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# Speech to the American Commission of ECCL: Moscow — May 7, 1924

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Duplicate copy: d. 258, ll. 127-132.

I will be very brief in my remarks. First of all I would like to say a few words about the statement that [John] Pepper read from *The Analyst* with regard to the crisis in America, and I want to say that that statement is an exaggeration. It is true that for the last 5, 6 months or so there has been a certain depression going on in the United States. In certain months there is an up-grade, then a down-grade, and so on, but the fluctuation is slight and I therefore say with Radek that there is no immediate crisis. The same opinion prevails with [Jenō] Varga.

*(Com. Pepper: “No, I talked to Varga on my way here, and he said that the depression was serious, and was growing and growing.”)*

Varga says there is a possibility that this depression will reach a certain point, but there is no immediate coming crisis of such a character, of such a wide nature as it was a few years ago, when there were five to six million unemployed workers in America.

The second point I want to raise is with regard to the labor aristocracy which Pepper described here. Here again I say that he exaggerated this to a very large extent. He said that the organized labor of America is composed of the labor aristocrats. This is so. But what is the composition of organized labor? The backbone of organized labor in America is the American Federation of Labor. The outstanding trade union of the AF of L is the mining organization. The United Mine Workers comprises half a million workers, and is in the hands of a few officials, it is controlled by the [John L.] Lewis regime. But

you can by no means label these miners as labor aristocracy. Take the other outstanding organization in the AF of L — the building trades. These comprise not only the organized skilled workers as the joiners and carpenters, but also the organized general laborers. The joiners and carpenters are just about half. Further, these joiners and carpenters are not such highly skilled workers either. They are just the average type of worker. Then again, take the needle trades. This is an outstanding organization, the most radical union in the States, and is under Socialist control, and yet we cannot label it as a labor aristocratic organization. Then there are the railway unions — the Big Four.<sup>1</sup> But even here there is differentiation going on. The railway unions are outside the AF of L. I would say that of the organized workers of America, one million perhaps could be labelled “labor aristocracy,” and three million are real workers.

How is the American Federation of Labor controlled? Very skillfully and very simply. First there is Gompers with his Executive Council. Then come his lieutenants in the various International headquarters. Gompers pulls the ropes, and he is on good terms with the International presidents, like Lewis and various others. These International presidents, in order to retain control of their organizations, make no efforts to build them up, as they are afraid that they will not be able to exercise control over big organizations. For example, Lewis does not want to have 100% organized workers in the United Mine Workers.

*(Com. Pepper: “Why not?”)*

I will tell you. If the miners in Nova Scotia are organized 100%, if the miners in Alberta are organized 100%, then these strong local organizations can undertake strikes, they can fight themselves without the assistance of Lewis. On the other hand, if the organization is small and weak, it is dependent upon Lewis’ financial assistance in strikes. That is why Lewis gave instructions to the Alberta organization not to extend to Vancouver Island. That is why he is not organizing West Virginia. A small organization cannot conduct the struggle without his assistance, and he does not give assistance if the union does not support him, if it does not vote for him. It is not only so in

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<sup>1</sup> The Big Four railway brotherhoods included the Order of Railway Conductors (ORC), the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE), the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen (B of LF&E), and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen (BRT).

the United Mine Workers, but everywhere throughout the organized labor movement in America. It is a fact recognized by everybody who knows the American labor movement.

Pepper also said that the labor aristocracy consists of the American-born workers. Nothing of the kind. The labor aristocracy consists of the highly skilled workers, of the workers who have been educated. But these are not confined to the American-born. They are Germans, and Letts [Latvians], and many others. I will take the Letts as an example, as I am a Lett. The Letts, who were 1905 revolutionists,<sup>2</sup> were all highly skilled workers. They developed themselves because they had the intelligence. Of the 10,000 Letts who went to the United States, 400 are in the Party. According to Pepper's definition, they are labor aristocrats; they all have houses, and gramophones, and automobiles, and so on. A large percentage of the labor aristocracy are foreign-born. They are skilled mechanics and hold high positions in industry. I can say, from actual experience of working in a shipyard for 15 years, that the highly skilled workers are mainly Scandinavians, Letts, Germans, etc., and our laborers were American-born. We drew wages like \$150 a week, while the American-born got \$40 a week.

Take again the Machinists' Union of William Johnston, which has a membership of about 300,000. The machinists are skilled mechanics, and yet they have a socialist president. That means there is a possibility to approach them. They are both highly skilled and American-born, and yet you can approach them. At the present time, due to the great strike, the union is badly smashed, and is almost out of existence. Out of the 300,000 members, only 80,000 or 90,000 remain. This is an indication that the labor aristocratic tendency is not growing, but, on the contrary, is on the decline.

