

HISTORY OF INDEPENDENT POLITICAL ACTION: Politics of the Farmer-Labor Party

August-September 1976

Each time we go through another round of primaries, local or national, Democratic or Republican, we hear a whole new string of promises and testimonials about how everybody is for the working person. And as one representative of big business follows another onto the political stage, as we prepare to choose between a Carter or a Reagan or a Ford or a Schweiker who's now trying to convince us that he wasn't all that much for the working people after all, more and more of us are making and are hearing comments about how much we need a political party that really *is* for the working class -- a political party that doesn't belong lock stock and barrel to the major monopolies.

But just as often as we'll hear such comments, we get the old "you'll never see it -- there's no party that can challenge the big two. You need too much money and pull to get into politics. Forget it, it's a dirty game anyway."

FAR-FETCHED IDEA?

Well, the fact is that a third party which would represent working, poor and oppressed people in this country is not such a far-fetched idea. In fact, such parties have existed in our own history, and despite tremendous harassment by the ruling class, treachery by the labor bureaucracy, and despite real inexperience and mistakes, these parties have not only influenced the course of the two major parties, but have won significant victories of their own.

Attempts to form independent political parties date all the way back to 1828. As we start to think seriously about forming a people's party today, we need to take a look at some of those parties, both to gain inspiration and to learn from their mistakes. We'll focus on the attempts in this century -- taking a look at the Farmer-Labor movement of the 20's this issue.

In 1924 Robert LaFollette and his running mate Wheeler polled 5 million out of the total of 30 million votes cast, running independent of both the Republican and Democratic parties. This was the strongest independent movement up until that time, one which was not to be matched again until the 1940's.

ANTI-MONOPOLY POPULISM

The LaFollette movement didn't have a clearly defined program beyond a kind of vague populist demand that the power of the monopolies be curbed. While the platform called for breaking "the combined power of the private monopoly system over the political and economic life of the American people," this was translated into

few concrete demands. It did call for public ownership of two industries, water power and railroads, and the reform of the court and tax systems.

As Hillman, then head of the ACWA said, however, the campaign consisted of "a few slogans and a dominant personality." The votes came from the workers and farmers, from the oppressed of the nation, but the leadership of the movement was firmly in the hands of middle class liberals and the labor bureaucracy -- neither of which had any intention of letting the movement grow into the militant organization which would really represent the masses of voters. These petty-bourgeois interests were concentrated in three political organizations:

- 1) The Non-Partisan League, a left-wing formation within the GOP, concentrated in the midwest and northeast, which adopted the tactics of attempting to bore from within the two major political parties;
- 2) the Committee of '48, a nationwide grouping of liberals, mostly intellectuals, fighting for liberal reform of the system and the powerful defense of civil liberties; and
- 3) the Plumb Plan movement, organized in 1919 by the Locomotive Engineers and Machinists Unions and calling for government ownership and democratic operation of railroads.

None of these groupings had a clear and consistent commitment to the development of a third party which would maintain strict independence from the interests of big business. They focused their energies on the reform struggle, often reducing their activity to that of more traditional pressure groups.

FARMER-LABOR PARTIES

Clearly the most progressive trend within the LaFollette movement grew out of the farmer-labor parties which sprang up locally and even on state-wide levels all over the country from 1918 on. These parties had met with some significant successes in state and local elections. For example, in Minnesota, the Farmer-Labor party elected two members to Congress, a senator and later a Governor.

The leadership of this movement came from the Chicago Federation of Labor, whose head, Fitzpatrick, had developed a close relationship with the many leftists and communists who provided the backbone to the major organizing campaigns of the period. Together the CFL and the Workers' Party (the Communist Party) founded the National Labor Party in 1919, which was expanded to the Farmer-Labor Party in 1920. In its Declaration of Principles the National Labor Party explains:

"The labor party was organized to assemble into a new majority the men and women who work, but who have been scattered as helpless minorities in the old parties under the leadership of the confidence men of big business. These confidence men, by exploitation, rob the workers of the product of their activities and use the huge profits thus gained to finance the old political parties, by which they gain and keep control of the government. They withhold money from the worker and use it to make him pay for his own defeat."

