hegemony of the proletariat. It was this broad common front policy that enabled them finally successfully to overthrow tsarism and capitalism and to establish socialism.

Lacking faith in the capacity of the proletariat to lead all the oppressed in capitalist society, the European Social-Democratic Parties followed an opportunist line with regard to developing the class combination which now constitutes the People's Front. The Gompers Right-wing trade union bureaucracy had a similar policy in the United States, being pretty generally in opposition to this Farmer-Labor Party trend. The same was also true of the Socialist Party in this country. For the first

twenty years of its history the Socialist Party was an open enemy of the Farmer-Labor Party tendency, and even now it is only a half-hearted supporter of it, as the recent New York election fight showed. And, when examined, even this "support," carried on under opposition to the People's Front, proves itself to be spurious. It is historically accurate to say that the American masses, without revolutionary theory and with socialist guidance, orientated in the direction of the People's Front in defense of their common democratic interests. It is only within recent years, since the rise of the Communist Party and especially since the Comintern's definitive formulation of the policy of the People's Front, that the traditional American Farmer-Labor Party (People's Front) tendency is receiving proper practical and theoretical support and leadership.

The gropings of the American toiling masses towards a People's Front, extended over all these years, have been characterized by a number of fundamental weaknesses. Thus, the farmers, lower middle class, and even the working class, the basic People's Front groups, have been deeply afflicted with capitalist illusions. This ideological weakness has tended to make their joint struggles transitory in character, loosely organized and confused as regards objectives. Hence, we see in the various stages of the movement such confusionism as cheap money quackery, trust-busting, isolationist pacifism, etc., mixed with many sound proposals on taxes, civil rights, etc., etc.

Because of its ideological immaturity, the developing People's Front

combination has in the past manifested itself chiefly only at election times, after which it again tended to fall apart and to succumb more or less under the control of capitalists. A further basic weakness of the movement was the relatively feeble leading role played in it by the proletariat and its revolutionary party, the hegemony of the incipient People's Front movement, especially in its earlier stages, resting mostly in the hands of the farmers and petty bourgeoisie.

But the deepening of the world capitalist decay—with its accompanying terrific industrial crises, mass unemployment, wholesale pauperization, with fascism and war, of which the United States is feeling the deadly force—is making imperative the adoption of a solid, well-organized People's Front by the toiling masses. Whereas the traditional alliances of the workers, farmers and petty bourgeoisie in American political struggles in the past have been temporary, loose and confused, now this democratic mass movement is rapidly taking on a more definite character. Under the blows of rapidly worsening economic conditions, the workers, farmers and petty bourgeoisie are tending more and more to free themselves from big capitalist tutelage and to unite firmly for common action in defense of their joint demands. Swiftly, their ever-recurring alliance assumes the character of a great American People's Front against fascism and war.

The workers, poorer farmers and lower petty bourgeoisie, the People's Front component classes, are rapidly becoming better organized and evidencing more of a determination to cooperate together against their common enemy, finance capital. Also,

what is vitally important, the proletariat, especially as represented by its most militant mass trade union section, the C.I.O., is steadily advancing toward the necessary hegemony over this movement. Moreover, the revolutionary party of the working class, the Communist Party, in contrast with the years'-long wrong attitude of the Socialist Party toward this movement is, with increasing effectiveness, playing its role of ideological leader by pioneering the necessary immediate demand slogans and by other practical, theoretical and organizational work. In short the constantly maturing American People's Front, under the blows of intensified mass exploitation, fascism and war, is ever becoming stronger, more firmly knit, more permanent in character, and more conscious of its political aims. The great mass movement which now groups itself in support of Roosevelt is moving with giant strides towards a powerful American People's Front, whether it calls itself by that name or not.

In introducing the central tactic of the People's Front into this country, the Communist Party cultivates and strengthens the native American democratic mass movement that tends naturally towards the People's Front. Our Party's job as the vanguard of the proletariat is to make this great spontaneous movement more conscious of its role and purpose, to seize upon every situation for organizing and strengthening it, so that this movement will before long grow into the great Farmer-Labor Party, the People's Front, able to defend the democratic liberties of the people and thus to facilitate the eventual establishment of socialism.