

From a People's Upheaval to a Class Movement

by *John Pepper* (New-York)

The class struggle creates ever clearer political expressions of the various classes. The American democratic tradition of coalition of various classes in the same political party is beginning to disappear. The most outstanding fact which proves this is the founding of a new mass organization in Minnesota, the Farmer-Labor Federation, by representatives of 120,000 workers.

Minnesota was the first state where the farmers and workers broke with both of the old capitalist parties, the Republican and Democratic, and set up their own party, the Farmer-Labor Party, as a mighty mass movement. The candidates of the Farmer-Labor Party, Shipstead and Magnus Johnson, were elected by a tremendous mass of three to four hundred thousand votes.

It was a *people's upheaval* against big capital, not a movement only of workers and exploited farmers, but also well-to-do farmers, small businessmen and even small-town bankers and small manufacturers who joined the camp of the discontented element.

It was a *people's upheaval*, not a *class movement*. That is its strong side and also its weak side. It is its strong side because it secured a quick victory. It is its weak side because, not being a real class movement it is dominated by the ideology of a narrow-minded lower middle class and by the hesitation and selfish interests of well-to-do farmers. The victory of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota against the capitalist parties was a tremendous defeat for our deadly enemy, the capitalist class, but it was not the workers and exploited farmers who were the real victors.

In the long run it is impossible for the same party to serve the interests of classes which are at such great variance as small manufacturers on the one hand and workers on the other hand, or exploited farmers on the one hand and on the other well-to-do farmers. It was clear from the very start that soon after the coalition of various classes going under the name of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota had won a victory, the various classes would begin to fall apart. It was clear in advance that after the *first* revolutionary step had been made, that is, the break with the old Republican and Democratic Parties, the *second* revolutionary step would be inevitable, namely, the separation of workers and exploited farmers from small businessmen, small manufacturers and well-to-do farmers. After the election of Magnus Johnson I wrote in the *Inprecorr*: "The development in the immediate future will go much more quickly than in the past. Years were needed before the workers and farmers became convinced that the Republicans and Democrats did not wish to help them. Months will suffice to show them that La Follette and Magnus Johnson cannot help them. They know today that Coolidge is their enemy. Experience will show them that La Follette and Johnson are not their friends."

The formation of the Farmer-Labor Federation is the first organizational expression of discontent of the workers and exploited farmers with the old machine of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota.

A Small Machine or a Real Party?

It is interesting that the first struggle within the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, which is a struggle between various classes composing that party broke out over the form of *organisation*, and not over questions of *program*.

The Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota is not a real party organization, but a small machine which controls the state, and besides that, three to four hundred thousand voters. The machine is superficial, and the voters are not organized locally in any sort of organization. The Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota is nothing but a small state machine of politicians, lawyers, journalists and an unorganized vague sentiment of large masses. In the last victorious elections the masses were entirely unorganized as a Farmer-Labor Party—*as a party*; but there were three organized driving forces: 1. The small legal machine of the Farmer-Labor Party without any masses; 2. The Non-Partisan League which is made up of farmers' organizations; 3. The Working People's Non-Partisan League which is an organization of trade unions and other industrial labor organizations. These three organized elements have had frequent conflicts with one another and often clashed in their work during the election campaign. William Mahoney, editor of the *Minnesota Union Advocate*, characterized this situation very well: "The campaign of 1922 proved that there existed *friction* and *conflict*. A number of elements were working at cross purposes, and wasting the money and energy of the Party supporters in the effort to dominate the movement. The Non-Partisan League, and a part of the Working People's League and the official Farmer-Labor Party with other minor forces were engaged in semi-independent activity. It led to division and confusion." (*Minnesota Union Advocate* of September 13, 1923).

The Farmer-Labor Party cannot win in the next elections in 1924, if it remains in the present situation, with the workers separately organized, the farmers separately organized and the party itself, as a party, not organized at all—with a small legal machine which rules the party by playing up at one time the farmers against the workers, and at another time the workers against the farmers. The workers of St. Paul and Minneapolis for the first time realized the danger lurking in this situation and demanded a *real party organisation* which is not merely a *small legal state machine*, but which embraces and organizes the revolutionary masses themselves. The legal machine of Pike, Shipstead, Magnus Johnson developed an energetic opposition to the plan for a *real party organization*, and attempted to sabotage the plan. But in view of the fact that not the workers alone but

also the radical portion of the farmers, the representatives of the exploited farmers, began to demand the organization of the party, the machine had to give way, and it was possible for a conference of the Working People's League and a conference of the Farmers' League to take place at the same time. The official machine of Pike, Shipstead and Magnus Johnson immediately changed tactic. These people no longer opposed altogether the organization of a party, but offered a plan of party organization which would have absolutely assured the rule and domination of the well-to-do farmers and small businessmen over the workers and exploited farmers.

A Party of Economic Organizations or of Voters?

