

AMERICAN TROTSKYISM  
AND THE MINNESOTA FARMER-LABOR PARTY  
FROM ORIGINS TO 1936

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree

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Master of Arts  
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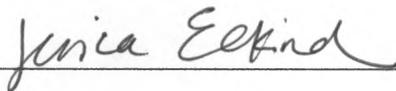
by

Nicolas Dylan Boorman  
San Francisco, California

May 2017

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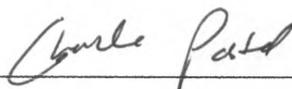
Jessica Elkind, Ph.D.

Professor of History

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Anthony D'Agostino, Ph.D.

Professor of History

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Charles Postel, Ph.D.

Professor of History

**American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party**  
**From Origins to 1936**

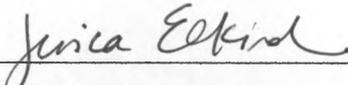
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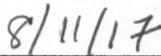
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The American Trotskyist movement was founded in part on proletarian class opposition to all capitalist parties, including two-class “farmer-labor” parties. While they had incompletely assimilated the fundamental difference between a “labor” and “farmer-labor” party, they effectively treated the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party as the class enemy during the 1934 Teamster strikes. However, in late 1934 they began an opportunist adaptation toward the FLP and joined a class-collaborationist bloc with FLP politicians and local union leaders. In the spring of 1935, the Trotskyists gave the FLP critical electoral support and simultaneously launched the *Northwest Organizer*, the mouthpiece of the bloc. In return, the bloc supported the Trotskyists’ continued control of Teamsters Local 574. Within a year the Trotskyists’ opportunist trajectory led them to enter the FLP and begin an unprincipled struggle against Stalinists and conservative Farmer-Labor politicians for control of this regional bourgeois party.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair, Thesis Committee

  
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Date

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## Introduction

*In a country that has newly entered the movement, the first really crucial step is the formation by the workers of an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is distinguishable as a labour party.*

– Friedrich Engels on the American workers movement, November 29, 1886<sup>1</sup>

At the birth of the American Trotskyist movement, its leaders knew that a “farmer-labor” party was an enemy force, something that they could never support. But seven years later they began supporting one, and they joined it, and vied for influence in it. Organizations on the revolutionary left have been politically ruined by less, but this particular betrayal was geographically isolated and temporary, a deviation from the Trotskyists’ otherwise principled struggles in the United States as a whole. When the affair came to an end, the policy became a dead letter. For decades, it was considered a closed chapter.

Historians have examined the early Trotskyist movement, especially its forces in Minnesota that led the famous 1934 Teamster strikes; historians have also examined the farmer-labor party in question – the Minnesota FLP – the most successful and long-lasting that ever took hold in this country. This research thesis seeks to address the

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Engels to Friedrich Sorge, November 29, 1886, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, vol. 47 (New York: International Publishers, 1995), 532.

mysterious gap at their intersection. From 1928 to 1934 the Trotskyists generally opposed the Minnesota FLP, supporting the Communist Party or running their own candidates against it. Then in 1935 they announced that they would give the FLP critical support. The early years of opposition were consistent with their founding principles; the question is, why did the tendency reverse itself in 1935?

When the Trotskyists won the leadership of Minneapolis Teamsters Local 574, they found themselves poised on the leading edge of the nation-wide industrial organizing drives that built the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The 1933-34 strike wave, demonstrating the American proletariat's capacity to leap from passivity to open rebellion, could very well have been the opening shot of a revolutionary upsurge, and the Trotskyists were determined to defend and extend their achievements as they entered the new period. At the same time, they were forced to fend off powerful enemies – the government, the big corporations, the press, the reactionary leadership of the American Federation of Labor – that would have had them expelled, ostracized, and wiped out as a political force. The Trotskyists reacted to this pressure by appealing for support from the increasingly militant leadership of other local unions, but in doing so they adapted to the Farmer-Labor Party loyalties of the Minnesota labor movement. In late 1934 the Trotskyists initiated a political bloc that included not only these labor elements, but also an outright capitalist politician who had aspirations in the FLP administration; the purpose of the bloc was not only to defend Local 574 and its red leadership, but also to publish a pro-FLP newspaper, the *Northwest Organizer*. With preparations for the bloc and its organ already underway, the Trotskyist national leadership voted to publicly back the FLP's candidates in the spring 1935 municipal elections.

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A great political gulf stands between the Marxist program for the emancipation of the world proletariat and the traditional outlook of the American labor and farmer

movements. Marxism is based on the understanding that the development of class societies is bound up with the development of production, that the struggle between classes under capitalism must lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that this dictatorship will abolish all class distinctions, carrying out a transition to a classless, stateless, egalitarian society; Friedrich Engels' "independent political party" is simply the organizational vehicle essential to spearheading the proletariat's revolutionary conquest of state power.<sup>2</sup>

The American labor and farmer traditions, on the other hand, drew primarily from the bourgeois-republican concepts of the equality of citizens and the economic independence of small producers. Populist forces in the 19th and early 20th centuries led urban industrial workers in struggle, but they subordinated their proletarian supporters to their agrarian petty-bourgeois base and bourgeois leadership by liquidating the specific historic interests of the working class into the interests of "toilers" in general. Programmatically, this meant eschewing the socialist revolution in favor of superficial and temporary reforms to the capitalist system. The founding of the Socialist Party in 1901 represented a *partial break* from the morass of Populist cross-class coalitions, as its political program was shaped first and foremost by the interests of the working class; this was demonstrated in action in the 1912 elections when the SP won nearly one million votes running in opposition to Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the founding of the Workers Party, section of the new Third (Communist) International in the United States, initiated the *decisive break* between revolutionary Marxism and American petty-bourgeois multi-class ideologies.

Like the Populists, the Socialist and Communist parties appealed to and drew support from downtrodden layers of the petty bourgeoisie, including the marginalized masses of rural farming families (the bulk of the SP's 1912 electoral support came from agrarian regions of Western states). This, however, did not negate their fundamentally

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx to J. Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852.

working-class nature or their break with class-collaborationist politics. Even the Bolsheviks adopted the program of “land to the tiller” in order to ensure that the Russian peasantry would support the proletarian dictatorship. The explanation for this lies in the Marxist understanding of the relationship between the party and the class. American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon later summarized this crucial point: “The class character of the party is not determined by the class that supports the party at the moment but rather by the class that the party supports. In other words, by its program. That is the decisive line... The class character of the party is determined first by its program; secondly by its actual policy in practice; and thirdly by its composition and control.”<sup>3</sup>

By this methodology the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party was a bourgeois party through and through. Its goal was that kinder, gentler capitalism so well known in American mythology. When elected to power the FLP served the bourgeoisie of the Northwest by enacting the necessary balance of stabilizing reforms and brutal state repression that all populist bourgeois parties employ to protect the capitalist order. Its constitution hobbled the strength of its labor component, giving free reign to the local class of bankers and lawyers and career politicians to run the party in the interests of property and profit. From 1932 until it dissolved into the Democratic Party in 1944 it supported Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal Democrats, functioning as their loyal proxy in the region. In its program, its practice, and its composition and control, the class character of the Minnesota FLP could not be clearer.

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The Marxist struggle for an independent workers party was taken up by V. I. Lenin’s Bolsheviks as they fought their way to the 1917 Revolution, and was upheld by

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<sup>3</sup> James P. Cannon, “Election Policy in 1948,” *SWP Internal Bulletin*, vol. X, no. 2 (April 1948): 13, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/idb/swp-1946-59/v10n02-1948-ib.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2014).

Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition against the betrayals of the rising Stalinist bureaucracy in the 1920s. When Trotsky found supporters in the American Communist Party in 1928, they took up the cause as well, launching an uncompromising political battle for *revolutionary, proletarian, internationalist* principles to which the communist vanguard must adhere if it seeks to lead a party of the workers to a victorious socialist revolution.

The United States has never seen the formation of anything like the party that Engels envisioned. Nearly all other highly developed capitalist powers have seen mass social-democratic parties fight for influence in the parliamentary arena, but the American bourgeoisie has mercilessly exploited objective conditions to keep the working class divided and conquered. It has relied primarily on the disproportionate social weight of petty capitalist proprietors, the linguistic and religious divisions between different immigrant groups, the subordination of women, and most importantly the vicious oppression of black Americans, a race-color caste forcibly segregated at the bottom of society. On top of this, the American trade-union bureaucracy – the entrenched labor leaders branded by early socialist Daniel De Leon as the “labor lieutenants of the capitalist class” – is particularly conservative, and has dutifully kept workers chained to one or another of the capitalist parties. Most of the ostensibly socialist left, instead of fighting to break these chains and free labor to build its own party, has made its peace with the bureaucrats and their political bosses.

The American Trotskyist movement, on the other hand, fought every conceivable obstacle to the creation of Engels’ “independent political party” – except in Minnesota beginning in 1935. Subordinating their proletarian program to the farmer-laborite politics of the alliance around the *Northwest Organizer* meant entering an unprincipled, class-collaborationist bloc. Extending critical support to the Farmer-Labor Party was pure opportunism – a capitulation to a populist bourgeois party in the hopes of safeguarding their position in Local 574. The American Trotskyists’ program in the Northwest,

entirely at odds with their principled methods throughout the rest of the country, constituted a betrayal of the political independence of the working class.

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This is a political account. The struggle for power drives the events and the analysis. Workers and company owners, those social classes whose interests are so notoriously at odds, are the real forces at work in this history. The protagonists are scientific socialists – dissident communists who were expelled from the Stalinist-controlled Communist Party for attempting to maintain their proletarian, revolutionary, and internationalist principles. They set as their task winning the working class's allegiance and leading its struggles toward socialist revolution. Like Trotskyists in all parts of the world, they were nearly always isolated, a tiny minority tendency that was violently excluded from the workers movement. But their model was the Russian Revolution of 1917, a world-shaking event that was still fresh in the minds of the international proletariat. The Soviet Union, in spite of its growing deformation under the Stalinist bureaucracy, stood as a testament to the potential of their program.

The struggle for power, as events unfolded in Minnesota in the early 1930s, forced the Trotskyists to face an endless series of daunting questions. How to convince thousands of truck drivers and loaders that the only way to get what they need is to collectively park their trucks? How to get them where they are needed, right now, at a particular address, to join what is possibly a deadly fray? How to coordinate their shutting down a city without getting anyone arrested or hurt? What to say to them when some of ours are killed? What to do when their favorite governor sends in the National Guard? What to say to them when your decisions get your union local banished from the International? What to do when the labor movement begins to rupture, spreading fissures up through the ruling capitalist party itself?

An organization's political program is crucial in determining answers to such questions. When a group softens, adapts, or reverses its program, the entire framework for grappling with these questions is re-formed. Under the blinding pressures of the ever-unfolding present, programmatic drift can occur without conscious intention; contradictions can develop without being caught; a parallel, exceptional set of standards can creep into an otherwise consistent, scientific approach to the class war.

This research thesis picks up where the Trotskyists left off. It applies the Marxist methodology that they should have applied themselves. It grapples pitilessly with a murky chapter of Trotskyist history, over two generations after the original participants themselves lost the ability to do so.