The convention of 1919 consisted mostly of rank and file workers and local trade union officials. Although the AFL international leadership, following Gompers' lead, were opposed to the independent initiative, delegates were present from local and state units of over half of the AFL International unions. The tremendous response to the convention call showed a clear rejection on the part of the rank and file of Gompers' policy of "non-partisan" politics.

In 1920, the Farmer-Labor Party, now including many state farmer parties and the Committee of 48, refused to nominate LaFollette because of his generally weak platform and because of his unwillingness to take a militant stand for the rights of Black people. At this point, the movement was still growing rapidly, focusing around 1) increasing the share for labor in management of industry, 2) the democratic management in the operation of publicly owned utilities and natural resources, and 3) Black equality.

In 1922, at the Conference for Progressive Political Action, organized by the Railway Unions' Plumb Plan, the NFLP was voted down on its resolution for the formation of a national independent party by only 12 votes. Clearly the rank and file call for a third party could no longer be ignored as the pipe dream of a few crazy radicals.

SPLIT IN THE FLP

Yet the following year the movement went into a rapid decline. The FLP's convention of 1923 showed a drop off in participation. But most importantly it was the scene of the split between Fitzpatrick's Chicago Federation of Labor and the left and communist representatives. This split was disastrous not only because it ushered in a long period of isolation of the left from the mass workers' movement, but in so doing it significantly

ELECTION '76: "Baffle 'Em with Bull"

April-May 1976

After a hard day's work you come home, grab a cold beer and sit down in front of the TV. Walter Cronkite comes on the screen. During the next thirty minutes you are filled in on the daily adventures of the competition between an Arizona 'Abraham Lincoln,' and Alabama racist, the man from Boeing and a Georgia peanut farmer.

Gerald Ford comes on the screen. He says that he is fighting for the hard-pressed working family. He will hold down the federal budget and prevent a new round of spiraling inflation. He is going to hold down taxes by chopping the big government 'give-away programs.' Yes,

weakened the whole workers' movement because of lack of clear leadership. This split made it possible for the initiative to be seized by the reform forces behind LaFollette -- the same forces who were with great relief to bury the whole idea of an independent party the year after LaFollette's defeat.

Fitzpatrick's hesitations of 1923 and his final withdrawal stem from several causes: 1) 1923 was a year of temporary economic stability which allowed the right wing trade union leadership to consolidate its hold on the locals; 2) the AFL leadership used its influence to threaten Fitzpatrick -- the Chicago Federation of Labor's per capita subsidy from the AFL was cut off; 3) the failure of the Socialist Party, which was strong in the rank and file movement, to support the project and 4) finally, the serious errors made by the Workers' Party, which refused to compromise its plans and program even in the face of the CFL doubts. The sectarianism of the Workers' Party during this period resulted in the total alienation of their most trusted allies within the CFL.

LEFT IS ISOLATED

The result of the split between Fitzpatrick and the left was that the bulk of Farmer-Labor forces absorbed into the LaFollette Progressive Party. Without left leadership these forces were unable to challenge the petty-bourgeois populist program of the Progressive Party. They ended up being a tale on LaFollette's kite. A small remnant of the Farmer-Labor Party, primarily the Communists, went it alone with meagre results in the '24 election. In short, the split strengthened the hand of the reformists over the Farmer-Labor movement and isolated the left.

There can be no doubt that even in its disintegration, the Farmer-Labor movement had a significant impact on the political climate of the nation. The work of these groupings laid the groundwork for the mass LaFollette movement, and forced even the AFL leadership to take what was for them practically a revolutionary step: in 1924, the AFL big-wigs backed LaFollette, an independent candidate for president.

However, there can also be no doubt that the failure of the communist forces to maintain a solid united front with the progressive leadership of the Chicago Federation of Labor made it possible for the same AFL bureaucrats to take the guts out of the movement in the presidential campaign and then to unceremoniously bury it.

Ford must be the candidate of the working people.

Or is it Ronald Reagan? He is against big government intruding into the lives of the honest and hard-working citizen. He is for tax reform, for turning over the \$90 billion dollar boondoggle in welfare, education and poverty funds to the states where they can be administered with less bureaucracy and at lower costs. He claims to be a "citizen politician" who is running against the system. Recently he said, "Unless we elect to the highest office men with no ties to the system, men at the top who are not afraid to tangle with it and take it on head first we will never change it."