The workers and exploited farmers offered and advocated a plan whereby the basis of the party organization shall be *economic organizations* of workers and farmers, the trade unions, cooperatives and farmers' organizations. The Pike-Shipstead-Magnus Johnson machine wants to organize the party on a *geographical basis*. The workers and exploited farmers have a plan whereby the trade unions, cooperatives and farmers' organizations shall elect delegates, and these delegates shall compose the convention of the party and decide upon officers, nominations and policies. The machine of the well-to-do farmers, small businessmen and lawyers advocate a plan whereby the representation would be based on the *vote* cast in the districts for Magnus Johnson at the last election. To all appearances the issue is only a question of better organization, but in reality it is a question of class-struggle. The question is whether the advanced part, the *organized* workers and *organized* farmers shall dominate in the party, or the uncertain, vague gelatine of *voting masses*. On the other hand the question is whether the well-to-do farmers and small businessmen shall be the leading elements of the party, or the workers and exploited farmers. The debate over this question, between the *Minnesota Union Advocate*, which is the official organ of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor representing 175,000 workers, and the *Minnesota Star*, which was at one time a labor paper but which sold out entirely to the business interests and is now the organ of the Pike machine, is highly instructive.

The *Minnesota Star* of September 14 says: "Between three and four hundred thousand voters of Minnesota have commissioned Senators Johnson and Shipstead to go to Washington and do something—or at least say something."

"If we could assemble a convention in Minnesota, really representative of the mass-mind of this state, it would be just and proper for this convention to tell our Senators what to say in Washington. This is entirely different from a Federation convention, based on a dues system impossible of fair apportionment, telling these Senators, the Congressmen and the other elected officials what they may or may not do."

"Such procedure may go in Russia where the franchise is perhaps wisely restricted at this time, but it won't go in the state of Minnesota where the electorate know how to read and write and are capable of at least same capacity to think."

"History has shown that the men of America whom we revere the most believed in mass democracy, not dictatorship."

The *Minnesota Union Advocate* in its issue of September 13 made the following brilliant reply to the Pike machine and the *Minnesota Star*: "State chairman Pike favored a regular Farmer-Labor convention of the party delegates elected on the basis of the vote cast for the candidates . . . Such a gathering would be futile and foolish and was abandoned."

"It was then decided to call together those economic elements that gave the party its birth and sustenance: the organized farmers and organized workers, and other progressive economic elements . . . Mr. Pike's argument against the composition of the conference is based on a lack of understanding of political forces. Although he knows as a matter of fact that political movements are based on economic interests, and the Farmer-Labor Party had its origin in the struggle of the producing elements for political expression and legislative relief, he persists in the splendid fiction that pure "democracy" and "abstract justice" are the basis of political control."

"That is the kind of "dope" the politicians fed the people and have picked their pockets while under its influence, but the farmers and workers and other useful elements in Minnesota know that the Farmer-Labor Party is based on the economic interests of these elements, and are determined that they will not devote time and money and labor, building up a political movement to be diverted into innocuous channels or vicious ones by misguided persons."

The Disillusionment with Pure Democracy.

This debate over the form of party organization is one of the most important political events in the whole of the United States for the present moment. Its importance is not only for

Minnesota locally, but it has a tremendous national significance. It is the first sign in the United States that the laboring masses are spontaneously of their own accord beginning to see that pure democracy and abstract justice are nothing else than dope against the interest of the laboring masses, and that the only way the workers and exploited farmers can attain anything is to fight for their class interests—if necessary even against pure democracy and abstract justice. The process of disillusionment with democracy on the part of the masses of workers and exploited farmers has set in, in the United States. Minnesota shows the most advanced situation. Minnesota made the first organized split from the Republican and Democratic parties, and it is in Minnesota that we see now the first signs of a differentiation of the classes within the big people's movement. We see the first separate organization of workers and exploited farmers within the general people's movement, against the capitalists. The organization of the Farmer-Labor Federation in Minnesota is of national significance. True, it is not affiliated with the national organization of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. The motion made at the convention for sending delegates to the January convention of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party was withdrawn due to technical formalities. But the Farmer-Labor Federation of Minnesota is based upon the same principles as the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. The Farmer-Labor Federation organized the left wing but at the same time it remained within the official Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, and will participate in the primaries of this party just as the national organization of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party organizes the left wing of the working class which it can reach, and at the same time serves as a propaganda instrument for a broader Labor Party.

Help to Split the Capitalist Class!

The revolutionary elements in the United States today have very complicated tasks. We must support the La Follette-Shipstead-Magnus Johnson movement in its struggle against the capitalist government. Yet at the same time we must criticize them thoroughly and mercilessly because their program is shallow, narrow-minded, and in the last analysis serves but the interests of the small businessmen and well-to-do farmers.

We must act as a driving force to compel the La Follette-Wheeler-Shipstead-Brookhart-Magnus Johnson forces to make an open split with the official Republican and Democratic parties, because that means that the farmers and small businessmen will separate politically from the trusts, big business and bank capital. But at the same time we must make every effort to organize the workers and exploited farmers separate and apart from the La Follette third party movement. We must exert ourselves to the utmost to create a powerful, broad Labor Party.

It would be a utopia to believe that the mighty, broad Labor Party could be organized at one stroke, within twenty-four hours, or at a single convention, and it is for this reason that we must do our utmost to help organize the Federated Farmer-Labor Party, which means to organize the left wing of the labor movement, and to use it as a driving force and propaganda instrument to win over the broad masses of workers and exploited farmers for a class party.