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The first chapters of this thesis trace the origins of the question to the beginning of the communist and farmer-labor movements in the United States. Chapter 1 addresses the communists' early affair with the farmer-labor forces behind Republican populist Robert La Follette, which became a politically formative experience in 1924 when Leon Trotsky fiercely protested, prompting the Communist International in Moscow to reverse the course of its American party. The politically degenerating Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, however, dragged communists in all parts of the world into bourgeois "two-class" parties, leaving the Americans with an opportunist program of tailing after what remained of farmer-labor organizations. There was little resistance to this until 1928, when Communist Party leader James P. Cannon and some of his close collaborators were won to Trotsky's Left Opposition, which opposed Stalin's revisionist "theory" on the class nature of the revolutionary party.

Chapter 2 assesses the extent to which the Trotskyists understood and assimilated the principled opposition to two-class parties, focusing on the early policies of the tendency's Minneapolis branch toward the Minnesota FLP. Their policies generally

reflected Trotsky's principled approach to the issue, with the exception of one episode in which the branch attempted to support a local farmer-labor newspaper. Furthermore, in 1931 the tendency dropped its call for a labor party and began to confuse the concepts of "labor" and "farmer-labor" party, blurring the class divide between the two. Dropping the labor party slogan blunted their approach to the FLP. Rejecting the fundamental understanding of a farmer-labor party as a capitalist party was a theoretical betrayal, but the potential implications of these problems would not be evident until 1934-35, when new pressures bore down on the group.

Chapter 3 takes on the great Minneapolis Teamster strikes of 1934 in order to demonstrate just what the Trotskyists could accomplish with the correct line. Openly combatting the deep loyalty of the labor movement to the FLP, they relied solely on the independent strength of the working class. In both their actions and their propaganda, the Trotskyists treated the FLP and the state administration of Governor Olson as the class enemy, and this, in the end, was key to the Teamsters' victory. In the aftermath of the strikes, they began to soften their propaganda about the governor, but in the November elections the Trotskyists, still at odds with the political sympathies of the local labor movement, refused to support the FLP's candidates.

Chapter 4 explains the Minneapolis Trotskyists' rapid political transformation over the winter of 1934-35 that led them to give critical support to the FLP in the spring 1935 municipal elections. It examines the sources of pressure operating on the branch, primarily attacks from Teamsters President Daniel Tobin, and traces the branch's responses: initiating the class-collaborationist Northwest Labor Unity Conference, securing the approval of the Trotskyist leadership at the Pittsburgh National Committee Plenum, then back in Minneapolis liquidating into FLP's electoral campaign by launching the *Northwest Organizer*. This opportunist adaptation bought them some time at the helm of Local 574 and won them some temporary allies in the city's labor leadership and in the FLP. It also enabled the Trotskyists to briefly outflank the Stalinist

CP by taking the lead in what was effectively the city's first popular front just before the Stalinists could do so themselves.

Chapter 5 addresses the turbulent developments of the following months. The newly elected FLP Mayor Latimer revealed himself to be a strikebreaker and his police quickly began to terrorize the working class, beating dozens and murdering two at a picket line in September. The FLP, already shaken by the Teamster strikes, began to polarize, with much of the party turning against Latimer. The Trotskyists took the opportunity to expand their class-collaborationist bloc, finding new allies in the anti-Latimer wing of the FLP. This growing crisis intersected the rise of the national industrial labor movement. The AFL leadership was anxious to stamp out the rebellion, and at Latimer and Tobin's behest, AFL President William Green sent an agent to Minneapolis to orchestrate a "red drive" against the Local 574 leadership. This backfired catastrophically for the FLP as the labor movement rushed to the Trotskyists' defense, pushing the rift in the FLP to the breaking point. The Trotskyists faced an immediate, palpable opportunity to split the FLP along class lines, but they were blinded by their new policy. Instead of attempting to destroy this bourgeois party – potentially creating a real workers party in the process – they worked to bolster their class-collaborationist bloc. These events unfolded just as the Trotskyists were preparing to enter the Socialist Party. The Stalinists had entered the Minnesota SP and FLP, and by the spring of 1936 the growing strength of the CP's genuine popular front threatened the Trotskyists' rather frail attempt at one. Still primarily concerned with preserving their position in Local 574, the Minneapolis Trotskyists reacted by entering the FLP as well.

The conclusion addresses the primary factors that limited the impact of the special program for Minnesota on the politics of American Trotskyism as a whole, and explores the alternative paths that might have opened if the Trotskyists had pursued a different policy. It briefly addresses the final chapter in the saga of the Trotskyist-led Teamsters, the 1941 attacks by the government and the trade-union bureaucracy that ousted the reds from the leadership of the union, in order to show how their policy of collaboration had

in fact undermined their strength in the workers movement. It also raises the debate in the Trotskyist movement over the 1948 Henry Wallace campaign, at which point the tendency pulled itself back decisively from its flirtations with populist parties. Finally, the conclusion takes up Leon Trotsky's 1940 intervention against the opportunist trajectory in Minnesota, furnishing some of the most incisive points necessary for a comprehensive evaluation of the Minneapolis Trotskyists and the Farmer-Labor Party.

## Historiography

The investigation into the events, pressures and decisions that led the American Trotskyists to give critical support to the Minnesota FLP in 1935 must first confront the most widely acclaimed historical account of the Minneapolis Teamsters: Farrell Dobbs' *Teamster Rebellion* (Monad Press, 1972), *Teamster Power* (1973), *Teamster Politics* (1975), and *Teamster Bureaucracy* (1977). Dobbs was a young truck driver recruited to the Trotskyist tendency early in 1934 and became a central leader of the Teamster strikes, as well as the over-the-road organizing campaign in 1937-38 that built the Teamsters into one of the nation's most powerful unions. Dobbs left his post as a Teamster organizer in 1940 to work as a full-time functionary for the Socialist Workers Party, becoming a central party leader alongside James P. Cannon.<sup>4</sup>

Dobbs' books, written three decades after the fact, are based not only on the recollections of Dobbs and his fellow participants from Minneapolis, but also on

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<sup>4</sup> Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014), 231-232.

newspaper accounts, letters, resolutions, and other documents created at the time, many of which were reviewed for this research paper. The books are rich in lively detail, which this thesis unfortunately must all too often flatten into terse paraphrase. The series is a valuable history for the American Trotskyist movement, drawing many lessons from the Minneapolis experience that are essential to young revolutionists in the American workers movement and beyond.

However, the series is disfigured by Dobbs' projection of his reformist politics of the 1970s back onto his revolutionary politics of the 1930s, which forces him to falsify certain events and positions held by the parties involved. The SWP, after a difficult period of isolation and political disorientation in the postwar McCarthy era, lost its revolutionary Marxist bearings around 1960. Under the leadership of Dobbs, who had taken over as the party's administrative leader in the early 1950s, in 1963 it expelled its only tendency that fought to uphold the fundamentals of Trotskyism. Thereafter the SWP degenerated rapidly through centrism to reformism. By the time that Dobbs wrote the *Teamster* series in the 1970s, his regime had transformed the organization into a politically hollow shell of its former self. Openly pursuing blocs with liberal trade-union bureaucrats and class-collaborationist maneuvers in the anti-Vietnam War protests and the bourgeois feminist movement, the SWP could hardly be expected to honestly evaluate the class-collaborationist deviations of an earlier period.<sup>5</sup>

Only this can explain why the *Teamster* series is permeated with revisionist distortions: the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party is depicted as a reformist workers party as if the Trotskyists had treated it as such from day one. The trade-union bureaucracy is portrayed not as a pro-capitalist layer organically rooted in the aristocracy of the labor movement, but as those bad apples still adhering to the AFL's reactionary craft-union policies or to the FLP's "right wing." FLP politicians are prettified with a radical

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<sup>5</sup> "The SWP – A Strangled Party," *Spartacist*, no. 38-39 (Summer 1986): 6-17, <https://ia801008.us.archive.org/20/items/spartacist05unse/spartacist05unse.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2017); "Trotskyism and the Minneapolis Teamsters: They Refused to Bow," *Workers Vanguard*, no. 174 (September 23, 1977): 6-8.

proletarian gloss, and the particular farmer-laborite with whom the Trotskyists cooperated to launch the *Northwest Organizer* is labelled “a Trotskyist” himself. In 1940, Leon Trotsky intervened against the SWP’s adaptation to the pro-Roosevelt “progressives” of the trade-union bureaucracy, in particular as it appeared in the *Northwest Organizer*, but Dobbs could not face such a damning indictment, so he eliminates it entirely from his series.<sup>6</sup>

All this serves as a cover for Dobbs’ claim – the glaring lie that inspired this thesis – that *the policy of giving critical support to a farmer-labor party had originated with the Communist International of Lenin and Trotsky*. Explaining their decision to first support the Minnesota FLP in 1935, Dobbs states: “The Trotskyist attitude toward the Farmer-Labor Party was not new; it continued and extended the policy that had been worked out in the early years of the Communist movement in the United States and elsewhere... This general line had the approval of the Third International, then led by V. I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky.”<sup>7</sup> This is false. In 1924, after the death of Lenin, the bureaucratically degenerating Comintern nearly steered the CP into crossing the class line by way of the farmer-labor movement, but Trotsky intervened to pull them back. The founding document of world Trotskyism codified *the principled opposition to bourgeois two-class parties* as an essential corollary to the struggle for a proletarian party. Trotsky’s American supporters incompletely assimilated this principle, but from 1928 to 1934 (with the exception of one episode in 1930) they effectively adhered to Trotsky’s program where they were put to the test in Minnesota, stubbornly opposing the FLP even under great pressure. In the spring of 1935, they *reversed* their practice to give critical support to the FLP for the first time. Dobbs rewrites this history in order to whitewash the 1935 line change.

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<sup>6</sup> Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 51. Dobbs’ fourth book, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, mentions the 1940 discussions with Trotsky only to address Trotsky’s argument that they should have given the CP critical electoral support at that time. Dobbs could deal with this criticism, but only in isolation, divorced from Trotsky’s deeper political point about the SWP’s trade-union work. See Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy* (New York: Monad Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Politics* (New York: Monad Press, 1975), 85.

The SWP never critically assessed its work in the Minnesota FLP, much less repudiated it, which may have played a role in initial impulses in the party to support Henry Wallace's 1948 campaign on the petty-bourgeois populist Progressive Party ticket. After a debate the SWP decisively rejected supporting the Progressive Party, which was qualitatively similar to the Minnesota FLP, but made no attempt to draw a connection between the two questions. The strange mess in Minnesota became a skeleton in the SWP's closet. In later years the party developed a demented amnesia about the entire issue, and attempts at historical commentary suppressed Trotsky's 1924 intervention, the CLA's 1928-29 founding positions, and the 1935 line change on the FLP. By 1985, the SWP was making such obsequious statements as: "Through its leadership of the Minneapolis Teamsters movement, the CLA was also gaining rich experience in relating to the reformist-led Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party."<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately for Dobbs and his epigones, the original records of these events are available to Marxist scholars today. Hopefully this research paper will do its part to expose the latter-day SWP's self-serving historical falsifications, shining new light on old truths that remain dear to the heart of the proletarian struggle.