How can we build up such a theory which has been proposed here by Pepper? That is just a glimpse of the situation; it is not a background. It is not a basis upon which we can develop a certain policy. He says there are 17 million workers, and the rest are farmers. In order to develop his theory, he is inclined to minimize the number of workers and to multiply the number of farmers. I believe, from the statistics that are available, from statements that have been compiled in research bureaus by men like Scott Nearing, who know something about conditions in America, that there are at least 22, 23, or 25 million workers in America. And what is more, the number is increasing.

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<sup>2</sup> Reference is to the failed Russian Revolution of 1905-07. Latvia was then part of the Tsarist empire.

Also, as Pepper himself says, the farmers are deserting their farms and flocking into the cities and becoming proletarian. The negroes are leaving the South and going into the cities. In Canada the same migration into the cities is taking place. And again, the Mexicans are being imported one way or another into industry as cheap labor, so that the proletariat, of which there are at least 23 to 25 million at the present time, are increasing by millions every year. It is therefore out of the question that we can assume as our basis the farmers, and not the workers. I believe if we could that it would amount to the discovery of a new America.

Now let us take the Labor Party, or Farmer-Labor Party. First of all, comrades, you shall decide the question here as an organizational question. What is more useful to our cause: to have a Labor Party or a Farmer-Labor Party? [Israel] Amter mentioned that we in Canada have a Labor Party, on the British model. We are developing it. Just recently, before the Party's convention, Amter drafted a letter, which [Vasil] Kolarov approved, suggesting that they should turn the Labor Party into a Farmer-Labor Party.

I will cite another instance of the confusion that there exists in America on this question. In 1921, the CEC of the Workers Party of America (Pepper and Foster were not there at the time, but I was) instructed the Political Committee of the Party to work out a program for the organization of an Agricultural Department within the Workers Party. [Harold] Ware drew up a plan, and it was adopted. I happened to come from Canada and be present at that meeting, and I criticized it, but after the discussion the plan was adopted. This is an indication of how much we were confused about this farmer-labor issue, for soon after, the plan was dropped.

*(Com. [Arthur] Rosenberg: Is the idea of building a Farmer-Labor Party of Russian origin, the policy of the Comintern, or was it an American plan?)*

I believe that it was an American product.

There is still time, however if you clarify this issue to save the situation in Canada. In Canada we were advised to discuss and lay plans for turning the Labor Party into a Farmer-Labor Party. But if this will not serve our cause, and is a dangerous step, then, comrades, you must take a definite stand and say to the Canadian comrades that they shall not proceed with it. I even believe that, owing to the fact

that all the leading comrades of the Russian CP and of the Comintern are taking the stand that we cannot go into the Third Party movement. I am inclined to believe that it is of great benefit. Further, if it is decided that we shall just build a Labor Party, and not a Farmer-Labor Party, we can still do that in the United States, irrespective of there being many Farmer-Labor parties, Federated Farmer-Labor Party, and so on. You must understand that these are widespread organizations, there is no consolidation, everything is loose and in fluctuation. It is very possible to carry out the maneuver in the United States of turning away from the farmer element and just start on a Labor Party basis, as was outlined and proposed here by [Robert] Stewart.

Another important question with regard to the building of a Farmer-Labor Party or a Labor Party is the tempo in which we are to go. That must depend on what kind of Labor Party you want. If you want a fighting organization, you have to go more slowly in order that we may direct and control it. Whereas, if we want to have a large mass gathering, we must make just such a splash as we are making now in the United States. But over such a movement, everybody knows that with our small organization we can not have strict control.

With regard to LaFollette, I believe that Comrade [Alexander] Martynov has put the question right: that we shall not discuss LaFollette, but we shall start from the basis. For instance, if a Farmer-Labor Party had nominated Lewis for candidate, that would not be any better than to have LaFollette. It happens that just because LaFollette came out as a candidate that all this discussion is going on. You must say whether the wrong basis has been laid down and the wrong policy pursued. Now is the time to lay down a basis and a policy as to how the election campaign — not only LaFollette's, which is on a national scale, but also the state and city elections — shall be waged. There has been a certain delay in the matter. It should be discussed fundamentally and settled once and for all. If there is to be a split, let it be taken on a definite basis, whether it is to be a Labor Party or a Farmer-Labor Party. That is for you to decide.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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