### ***Walker, Palmer, and the Academic Scholars***

The other classic account of the 1934 Minneapolis strikes commonly cited by scholars is *American City: A Rank and File History of Minneapolis* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), written by newspaperman Charles Rumford Walker and first published in 1937. Like the series by Dobbs, Walker's book is based on contemporary interactions and interviews with his subjects. After a thorough review of the region's history, its class struggles, its economy, and the impacts of the Great Depression, Walker lays down a powerful narrative of the 1934 Teamster strikes. In an evenhanded manner he lets all sides in the conflict speak for themselves, but he includes more than enough

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, "Introduction" (July 1985), *The Communist League of America: James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1932-34* (New York: Monad Press, 1985), 18.

damning information on the wealth, power and violence of the capitalists running the Northwest “empire” to make clear that his sympathies lie with the working class.

Walker shrewdly analyzes the contradictions of the Farmer-Labor Party and the resulting dilemmas faced by Governor Olson as he attempted to quell the strike upheaval. Walker also highlights the role played by the Trotskyist leadership of the Teamsters, in particular their fierce opposition to Olson’s National Guard mobilization at the climax of the final trucker strike. He goes on to describe the aftermath, focusing on the bitter Strutwear and Flour City strikes of 1935, which he depicts as “replicas of the civil war” of the previous year that raised the prospect of “translating the moral gains of 1934 into practical ones for *the whole rank and file* of the empire’s capital.” Walker demonstrates that in the period just after the 1934 strikes, Local 574 rendered decisive support to the entire Northwest labor movement by loaning “organizers, leaders, negotiators, and ‘staff advice,” thereby assisting in the establishment of 38 new unions in just two years.<sup>9</sup>

The publication of Bryan D. Palmer’s recent *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers’ Strikes of 1934* (Brill, 2013) was an important catalyst for this research project. Palmer, a professor at Trent University in Canada, has written extensively about the North American workers movement and the reds who sought to lead it, including a biography of James P. Cannon. He is therefore well equipped to mount a critical evaluation of the work of the Minneapolis Teamsters in 1934.

Palmer writes with sympathy for the Trotskyist cause, searching for consistency and tenacity in their work, and demanding better of them where he finds faults. He puts forward some defective ideas about Minnesota’s “uneven and combined development” (a concept that Trotsky applied to countries of belated capitalist development like tsarist Russia) and the centrality of the trade-union caucus (following arguments made by Chris Knox in the Trotskyist newspaper *Workers Vanguard* in 1973 and subsequently upheld by the Bolshevik Tendency). These problems, however, do not interfere with Palmer’s

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<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis in original). Charles Rumford Walker, *American City: A Rank and File History of Minneapolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 248, 251, 265.

sharp assessment of the Minneapolis CLA's strengths and weaknesses as it grappled with the FLP in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 3 relies on a useful background essay by Palmer, "Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-33," which he includes in his book as an appendix, but Chapter 4 deals with Palmer's primary contributions on the question of the Farmer-Labor Party. As Palmer states in his introduction:

while Dobbs's classic account of the truckers' upheavals of 1934 is largely accurate, it does, at times, need to be critically interrogated in terms of the leadership's occasional failures, especially with respect to its early inability to mount a revolutionary critique of Farmer-Laborism, which may have fed into a tendency to rely unduly on this political tendency's head spokesman, Governor Floyd B. Olson. There is, as well, the necessity to scrutinize the ways in which the successes of the Minneapolis General Drivers' Union may have conditioned practices on the part of its Trotskyist leadership that broke from the theoretical and political insights that those very victories nurtured.<sup>11</sup>

Palmer is certainly correct in pointing out that the Trotskyists' support to the Minnesota FLP opened the way to their increasing tendency to adapt to New Deal "progressives" in the AFL officialdom in general; as Palmer notes, Leon Trotsky himself caught his American supporters in the act in 1940, demanding they correct their course.<sup>12</sup>

Palmer's focus does not extend far beyond the events of 1934, but in a pair of footnote asides, he criticizes the Trotskyists for later papering over Governor Olson's efforts to suppress the 1934 strikes and for giving critical support to the FLP in 1936. He sees rough outlines of the Trotskyists' opportunist bloc, but only in 1936 when they made a deal to rejoin the AFL. The origins of the bloc, its connection to the *Northwest Organizer*, and the decision to first support the FLP in 1935 are not addressed. His

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<sup>10</sup> One review of *Revolutionary Teamsters* takes up these issues in detail. See E. Tanner, "Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934, by Bryan D. Palmer: A Review and Commentary (Part One)," *Workers Vanguard*, no. 1052 (September 19, 2014): <http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/1052/palmer.html> (accessed November 16, 2014); and "(Part Two)," *Workers Vanguard*, no. 1053 (October 3, 2014): <http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/1053/palmer.html> (accessed November 16, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014), 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-237.

criticisms of the Trotskyists in the years after 1934 are centered on their failure to “preserve” the gains they had achieved, a static conception of revolutionary struggle that denies Local 574’s actual value as a beachhead, a springboard for future battles.<sup>13</sup>

With little scholarship on the Trotskyists’ activities in the late 1930s available, Palmer refers his readers to a 2011 master’s thesis by Kristoffer Smemo, a student at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Smemo’s paper, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis, 1934-1938,” traces the early stages of the collapse of the Minnesota FLP by detailing the factional infighting between the Stalinists and Trotskyists that began in 1935 when both tendencies started jockeying for influence with Farmer-Labor politicians. His thesis quite usefully establishes a parallel narrative to that of Farrell Dobbs, filling in gaps and fully exposing Trotskyist capitulations that Dobbs tries to burnish beyond recognition. Unfortunately, Smemo’s work is marred by sloppy scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

More importantly, Smemo has a far more distant political angle than Dobbs or Palmer on the subject, which must be identified if any sense is to be made of his commentary. He approaches the various political tendencies at work in Minneapolis through the lens of the New Deal Democratic Party, which for him represents the high point of “labor unity.” Uninterested in the Trotskyists’ program for socialist revolution, he complains incessantly of how “labor factionalism divided workers and alienated crucial cross-class allies.” He laments the divisive role played by leftists, but manages to hold out hope for “the longterm [sic] viability of liberal reform”:

factionalism crippled the labor movement’s ability to press the state for more sweeping and even social democratic change at the national and state level from 1938 onward. This critical defeat of working-class politics foreclosed the labor movement’s ability to act as an engine of proto-social democracy, but it also reaffirmed a commitment to the basic tenets of New Deal liberalism among both Democrats and key segments of the Republican Party.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Palmer, 73, 226, 234-236.

<sup>14</sup> Kristoffer O. Smemo, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis, 1934-1938” (MA thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2011): <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1757&context=theses> (accessed June 27, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 3-5.

This is, unremarkably, the hegemonic narrative for academic historians of this period. Scholarly histories of the Minnesota FLP, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party have been written, but the Minneapolis Trotskyists' role in these histories is either reduced to a handful of hostile sentences or simply ignored. This is the case with Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative*; John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party*; Paul S. Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association: Minnesota's Party *Within* a Party"; William Millikan, "The Red-Baiting of Kenneth C. Haycraft"; David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History*; and Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History*. These works are primarily cited for background information and clarifying details regarding the role of other parties and politicians.<sup>16</sup>

One exception is Richard M. Valelly's *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (University of Chicago Press,

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<sup>16</sup> In Gieske's narrative, any communist participation in the farmer-labor movement was a political liability and a gift to the Republicans. A "heavy price would be paid" for allowing the Stalinists and Trotskyists into the FLP in 1936. Strikes were violent and destructive, and the Trotskyists subjected the union they led to a "reign of terror." See Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 211, 218, 236, 254. Haynes also decries the violence of strikes, including "several killings," which he blames on the Trotskyist leadership of Local 574. He attributes this leadership's "isolation" from the Teamster membership to the Trotskyists' "sectarian" politics. See John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 25-26. Holbo, focusing on the relationship between the Farmer-Labor Association and the Farmer-Labor Party, does not address the role of the Trotskyists. See Paul S. Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association: Minnesota's Party *Within* a Party," *Minnesota History*, vol. 38, no. 7 (September 1963): <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/38/v38i07p301-309.pdf> (accessed August 31, 2015). Millikan complains about the "infiltration" of Stalinists and "Trotskyites" into the FLP, and denounces the Teamster leadership for allegedly slandering his subject, Kenneth Haycraft, in 1937. See William Millikan, "The Red-Baiting of Kenneth C. Haycraft," *Minnesota History*, vol. 54/4 (Winter 1994): 179-180, <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/54/v54i04p170-187.pdf> (accessed September 13, 2014). Shannon, writing on the Socialist Party, condemns the "Trotskyites" for being "obstreperous" and "the most zealous seekers of doctrinal purity," and for disobeying the injunctions of the SP leadership. See David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 251-253. Ross likewise defends the SP against the disruptive Trotskyists, as "it was obvious that James Cannon and his followers had not entered the party in good faith and were pursuing a ruthless course of rule or ruin." See Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (USA: Potomac Books, 2015), 379.

1989), which features the Trotskyists prominently in its account of the FLP's disintegration from 1936 onward. Valelly describes the origins of their political bloc with a wing of the FLP in 1935 as though it sprang from a long history of harmonious collaboration: "The Dunne brothers and Karl Skoglund, the core of the Twin Cities branch of Communist League of America, had known Olson for many years. They respected him even as they criticized him, and found that they had easy access to the inner circles of the Farmer-Labor party."<sup>17</sup>

There is no evidence that this is true, but it fits perfectly in Valelly's framework. He claims that Governor Olson did "something completely novel" in 1934 by using the National Guard to break a major city's open-shop system and hand victory to a union on strike, setting a precedent that he upheld in 1935 and that his two successors upheld through 1939. He claims that, "Together Olson and Roosevelt richly rewarded the political entrepreneurship and exemplary organizational skills of the Trotskyist labor leaders who planned and led the 1934 strikes." This is hard to reconcile with reality; these New Deal luminaries slandered and demonized the reds, sent police and soldiers to beat them, arrest them, crush their strikes, maim and murder their union brothers; eventually Roosevelt railroaded their leaders to prison for sedition in 1941. But Valelly only sees the wise "truce" that was reached after the 1934 strikes, and the "network of elite links between [the Teamsters local] and the Farmer-Labor party" that then flourished. The presentation is somewhat bewildering unless it is taken as a late contribution to the Cold Warriors' "consensus school" of American history – another crude effort to hide irreconcilable class antagonisms behind a cloud of friendly patriotic dust. In any case, Valelly usefully names several of the prominent Farmer-Laborites who supported Local 574 beginning in 1934, and with whom the Trotskyists formed a political bloc in 1935, though the substance of these relationships must be sought out in other sources.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 116.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, 129.

### ***Zumoff and PRL books***

The invaluable historical works produced by recent Marxist scholarship have focused on earlier periods, so they play a role only in the initial sections of this thesis. Chapter 1 relies heavily on Jacob A. Zumoff's *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929* (Brill, 2014), which highlights the constructive role played by Lenin and Trotsky's Communist International in the forging of the American Communist Party and its early struggles, and the destructive role it began to play as it degenerated under the Stalinist bureaucracy that took power in the Soviet Union in 1923-24. This chapter also draws from the introduction to a collection of Cannon writings assembled by the Prometheus Research Library (PRL), *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920-1928* (Spartacist Publishing Company, 1992), which summarizes the political issues in dispute during the faction fights that raged in the CP during the 1920s, focusing on Cannon's years as one of the principal leaders of the American party and his "faction to end all factions." Both Zumoff and the PRL introduction address the CP's affair with farmer-laborism as one installment in a complex process of development, and both do so in far more depth than can be replicated here. This chapter proceeds from these histories to examine Leon Trotsky's analysis of the American farmer-labor movement in his 1928 "Critique of the Draft Program," the founding document of the international Trotskyist movement, and the subsequent evidence of his American supporters' assimilation of the political principles underlying Trotsky's positions.

Chapter 2 utilizes Palmer's background appendix as well as a second PRL collection, *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931-33* (Spartacist Publishing Company, 2002). The introduction to *Dog Days* explains the background to the faction fight between Cannon and the younger, less-experienced layer of party leaders around Max Shachtman, which nearly split the young Trotskyist tendency and prefigured, with a nearly identical polarization of cadres, the

definitive split that occurred in 1939-40. These early chapters take the political analysis in the two PRL introductions as a starting point and elaborate on them with respect to the Trotskyists' approach to the Minnesota farmer-labor movement.<sup>19</sup>

### **Primary Sources**

The core of this research project is derived from the original records of the period, and these sources are given greater weight in each subsequent chapter, as secondary literature is sparse for the years after 1934. An exhaustive survey of Trotskyist newspapers – *The Militant*, *The New Militant*, *Socialist Appeal*, etc. – establishes the tendency's official public record of its activities. The 1934 strike bulletin of Local 574, *The Organizer*, and the union's weekly newspaper that ran from 1935-41, *The Northwest Organizer*, have also been scoured for evidence, as they reveal the divergent dimensions of the Trotskyists' politics as they developed in these years. Other published material cited includes their theoretical journal, *The New International*, as well as pamphlets, flyers, leaflets, statements, and books issued by the tendency in these years.<sup>20</sup>

To penetrate beyond the public party line to the internal life of the organization, research was carried out into the central participants' private correspondence, notes for speeches, internal reports and discussion documents, as well as their organizations'

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<sup>19</sup> Other sources from in and around the Communist/Trotskyist movement are periodically cited for background information. These include: James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972); James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972); Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978); Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957); Chris Knox, "Trotskyist Work in the Trade Unions: General Strike! (Part 2 of 4)," *Workers Vanguard*, no. 26 (August 3, 1973) and "Trotskyist Work in the Trade Unions: The Primacy of Politics (Part 3 of 4)," *Workers Vanguard*, no. 27 (August 31, 1973); "Introduction" by Prometheus Research Library, Max Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism? Internal Problems of the Workers Party*, Prometheus Research Series, no. 5 (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2000); Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, "Introduction" (July 1985), *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1932-34*.

<sup>20</sup> All of these newspapers, as well as the *New International*, several internal bulletins and pamphlets, as well as an audio recording of a roundtable discussion, were accessed online at the Marxists Internet Archive.

minutes, motions, resolutions, and theses. Some of this material has been published in volumes of selected Cannon and Trotsky writings by the latter-day SWP, and in the PRL collections discussed above, but the bulk of it was found in historical archives scattered across the United States. The collections searched thus far are the Records of the Socialist Workers Party, the James P. Cannon Papers, and the Farrell Dobbs Papers, all held by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; the Leon Trotsky Collection and Albert Glotzer Papers, at the Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University; and the Max Shachtman Papers, at the Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.<sup>21</sup>

From these sources material has been assembled for several further chapters that cover the years 1936 to 1941. Due to the limitations of space and time they cannot be included in this thesis, but this period may important lessons that have yet to be fully investigated. These projected chapters would address the battles between the Trotskyists'

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<sup>21</sup> The volumes of Cannon and Trotsky writings include: *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1932*, ed. George Breitman and Sarah Lovell (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973); *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement, 1929-33*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1979); *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1935-36*, ed. Naomi Allen and George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977); *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1936-37*, ed. Naomi Allen and George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978); *The Left Opposition in the U.S.: James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, ed. Fred Stanton (New York: Monad Press, 1981); James P. Cannon, *The Communist League of America: James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1932-34*, ed. Fred Stanton and Michael Taber (New York: Monad Press, 1985); James P. Cannon, *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II: James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1940-43*, ed. Les Evans (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975).

The emphasis of this research has resulted in a very narrow focus on the perspective of the Trotskyists. Given the enormous number of additional sources that have yet to be investigated, this may be seen as a potential weakness. The newspapers of the Minnesota FLP (the *Leader*), of the Central Labor Union (the *Minneapolis Labor Review*), of the St. Paul Regional Labor Federation (the *Minnesota Union Advocate*), and of the Duluth Trades and Labor Assembly (*Labor World*), have yet to be fully reviewed. Likewise the Twin Cities' major bourgeois papers. The dissident farmer-laborite *Midwest American* and the Minneapolis Stalinists' *United Action* have not yet been located. The *Producers News* of Plentywood, Montana, especially its issues of 1935-37, must also be checked (the Library of Congress has digitized and made available the *Producers News* for 1918-22, but the paper continued until March 5, 1937; see <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053305/>). The Farmer-Labor Party Records are held by the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, as are the Oscar Hawkins Papers and the Allen and Violet Sollie Papers which likely include related materials (see <https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/collection/data/313829804> and [http://mnhs.mnpals.net/F/?func=find-c&ccl\\_term=palsn%3D900023613](http://mnhs.mnpals.net/F/?func=find-c&ccl_term=palsn%3D900023613)). The International Brotherhood of Teamsters archives are at the Gelman Library at George Washington University (see <http://teamstersarchives.gwu.edu/archives>).

and the Stalinists' popular fronts, and those between the AFL and CIO which eventually spilled into the Minnesota labor movement and FLP; the 1938 and 1940 discussions with Leon Trotsky and their impact on the American Trotskyists' policies; the 1941 Minneapolis Sedition Trial and purge of the city's Teamsters union; the final liquidation of the FLP into the Democratic Party in 1944; and the 1948 Wallace campaign, which the Trotskyists refused to support, bringing their flirtations with bourgeois third parties to an end.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Contribution to the Historiography***

Academics have frequently preoccupied themselves with the question, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" From Werner Sombart's 1907 book by that name to Eric Foner's useful 1984 historiographical essay by the same title, scholars have examined a multitude of internal (subjective) and external (objective) factors that have hindered the development of socialist consciousness in the American proletariat and have time and again thwarted the establishment of an independent workers party.<sup>23</sup>

Foner points out that by seizing on "external" factors, most historians have written off the possibility of a socialist future: "if essentially unchanging aspects of

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<sup>22</sup> Further research will also be necessary to complete the outstanding chapters covering 1936 to 1941, and other related developments through 1948. A proper assessment of the SP entry period, 1936-37, requires a review of the Trotskyists' Central Office files at the Prometheus Research Library in New York. A chapter on the 1941 Minneapolis Sedition Trial and the purge of the Trotskyists from the Teamsters will rely on secondary sources such as Ralph C. James and Estelle James, "The Purge of the Trotskyites from the Teamsters," *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1 (March 1966): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/445466> (accessed December 18, 2014), and a new book by Donna Haverty-Stacke, *Trotskyists on Trial: Free Speech and Political Persecution since the Age of FDR* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). This chapter must also look into the *Industrial Organizer*, the newspaper that appeared after the *Northwest Organizer* was discontinued in 1941, which was edited by Miles Dunne and continued through May 1942 (see <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/industrialorganizer/>). Furthermore, the "Minneapolis" folder in the SWP papers, unlike other branch record folders, is almost completely empty. The FBI in its 1941 raid may have seized the bulk of the Minneapolis branch's files; if so, a Freedom of Information Act request might secure their release if they still exist.

<sup>23</sup> Werner Sombart, *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976); Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop*, no. 17 (Spring 1984): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288545> (accessed July 17, 2017).

American society – social mobility, the ‘American ideology,’ the nature of the political system – are responsible for the failure of socialism, there appears to be little reason to hope for a future revival of socialist fortunes.” On the other hand, a focus on “internal” factors “has an obvious appeal for more optimistic left-oriented historians” because if “tactical, strategic or ideological errors sabotaged previous socialist movements, then perhaps future radicals can learn from past mistakes, avoid repeating them, and rebuild American socialism.”<sup>24</sup>

This thesis contributes to the above discussion, providing new insights into the subjective failings of the socialist cause in this country. It will also be of interest to scholars of the American industrial labor movement, especially those seeking to shed more light on the origins of the Congress of Industrial Organizations.<sup>25</sup> And it will be useful to those with a purely academic interest in the Communist and Trotskyist movements of the early twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> Its true relevance, however, will be to the Trotskyist movement itself, and as such it represents a sharp political break from existing academic literature. Its purpose is not simply to illuminate and analyze, but to programmatically rearm those who seek socialist revolution here in the belly of the imperialist beast.

Unlike the latter-day SWP and the many derivative organizations that have split from it over the years, this thesis does not endorse the exceptional policy of the Trotskyists toward the Minnesota FLP. Instead, it ruthlessly exposes and rejects this opportunist adaptation, upholding instead the fundamental principles that armed the

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<sup>24</sup> Foner, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Relevant scholarly works from this field include: Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977); Saul Alinsky, *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York: The Cornwall Press, 1949); Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> A number of the academic works cited above fall into this category. Another example is Verlaine Stoner McDonald, *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2010).

Academics have also paid attention to the published works of Trotskyists themselves, such as those of Farrell Dobbs and James P. Cannon cited above, as well as other accounts that are outside the scope of this thesis, such as James Kutcher, *The Case of the Legless Veteran* (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

Bolsheviks in their fight for revolution in 1917 and subsequently animated the early Third and Fourth Internationals.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Lessons of La Follette**

**1923-1929**

The American communist movement first met the pitfalls of farmer-laborism in its troubled adolescence. Ensnaring itself in the “progressive” currents of the labor movement, the communists’ Workers Party (WP) came very close in 1924 to supporting the candidacy of Republican populist Robert La Follette. This could have been politically fatal for the young revolutionary movement, as it would have meant betraying the Marxist principle of proletarian political independence and returning to the bourgeois pressure politics of social-democratic reformism.

A salutary intervention by Leon Trotsky compelled the Communist International to pull its American party back from its opportunist trajectory. The Comintern, just beginning its bureaucratic degeneration, “intervened forcefully, if clumsily and belatedly, to prevent the party from liquidating itself politically.” But in doing so, the Comintern

compounded the WP's opportunist bent by upholding the call for a "two-class party" and keeping WP supporters at work for the farmer-labor movement.<sup>27</sup>

The La Follette episode was a formative experience for the American communist movement, and it became a key reference point for years to come. Cannon's understanding of it played a role in his openness to Trotsky's positions in 1928; it helped shape the early Trotskyist tendency's opposition to the farmer-labor movement; and it continued to be analyzed and discussed into the 1930s and beyond. Many of the same pressures that affected the WP in the early 1920s reappeared in new forms, with new casts of characters, to test the Trotskyist movement in later years.

### ***Origins of Farmer-Labor Populism in America***

The communists' first encounter with American farmer-laborism took place at a series of conferences and conventions in Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota – the old Northwest. The strength of the farmer-labor movement in this region sprang from the legacy of toiling western farmers and their agrarian radicalism. Dating back to the Grange of the 1870s, this current had always been co-opted by bourgeois Progressivism, though in truth it sought to turn history backward. As Walker explains:

The successive waves of 'agrarian radicalism' which swept over the Northwest in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth had one purpose – to rid 'the people' of the abuses of 'monopoly' and restore to the worker or farmer his 'inalienable rights' under an American democracy. In that sense the authors of the movement did not look upon themselves as radicals but as restorationists.<sup>28</sup>

In 1915 these forces founded the Non-Partisan League, an organization that tried to use local Republican and sometimes Democratic Party branches to fight for cheap credit for farmers and public ownership of grain elevators.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 112.

<sup>28</sup> Walker, 46.

<sup>29</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 22; Walker, 50.

For more on the impact of agrarian radicalism and Progressivism on the early socialist and communist movements, see Foner, 63; Draper, 15, 41-42; PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 19, 23.

In the upsurge of labor radicalism toward the end of World War I, dissatisfaction with the two capitalist parties sparked the “third party” movement, and in 1918 the Non-Partisan League and the AFL bureaucracy founded the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, which would by the early 1930s completely displace the Democratic Party in the state to rival the Republicans. The Minnesota FLP allowed the affiliation of trade unions, but the party constitution always kept their power strictly limited to prevent the working class from exercising decisive influence. The party was not simply divided by the objectively counterposed class interests of farmers and workers; the real power rested with the small-town bankers who owned the farmers’ mortgages and their senior partners in the commercial hub of the Twin Cities. As one of the last vestiges of the Progressive movement, the FLP was a bourgeois political party from its inception.<sup>30</sup>

The growing “third party” movement founded another in 1919: a national Labor Party, led by Chicago Federation of Labor head John Fitzpatrick. Initially it was evolving as a reformist labor party, akin to the British Labour Party, but this was attenuated the following year when it fused with the “Bull Moose” Progressives of the Committee of 48 and rebranded itself the Farmer-Labor Party.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Communists and Fitzpatrick***

From its founding until late 1922, the early communist movement was paralyzed by organizational disunity and a sectarian adherence to “underground” work. Initially this was a reaction to the 1919-20 Red Scare and the accompanying government repression, but it continued after the threat had passed. Working underground meant that it could have little to do with these new third parties. This issue resulted in fierce factional infighting, but finally, prompted by the Comintern, the communist movement united to found the Workers Party, started functioning openly as a legal organization, took up the “labor party” cause and oriented toward the left wing of the trade-union

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<sup>30</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 61-62; Palmer, 34; Haynes, 10; Valelly, 137-138.

<sup>31</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 21-22; Zumoff, 113.

movement.<sup>32</sup> The early 1920s were not an auspicious time for American communist growth, but with this turn the WP leadership “overcorrected,” launching the party into get-rich-quick schemes as they tried to break out of isolation. In the process they revealed naïve and often opportunistic impulses toward Progressive and farmer-laborite forces.<sup>33</sup>

In 1923 the Workers Party enthusiastically formed a political bloc with John Fitzpatrick for the purpose of launching a larger Farmer-Labor Party, but in doing so it failed to draw the class line by insisting the new party be unambiguously proletarian in character or by fighting for a break with bourgeois populist currents, the most prominent being the Progressive movement around La Follette. While the WP failed to combat the farmer-laborites politically, it fought Fitzpatrick for organizational control, causing a precipitous and ill-conceived split with him and his union allies. The communists, along with a handful of Non-Partisan League populists and union progressives, were left in control of the newly founded Federated Farmer-Labor Party (FFLP). Fitzpatrick became a bitter opponent, and without his protection, over the next two years the communist militants working in AFL unions were driven out, further compounding the WP’s isolation.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Zumoff, 50-115.

<sup>33</sup> Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism*, 23; Zumoff, 112.

The early Communists’ softness toward the Farmer-Labor movement was compounded by the confused resolution that included possible “workers and peasants governments” adopted by the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922. See PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 23; Zumoff, 119-125.

In the early American Communist movement, “progressive” was used as an elastic term, encompassing both proletarian forces (from rank-and-file militants to left-talking union bureaucrats) and bourgeois elements (such as farmer-laborites and La Follette supporters). Further complicating their confusion and softness toward progressives, the American Communists did not always distinguish between a united front and a political bloc. For the Communist International of Lenin and Trotsky, the united front was a crucial tactical action in which the revolutionary party fought alongside reformist-led forces to achieve an immediate goal. Communists could only join in such an action if they retained their political independence and their freedom to criticize, exposing the bankruptcy of and politically defeating social-democratic misleadership that prevented the working class from struggling for power. Instead of actually implementing this tactic, the American communists often used the “united front” as a label for blocs they formed with other forces, which entailed much closer political collaboration over longer periods of time. Moreover, they raised this tactical issue to the level of a strategic question,

### ***Losing Our Communist Soul in the La Follette Movement***

In the aftermath of the Fitzpatrick debacle, factional struggle broke out again as James P. Cannon and William Z. Foster joined forces to depose John Pepper, an inveterate opportunist maneuverer who had taken control of the WP and enjoyed the support of party leaders C.E. Ruthenberg, Max Bedacht, and Jay Lovestone. The Cannon-Foster faction won control of the WP and led the party from December 1923 to August 1925; but while the two factions initially differed in their assessments of the split with Fitzpatrick, they came to agree on the fundamental political question at stake. Both factions accepted that the WP could only trail after the farmer-labor movement, upholding the strategy of forming political blocs with its progressive elements.<sup>35</sup>

As the 1924 presidential elections approached, what remained of the agrarian populists and trade-union progressives in the communists' FFLP were drawn into the much larger movement for the candidacy of Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette. The AFL, the Socialist Party, and the last remnants of the Non-Partisan League attempted to found a new Progressive party, appealing to this anachronistic Republican populist to leave his old bourgeois party for their new one. The Pepper faction hailed the "La Follette Revolution" and demanded that the WP join the movement. The Cannon-Foster group's enthusiasm for the farmer-labor movement was dampened by their failure with Fitzpatrick, but fearing to swim against the stream, they went along. The WP, portraying the La Follette Progressives as working-class centrists rather than the capitalist class enemies that they were, adopted the opportunist policy of the "third party alliance," which meant building a party with La Follette's supporters without openly advocating La Follette's candidacy.<sup>36</sup>

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applying it as a general perspective throughout their trade-union work. See Zumoff, 106, 119, 127; "Introduction by the Prometheus Research Library," *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931-33* (New York: Spartacist Publishing Company, 2002), 65; PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 24-25.

<sup>36</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 25-27; Zumoff, 127-135.

Opposition to the La Follette movement from within the WP played a role in the ongoing factional convulsions, but it took a more authoritative force to spike the “third party alliance.” Leon Trotsky impelled the Comintern in Moscow to call a halt, pulling its American section back from the brink. By 1924 Trotsky, already in opposition to much of the Russian party leadership, was increasingly censored by the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin, but he was able to publish his views on the WP’s policy. He excoriated them for abandoning the fundamental task in the struggle against populism and reformism: “the task of assuring the *proletarian character of the party*.” Trotsky denounced their participation in the La Follette campaign as a betrayal of principle – they had crossed the class line between proletarian struggle and bourgeois politics. Zinoviev, head of the Comintern, made a partial concession to Trotsky as part of a general turn to outflank him on the left. The Comintern issued instructions to the WP to extricate itself from the campaign and put up its own candidates for the elections.<sup>37</sup>

However, Zinoviev could not accept Trotsky’s generalized opposition to a two-class party without undermining the triumvirate’s campaign against Trotsky for “underestimating the peasantry.” Therefore the Comintern pronouncement accepted the need for a farmer-labor party in the United States, opposing only the bourgeois politician who might lead it. Moreover, the degenerating Comintern leadership saw this as only a tactical question, as did the two major factions of the WP. The American communists came out hard against La Follette, but still held that the way to break with the capitalist parties was to build a “genuine” farmer-labor party. La Follette himself remained loyal to the Republicans, declining the nomination of the farmer-labor movement and issuing a red-baiting attack on the communists among his followers.<sup>38</sup>

In any case, the “third party” forces had a poor showing in the 1924 elections, and Republican Calvin Coolidge won in a landslide. The communists’ confused participation

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<sup>37</sup> (Emphasis in original). PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 27-32, 35-37; Leon Trotsky, “Author’s 1924 Introduction,” *The First 5 Years of the Communist International, Volume 1* (New York: Monad Press, 1972), 13; Zumoff, 136-142.

<sup>38</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 32-34; Zumoff, 141-144, 146.

in and humiliating retreat from the La Follette campaign was badly demoralizing for the WP. In its official postmortem on the affair it was forced to confess that “‘The Farmer-Labor movement which we wanted to save from being swallowed by LaFollette was substantially a LaFollette movement... We attempted to save a Farmer-Labor soul which didn’t exist and in the process we nearly lost our own communist soul.’”<sup>39</sup>

### ***Trapped in the Farmer-Labor Movement***

Clashing evaluations of the elections quickly rekindled the faction fight in the WP. Cannon and Foster insisted that the farmer-labor movement had been co-opted by La Follette and was dead, so the “labor party” slogan should be dropped in favor of concrete united-front campaigns in the trade-union movement; the Ruthenberg-Lovestone group (Pepper had been recalled by the Comintern) argued that the La Follette movement had won a great victory, so the WP should remain oriented behind the Progressives and farmer-laborites. Both sides could claim to stand on the Comintern’s convoluted 1924 decision, but the following year the International intervened again with an even more confusing line. It declared that the elections had indeed been a victory for the La Follette forces, but at the same time it rejected the slogan for a “farmer-labor party” because the conditions were no longer conducive to forming one. On the other hand it upheld the need for an agitational “labor party” campaign, which meant a continued orientation to the bourgeois Progressives, and directed the party membership to continue their participation in any established labor and farmer-labor parties.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 34; *Workers Monthly* (December 1924), quoted in Max Shachtman, “The Problem of the Labor Party,” *The New International*, vol. II, no. 2 (March 1935): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1935/03/labparty.htm> (accessed November 21, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> The Comintern’s bottom line was support to the more “loyal” Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction, which it subsequently bolstered through bureaucratic fiat after the Cannon-Foster group had won a decisive majority of delegates to the WP’s August 1925 Convention. See PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 34-38; Zumoff, 158-160; Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism*, 23-29; Gieske, 101.

However, by this time the La Follette movement was dead, and the various organizations that had supported it, including the FFLP, were dying with it. The Comintern decree was a dead letter – except in a few states like Minnesota, where a tenacious Farmer-Labor Party survived. The WP’s unprincipled maneuvers had backfired, exacerbating the party’s isolation in the workers movement, but in the Minnesota FLP the communists still had an arena in which to apply their program. That party attempted to expel its communist members in 1925, but they remained in the movement, backing the Magnus Johnson group in the FLP’s own factional turbulence.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Trotsky’s Critique and the Origins of American Trotskyism***

The faction fight in the Russian Communist Party was opaque and largely incomprehensible to the American communists, but in 1928 James P. Cannon was won to the Left Opposition when he was able to study Trotsky’s position while in Moscow for the Sixth Comintern Congress. Upon his return he recruited a handful of his close faction supporters, centrally Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, before they were all expelled from the party. These “three generals without an army” gathered what fledgling Trotsky supporters they could muster, founded the Communist League of America (CLA), and got to work in New York City printing the *Militant*. This was their chief instrument of intervention into the Communist Party and wider labor movement, its purpose to reestablish among communists the Leninist principles and program that had made the Russian Revolution possible.<sup>42</sup>

Central to the recruitment of James P. Cannon and his comrades was Trotsky’s 1928 document, “The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals” (known as the “Critique”), which Cannon helped to smuggle out of the Soviet Union. It was published serially in the early issues of the *Militant*. Trotsky’s Critique was not only a comprehensive exposition of the bureaucratic degeneration of the

<sup>41</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 38-39; Zumoff, 147-148, 161; Gieske, 101; Haynes, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism*, 40-55; Zumoff, 257-262.

Soviet Union and the Comintern under Stalin, but also a powerful reassertion of the proletarian, revolutionary, internationalist principles of Bolshevism, as opposed to the essentially Menshevik – class-collaborationist, reformist, nationalist – conceptions that Stalinism reverted to. A primary focus of Trotsky’s polemic was the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27, which had been brutally repressed by the Kuomintang regime of Chiang Kai-shek with the complicity of the Stalinized Comintern. But the Critique also drew on the American communists’ adventure with farmer-laborism in 1924 to establish a generalized understanding of the nature of Stalinism as a variant of social-democratic reformism. In the United States, Stalinist “theory” had actually codified the tendency of communists to capitulate to bourgeois populism in its farmer-labor guise. This section of the Critique spoke directly to the Cannon group’s experience.<sup>43</sup>

The Critique traced the political origins of this issue to the Soviet Thermidor, the political counterrevolution in which the rule of the Soviet proletariat was politically usurped by the rising bureaucracy: “Beginning with 1924, a year which will go down as the year of open revision of a number of fundamental theses of Marx and Lenin, Stalin advanced the formula of the ‘two-class workers and peasants parties for the Eastern countries.’” In contrast to the complete independence and irreconcilable class character of the Communist Parties of Lenin and Trotsky’s International, the two-class parties that the Comintern began to advocate and collaborate with represented “an absolutely new, entirely false, and thoroughly anti-Marxian formulation of the fundamental question of the party and of its relation to its own class and other classes.”<sup>44</sup>

In his analysis Trotsky made the class character of such parties absolutely clear, arguing that they “are in reality one of the varieties of bourgeois parties.” As he explained,

Of course, every bourgeois party that relies or seeks to rely on the peasantry and, if possible, on the workers, is compelled to camouflage itself, that is, to assume

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<sup>43</sup> PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Leon Trotsky, “The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals” (1928), *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1996), 224-25.

two or three appropriate colorations. The celebrated idea of ‘workers and peasants parties’ seems to have been specially created to camouflage bourgeois parties which are compelled to seek support from the peasantry but who are also ready to absorb workers in their ranks.<sup>45</sup>

The Stalinist-led Comintern treated the Kuomintang as one such “two-class workers and peasants party” and, reviving the Menshevik theory of revolution in stages, forced the Chinese proletariat and its Communist leadership into a subordinate and vulnerable position under the Chinese bourgeoisie inside the Kuomintang. When the class contradictions of this “two-class party” reached the breaking point, the bourgeois leadership of the Kuomintang turned on its base, massacring thousands of Chinese workers and radical intellectuals.<sup>46</sup>

Despite years of desperate warnings from the Left Opposition, the Stalinist leadership expressed shock at the disappearance of “nine tenths” of the Kuomintang. Trotsky responded that one could only understand the tragedy if one understands “the impossibility of a bi-composite, that is a two-class party, expressing simultaneously two mutually exclusive historical lines—the proletarian and the petty-bourgeois lines.”<sup>47</sup>

The Critique went on to show the connection between the Stalinist “two-class party” theory and the capitulation to bourgeois “third party” populism that was behind the American communists’ “senseless and infamous adventure of creating a ‘farmer-labor party’ around La Follette in order to overthrow quickly American capitalism.”<sup>48</sup> It summarized Pepper’s program for participation in the campaign:

a party of a few thousand members, consisting chiefly of immigrants, had to fuse with the farmers through the medium of a bourgeois party and by thus founding a ‘two-class’ party, insure the socialist revolution in the face of the passivity or neutrality of the proletariat corrupted by superprofits. This insane idea found supporters and half-supporters among the upper leadership of the Comintern.

Trotsky noted his own role in correcting the American communists only implicitly:

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<sup>45</sup> Trotsky, “Critique,” 227.

<sup>46</sup> “The Origins of Chinese Trotskyism,” *Spartacist*, no. 53 (Summer 1997): 22.

<sup>47</sup> Trotsky, “Critique,” 226.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

For several weeks the issue swayed in the balance until finally a concession was made to the ABC of Marxism (the comment behind the scenes was: Trotskyist prejudices). It was necessary to lasso the American Communist Party in order to tear it away from the La Follette party which died even before its founder.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Trotsky buried the “two-class party” once and for all by recounting the history of the Bolsheviks’ struggle for a truly proletarian party against the bourgeois populists (Russian Narodniks) and social democrats (Mensheviks and European reformist parties) in the years before the 1917 Russian Revolution. He quoted Lenin’s polemics against these opponents, concluding, “Could one condemn the very idea of a workers and peasants party more harshly, more ruthlessly, and more devastatingly?” Trotsky argued that if Lenin and his comrades had not been successful in this fight, the Russian proletariat “would inevitably have dissolved itself among the petty-bourgeois elements through the medium of the Social Revolutionary Party or some other ‘two-class party’ which, in turn, would inevitably have subjected the vanguard to bourgeois leadership” – thus ending the Russian Revolution before it ever could have begun.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Applying Trotsky’s Communism in America***

Although James P Cannon had played his part in supporting it, his experience with the 1924 La Follette adventure predisposed him to make the leap to Trotsky’s camp. Among the many factors that had shaped the Cannon group were the fight of the Cannon-Foster faction against the orientation to La Follette after the 1924 elections and Cannon’s stubborn “insistence on the leading role of the working class in any farmer-labor party.”<sup>51</sup> Cannon’s understanding of Trotsky’s position is clear in his introduction to a 1929 CLA pamphlet version of the Critique:

The formation of ‘Farmer-Labor’ Parties—that source of such exaggerated hopes and unbounded mistakes in the American Party—is reviewed at length in this volume. The underlying falsity of the whole idea of a ‘two-class’ party is

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 230-31.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 232-33.

<sup>51</sup> PRL Introduction, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 62, 68.

analyzed from the theoretical standpoint of Marxism and the history of the Russian revolutionary movement, and is condemned in principle—for the West as well as the East. Trotsky's comment on the 'Third Party Alliance' with LaFollette, the fight against which was led by him will be especially interesting to American Communists. All of which is a timely reminder of the heavy debt our Party owes to Trotsky.<sup>52</sup>

The first comprehensive programmatic statement of the CLA, the "Platform of the Communist Opposition," embraced Trotsky's position on two-class parties:

The organization of two classes in one Party—a Farmer-Labor Party—must be rejected in principle in favor of the separate organization of the workers, and the formation of a political alliance with the poor farmers under the leadership of the former. The opportunist errors of Party comrades in the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota and other states flowed inevitably from, and were secondary to the basically false policy of a two-class Party, pursued by the Party leadership, in which farmer and worker are ostensibly on an 'equal basis,' but where in reality the petty bourgeois ideology of the former actually dominates.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> James P. Cannon, "Introduction," Leon Trotsky, *The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals* (pamphlet), (New York: The Militant, 1929), ix.

<sup>53</sup> James P. Cannon, Arne Swabeck, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, "Platform of the Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, vol. II, no. 4 (February 15, 1929): 6, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1929/15feb1929.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

This position, and the awareness of the significance of the 1924 episode, could only have been reinforced by a letter from Trotsky in Constantinople to the editors of the *Militant*, in which Trotsky reflected on the origins of the American Communist movement:

"As far as I can judge, your official Communist Party inherited no few characteristics from the old socialist party. That became clear to me at the time when Pepper succeeded in dragging the American Communist Party into the scandalous adventure with the Party of LaFollette. This low-grade policy of parliamentary opportunism was disguised with 'revolutionary' chatter to the effect that the social revolution will be achieved in the United States not by the proletariat but by the ruined farmers. When Pepper expounded this theory to me upon his return from the United States I [thought] that I had to do with a curious case of individual aberration. Only with some effort I realized that this is a whole system, and that the American Communist Party had been dragged into this system. Then it became clear to me that this small Party cannot develop without deep inner crises, which will guarantee it against Pepperism and other evil diseases. I cannot call them infantile diseases. On the contrary, these are senile diseases, diseases of bureaucratic sterility and revolutionary impotence.

That is why I suspect that the Communist Party has taken over many of the qualities of the socialist party, which in spite of its youth struck me with features of decrepitude." See Leon Trotsky, "Tasks of the American Opposition," *The Militant*, vol. II, no. 10 (June 1, 1929): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1929/01jun1929.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

This revelation about the nature of a farmer-labor party had a clarifying effect on the Trotskyists' use of the "labor party" slogan, as they now maintained the call for a proletarian class-based political party in their propaganda without leaving room for any conciliation toward a two-class party. The "Platform" stated that the "perspective of a Labor Party, as a primary step in the political development of the American workers, adopted by the Party in 1922 after a sharp struggle in the Party and at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, holds good today." It went on to stipulate that such a party must be a true mass party, based not on individual membership but on the collective affiliation of workers organizations.<sup>54</sup>

The CLA did not see this slogan as an algebraic call for the proletariat to break with all bourgeois political parties. Instead, the use of the slogan was premised on the definition of a "labor party" as an *inherently reformist* party that would embody an *inevitably reformist* stage in the political development of the American working class. When assumptions about this inevitability were later challenged, the slogan was abandoned, and this disarmed the Trotskyists in their struggle against farmer-laborism. However, as the next chapter will show, in their early years the "labor party" served as a powerful weapon in the CLA's programmatic arsenal.<sup>55</sup>

At its inception the Trotskyist group in the United States was programmatically strong, but it faced a dire political landscape. In 1928 the Stalinists in Moscow announced the "Third Period" and the Russian Party led the Comintern in a purge of the right wing. The Communist Parties of the world careened into an "ultra-left" phase that undercut much of the attraction of the Left Opposition. For Cannon and his comrades this was a "devastating blow" that politically froze them out of any hearing with the party membership. The CLA was under tremendous financial pressure, struggling to acquire its own printing press so it could get its paper out. Its supporters were subjected to bureaucratic and often violent repression from the CP, but as a wrongfully expelled

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<sup>54</sup> Cannon, Swabeck, Abern and Shachtman, "Platform," 6.

<sup>55</sup> PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 38-9.

faction, the Trotskyists remained oriented toward the rank and file of the party, their first duty to save as many communist cadre as possible from the degenerating CP leadership. The CLA initially had about one hundred supporters nationally, compared to the Communist Party's seven thousand, and it had precious few opportunities for recruitment. It began its existence in a period of bitter isolation.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Palmer, 275, 282; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 31-2; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 64-73, 94-95.

## Chapter 2

### Questions in the Old Northwest

1929-1933

At its founding, the Communist League of America's official programmatic position toward bourgeois two-class parties appeared to be unambiguous. In the Northwest, the only place in the country where the tendency was truly put to the test on this issue, the Trotskyists' initial application of this program was impressive: they corrected the muddled "labor party" line they had carried over from the CP and took a hard stand against the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, even as they faced the complication of inheriting forces still inside this organization of their class enemy.

However, records from the following years show that the Trotskyists maintained lingering opportunist impulses toward the progressives of the farmer-labor movement, and that they had incompletely assimilated the fundamental class line between a proletarian party and a populist bourgeois party. In 1930 the Minneapolis branch attempted to support a new regional FLP newspaper, forcing the CLA leadership in New York to issue a public repudiation. The tendency pulled back from crossing the line into this class-collaborationist propaganda bloc, but in this same period, the Trotskyists

slipped an ambiguity into their stance on the class nature of a farmer-labor party by conflating it with a “labor party.” This theoretical confusion was introduced by the central leadership, and was possibly compounded by Trotsky himself. Then in 1931 the Trotskyists dropped the labor party slogan altogether, inadvertently blunting their program in Minnesota, though the repercussions of this decision would not be seen until 1935.

### ***The Political Landscape***

Prospects for proletarian struggle during the years 1929-33 were heavily warped by the Great Depression. During this period industrial production in the U.S. fell by 48.7%, and the unemployed population rose from 5 to 15 million. While workers’ incomes initially remained stable, the ruling class began slashing wages in late 1931, starting with an immediate 15% decrease in many industries. Those workers who managed to keep their jobs were generally too fearful of being thrown into the army of the unemployed to risk any kind of counteroffensive. The resulting conservatism of the rank-and-file, coupled with the AFL leadership’s pro-capitalist politics, sent the organized labor movement to its nadir: AFL union membership dropped from 3.4 million in 1929 to 2.1 million in 1933, and the number of strikes per year, already at historic lows in the 1920s, fell even further.<sup>57</sup>

The Depression hit Minnesota with particular force. The economy of the Northwest was primarily agricultural, but also included livestock, lumber, and iron mining. The region’s small urban centers had developed around rail and truck routes, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, its principal transit hub, relied on a relatively large number of transfer industry workers. By 1933 Minnesota flour production and meat packing were down to 65% of normal; the state’s building index had fallen to 12% and mining index to 10%. Income for farmers had dropped by half by 1932, and mass foreclosures drove

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<sup>57</sup> PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 33-34.

farmers to seek work in the cities, where many fell into the ranks of the unemployed. By early 1934 unemployed workers and dependents made up almost one third of the population of Minneapolis and surrounding Hennepin County.<sup>58</sup>

Minneapolis itself was a notoriously open-shop town, tightly controlled by the owners of the largest enterprises. United in the Citizens Alliance, these capitalists crushed unions and bled the working class dry in the interest of profit. Even then, by 1932 the Depression had left 86% of manufacturing plants in Minneapolis operating at a loss.<sup>59</sup>

Proletarian revolutionists in the Northwest faced a unique situation. While the region lacked the massive industrial plants that would soon put cities like Flint and Toledo on the map as the leaders of the industrial labor movement, truck transport and warehouse labor would prove to be a strategic pillar of the economy, providing the rank-and-file base for a militant working-class upheaval. Furthermore, Northwest workers had been heavily influenced by the recent waves of immigrant laborers who brought their relatively advanced social-democratic politics from Europe, and by the struggles of the Industrial Workers of the World in the early years of the century – Minneapolis had served as a local center for IWW agricultural organizing drives. The Minnesota IWW was crushed along with much of the labor and antiwar movement when the state legislature established an “open military dictatorship” during the wave of reaction in 1919-20, and the rail strike of 1922 had been violently suppressed. However, throughout the decade and into the 1930s radical political currents still ran deep among the toilers of the region.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (Montreal: Pathfinder Press, 2004), 34-38; Preis, 24; Walker, 84-85; Palmer, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Walker, 84-86; Preis, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 34-38; Walker, 50.

## *Two Expulsions*

When the Communist Party turned to its “ultra-left” Third Period in 1928, it launched an opposition to the Minnesota FLP by running Vincent Ray Dunne, a long-time leader of the Minneapolis communist movement, on the CP ticket for U.S. Senator. Dunne was the Secretary of the Minneapolis 12th Ward Farmer-Labor Club and had been elected as a delegate to every convention of the Farmer-Labor Federation and Association from 1924 to 1928. But running against the FLP nominee was an outrageous affront to the movement, and he was immediately removed from his Ward office, purged from the FLP, and expelled from the Office Workers Union that he had helped charter. Just three days later Dunne was expelled from the CP on charges of “Trotskyism.”<sup>61</sup>

All those members of the Minneapolis branch who questioned the expulsion of Cannon in New York were thrown out as well, as they were throughout the country, but in this city the result was an anomalous balance of forces. While the Trotskyists were in a small minority nearly everywhere, in Minneapolis the core of the CP branch leadership was purged. Vincent Dunne, who had been a supporter of Cannon’s faction in the CP, now became a central leader for the some 27 expelled Minneapolis members as they read and discussed the materials published by Trotsky and the Cannon group, cohering around the nascent Left Opposition tendency.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The Farmer-Labor Federation, later renamed the Farmer-Labor Association, was an organization inside the Minnesota FLP that held the movement together between elections, selecting nominees, drafting election platforms, and generally keeping the party under control. See Holbo. According to his brief political biography in the *Militant*, V. Dunne was removed from office specifically “for fighting F.L.P. bureaucrats and labor fakers Shipstead, Cramer, Weir, Starkey, Lundeen, etc.,” and was expelled from his union “for opposing Shipstead as Senatorial candidate.” See: Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 44, 56; Gieske, 111-115; “New Expulsions,” *The Militant*, vol. II, no. 5 (March 1, 1929): 8, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1929/01mar1929.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> The Workers Party changed its name to Workers (Communist) Party in 1925, then to Communist Party USA in 1929. See Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 44-45; *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1920-1928*, 600n.

The other central leader of the group was Carl Skoglund, a founding CP member who recruited Vincent Dunne in 1920. They were close collaborators; both sat on the CP’s Minneapolis Central Committee, and both were elected by their union locals (Skoglund for the railway carmen’s union and Dunne, working as a weighmaster in a coal yard, for the office workers) as delegates to the Minneapolis

These Minneapolis cadre had strong roots in the city's labor movement, with leadership experience going back to the Industrial Workers of the World, the early Socialist Party, and the founding of the Communist movement. Cannon noted in his speech appealing his expulsion that these "are precisely the comrades whose names have stood out in the labor movement of Minnesota for years as the very banner of communism. The prestige our party enjoys in the labor movement there is due mainly to them." The Minneapolis CP branch was gutted after the expulsions, and the resulting balance of forces would be key to the Trotskyist movement's success in leading the city's Teamster union through the famous strikes of 1934.<sup>63</sup>

After the first wave in 1928, the expulsions continued. C.R. Hedlund survived long enough in the CP to run in the November elections against the FLP and Republican Party for the 10th Congressional District, receiving about 24,000 votes. When he too was expelled, he defended himself against charges of indiscipline by citing his record as a "member and officer of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor political movement since its inception in 1919" who "carried out the Party policy and instructions in the Farmer-Labor political movement as well as its Trade Union policy without one single exception." Neither the statement on Vincent Dunne nor Hedlund's letter in the *Militant* questioned the farmer-laborite opportunism of the CP, instead presenting their longtime support of the FLP as a merit.<sup>64</sup>

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Central Labor Union, the city's ruling AFL body. Vincent Dunne was a brother of William (Bill) Dunne, a prominent member of Cannon's faction. Bill Dunne remained with the Communist Party when the Trotskyists were expelled, but three of his younger brothers, Vincent, Miles and Grant, joined the CLA. See Zumoff, 261; *Cannon and the Early Years*, 579g; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 10-11; Palmer, 35, 272; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 42.

<sup>63</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 44-45; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 10-11; Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, "Introduction" (July 1985), *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1932-34*, 11; James P. Cannon, "Our Appeal to the Party Members" (speech), December 17, 1928, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 67; Tanner (Part One).

<sup>64</sup> C. R. Hedlund, "From a Minnesota 'Renegade,'" *The Militant*, ii, no. 6 (March 15, 1929): 8, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1929/15mar1929.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2014); Vincent R. Dunne, "The Minneapolis Elections: Comrade C.R. Hedlund Is Our Candidate for Mayor," *The Militant*, vol. I, nos. 9-10 (May 1-15, 1929), <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/dunne/1929/05/mayorcand.htm> (accessed November 6, 2014).

Two months later the Minneapolis CLA ran Hedlund for mayor, and in the process the Trotskyists recognized and repudiated their previous support to the two-class party:

It is unquestionably true that the comrades of the Opposition, together with the whole Party, had a false perspective of the development of the Labor Party, having been taught over a long period by the leaders of the Party and the Comintern, the dangerous and reactionary theory of a political party based upon two classes—the workers [and] the farmers. Because of this numerous mistakes were made in the labor party work.<sup>65</sup>

The sharpest application of Trotsky's position on two-class parties came from the branch's leading cadre. Vincent Dunne penned an article in early 1930 titled "The Minnesota F.L.P.: Six Years of Confusion and Disappointment in a Two-Class Party," using language similar to that in the CLA's "Platform of the Communist Opposition" to oppose two-class parties, referring to the theory's Stalinist origins, to Trotsky's polemic in the Critique, and to the 1924 La Follette episode, which he focused on as the only source of practical lessons available at the time. In unambiguous terms, he denounced "the false idea of dual composition parties," and insisted that "the workers have nothing to gain from this horse play." Dunne depicted the Minnesota FLP as headed toward coalition with the Democratic Party, predicting a future of maneuvers and "bigger and better mergers."

Dunne's article also illustrated the Trotskyists' use of the "labor party" slogan in the Minnesota context. He concluded his polemic against the FLP by pointing the way forward to a real proletarian party:

Does all of the foregoing preclude the possibility of the workers making an advance politically, through a Labor Party? Not at all; the fact is, that millions of industrial workers still are bound to the political parties of the dominant capitalist groups. A Labor Party based upon workers' organizations, with a program permeated with the idea of the struggle of the classes, can serve as an instrument

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<sup>65</sup> V. R. Dunne, "The Minneapolis Elections."

in rallying the masses for a march toward the Marxian solution of the great problem.<sup>66</sup>

### ***Noyautage***

These *Militant* articles from 1929-30 suggest a clean break between the Trotskyists and the FLP, but while the prominent communists who openly opposed the Farmer-Labor leaders were certainly forced out, internal correspondence and articles in their public press later in 1930 indicate that some CLA supporters remained in the ranks of the FLP. The CP was in full sectarian retreat, and would play no further role in the FLP until 1935, but the communists of the CLA used their remaining presence in the party to attempt to *split* the proletarian forces from the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie and capitalist politicians who controlled the movement. This was their corrected “labor party” line in action, the first step toward building a true class party.

In May 1930 Max Shachtman consulted with Leon Trotsky, now in exile on the Turkish island of Prinkipo, about the CLA’s policy in Minnesota. Shachtman had read in the Platform of the Chinese Opposition (printed in the French Trotskyist journal *Contre le Courant*) that “Jamais, dans aucune condition, un Parti du proletariat ne peut entrer dans celui d’une autre classe, ni se meler en tant qu’organization a celui-ci” (“Never, in any condition, can a party of the proletariat enter into a party of another class, nor combine into an organization with one” [author’s translation]). This led Shachtman to ask Trotsky:

whether such a declaration, in your opinion, also holds true for a Party like a Labor Party. This is not only a theoretical, or prospective question with us, but, at least in one State (Minnesota) it is quite actuelle: there our comrades are active in the official Farmer-Labor Party, where they have already formed a so-called labor bloc for the purpose of splitting the F. L. P. and dividing the workers’ section from that of the Farmers.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Vincent R. Dunne, “The Minnesota F.L.P.: Six Years of Confusion and Disappointment in a Two-Class Party,” *The Militant*, vol. III, no. 3 (January 18, 1930): 3, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/dunne/1930/01/flp.htm> (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Max Shachtman to Leon Trotsky, May 2, 1930, Trotsky Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, 3.

This is the first recorded instance of the FLP being categorized as a labor party and not a bourgeois two-class party. Shachtman's confusing modification to his organization's theoretical understanding of the FLP was soon echoed by his comrades in Minnesota, who were facing the immediate pressures of their fraction work in the FLP. However, the issue's significance for Shachtman lay in the CLA's emerging debate on the labor party slogan, which became a factional football in the "Dog Days" fight (addressed below).

Responding to Shachtman's letter, Trotsky ruled out the possibility of "organizational mergers" with definitively reformist workers parties, giving as an example the German Social Democracy, but stated that "it is possible that there are or will arise transitional formations which encompass the working masses but have no definite program and no corresponding discipline and hence leave open the possibility of organizational but, in any case, temporary ties." This would be a valid tactic only in certain situations, as "the objective conditions and the characteristics of the labor party in question as well as the nature of the organizational ties must be concretely investigated and determined." Trotsky saw such organizational tactics as beyond the scope of the Americans' work in the Minnesota FLP: "It seems to me that this is more like 'noyautage' [fraction work], that is, putting out feelers to other organizations, than an organizational merger involving the party."<sup>68</sup>

Only one article in the *Militant* in this period hints at the CLA's splitting tactics at work in the Minnesota FLP. Reacting to Floyd B. Olson and his supporters gaining control of the FLP, the CLA published an unsigned article on a March 1930 convention in St. Paul titled "Minnesota's 'Farmer-Labor' Meet: The 'Practical' Politicians and Business Men Take Charge." The article treats this bourgeois party as if it were just then being taken over by bourgeois politicians: "the small group of political adventurers... have in devious ways attained power in the organization"; "the organization was

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<sup>68</sup> Leon Trotsky to Max Shachtman, June 20, 1930, *Writings of Trotsky, Supplement 1929-33*, 43.

appropriated by the banker-farmer-office-holder delegates and turned over to Floyd B. Olson.” The article complained that the overwhelming majority of the delegates had been picked by the FLP leadership “for the task of keeping out the platform and program of the Left wing and trade union elements.” FLP Senator Lommen “brushed aside the entire document presented by the trade union workers” and instead “brought out the most reactionary platform that has [ever] been adopted by a F.L. gathering in Minnesota.” Referring to the CLA supporters still active in the FLP, the article continued, “Communists and Left wingers were denied any voice in the proceedings. The Left wing workers were unable to have their platform resolution even considered.” It concluded:

In the coming campaign and in the following period the Minnesota workers have the task before them to salvage the movement, to keep their unions out of the hands of the clique now in control of the F. L. P.; and to shape a course toward a Labor party, which must be national in scope, based upon the unions and other workers’ organizations and with a class-struggle platform. The Communists in this movement must undertake to clarify and educate the masses and to steer them towards Communism.<sup>69</sup>

When the *Militant* addressed the FLP again three months later, it sharply condemned the party, stating that “this entire Farmer-Labor Party movement has nothing constructive to offer the American working class.” It attacked the “false conception” of a farmer-labor party that governed the CP’s work up to 1928, denouncing the Stalinist opportunism behind “All the efforts which have been wasted in the last ten years by the Communist movement to build and maintain the Farmer-Labor parties.” The same article entertains the possibility that the working class could take over the Minnesota FLP. As with any two-class party, it would soon “be forced to surrender its leadership to the workers or the big bourgeoisie.” But apparently echoing Shachtman’s view in his May letter, it also asserted that the FLP was a labor party: “Like all labor parties of the reformist character, the [Farmer-Labor Association] simply intends to function as a party of a subordinate class to ask for favors from the ruling class.” Indeed, Olson’s platform

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<sup>69</sup> “Minnesota’s ‘Farmer-Labor’ Meet: The ‘Practical’ Politicians and Business Men Take Charge,” *The Militant*, vol. III, no. 15 (April 12, 1930): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1930/12apr1930.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2014).

for this FLP convention was so “mild” that “Democrats and Republicans were made to feel comfortable with it,” and motions put forward by dissident leftists calling for American diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union and for government ownership of industry were quashed. These facts did not, however, lead the Trotskyists to reassert the fundamentally bourgeois character of the FLP.<sup>70</sup>

There is no evidence that the CLA’s fraction work inside the FLP during this period was fruitful, either in splitting forces away or in winning individual recruits. Their ambiguity on the class nature of the FLP was not linked to their work inside it, as it was beginning in 1935. Having members from the pre-1928 period who had escaped expulsions still inside a bourgeois two-class party would not have been considered unprincipled, and the general absence of recorded controversy about this “noyautage” suggests that their program for splitting the party was considered the only viable option in that situation. In any case, the Trotskyists’ interest in the Minnesota FLP was negligible compared to their national orientation to the CP, which they continued to approach with campaigns of critical support and appeals for reentry. With the American labor

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<sup>70</sup> It is possible that the political position and social composition of the Minnesota FLP during these years could give the impression that the working class held decisive weight in the party. Farmer-Labor organizations elsewhere in the US functioned as de-facto Socialist Party affiliates; in the 1932 elections the Minnesota FLP agreed to not officially endorse either the Democrats or Republicans (though Olson himself did support Franklin D. Roosevelt for president), and in exchange the SP backed the entire FLP slate. On the composition of the FLP, one historian has found that from 1926 to 1933, “unions which joined as units probably provided the majority of the organization’s paying members.” Late in this period there were between 6,000 and 8,500 union members in the Farmer-Labor Association, while individual membership through local clubs did not exceed 1,500. The CLA would not have been familiar with these statistics, which were compiled decades later, but their regular work in Minnesota’s urban centers – where most FLP union workers were based – could have warped their assessment. In any case, the relative weight of unions in the FLP was overturned by the shift to corporate funding in 1932 and Olson’s 1933 drive to establish urban Ward Clubs as a base for himself against the unions within the party. This brought in 14,000 new members by 1934, dominating the total of about 20,000. In 1930, however, these changes had not yet begun, and the Minnesota FLP may have appeared to the American Trotskyists to be qualitatively similar to the labor parties of other nations. See A. Ekstrom, “Northwest Experiences: Farmer-Laborism in Action,” *The Militant*, vol. III, no. 27 (July 26, 1930): 3, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1930/28jul1930.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014); Ross, 322; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 63; Holbo, 302-303; Gieske, 130.

movement largely moribund before 1933, they had no opportunity to apply such tactics to any other party.<sup>71</sup>

The CLA's ambiguity on the class nature of farmer-laborism may have fed into their willingness to support a new farmer-labor newspaper in 1930, but after they corrected their course the Trotskyists again hardened against this brand of populist politics. At some point between 1930 and 1934 their work in the FLP must have come to an end, as all references to it disappear from the *Militant*, and the Trotskyists' discussions on fraction work in 1935-36 clearly indicate that by that time they no longer had a presence in the party.

### ***The "Left-Right Bloc" for a New Farmer-Labor Newspaper***

In the fall of 1930, the CLA Minneapolis branch endorsed a plan for a new Northwest farmer-labor newspaper, the majority temporarily following the lead of longtime communist and founding CLAer T.J. O'Flaherty. The National Committee (NC) in New York intervened, publicly repudiating the Minneapolis branch's actions, and fought to win the local members back to what the leadership understood to be *principled opposition* to two-class political formations. O'Flaherty parted ways with the Trotskyist movement over this fight, but the rest of the Minneapolis comrades were convinced by the leadership in the center, the mistake and correction hardening them against such opportunist endeavors in their immediate future.

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<sup>71</sup> The question of conducting fraction work in a bourgeois two-class party was also addressed in an exchange of letters between Trotsky and Harold Isaacs in 1937. When Isaacs asserted that the Chinese Communists' entry into the Kuomintang in 1922 was a betrayal, Trotsky responded: "the entering in itself in 1922 was not a crime, possibly not even a mistake, especially in the south, under the assumption that the Kuomintang at this time had a number of workers and the young Communist party was weak and composed almost entirely of intellectuals. (This is true for 1922?) In this case the entry would have been an episodic step to independency, analogous to a certain degree to your entering the Socialist Party. The question is what was their purpose in entering and what was their subsequent policy?" See Leon Trotsky to Harold Isaacs, November 1, 1937, Trotsky Collection, Box 38, Hoover Institution Archives, 2.

The new newspaper was not connected to the Minnesota FLP, but was initiated by the newly-formed Farmer-Labor Party of Montana, a grouping in Plentywood around the *Producers News*, the old Non-Partisan League newspaper edited by Charles “Red Flag” Taylor. O’Flaherty was already involved with the *Producers News*, and proposed that the CLA join the Montana farmer-laborites in a bloc of left-wing tendencies including Finnish cooperatives recently expelled from the CP, disaffected former members of the Minnesota FLP, and the Lovestoneites – the expelled right wing of the CP led by Jay Lovestone. The explicit purpose of this bloc was to launch a new Minneapolis newspaper to help build the farmer-labor movement throughout the Northwest.<sup>72</sup>

The NC’s letter to the Minneapolis branch, drafted by Max Shachtman and printed in the *Militant* under the headline “On the Proposal for a New Farmer-Labor Party Fraud,” took an uncompromising stand against left-right blocs and against two-class parties, drawing on Trotsky’s 1924 intervention and the CLA’s founding programmatic positions, which reflected a consciousness of immediate past experience they would lose in later years.

Shachtman’s letter first reasserted that the CLA would maintain its orientation toward the Communist Party – the Trotskyists maintained their demand for reentry until 1933 – and would continue to give critical support in Minnesota elections to the CP and *not* to the Farmer-Labor Party. He characterized the former as “the only Party of the proletariat,” and the latter as a petty-bourgeois party which “represents and defends the interests of the petty-bourgeoisie in the cities and the better off elements among the farmers – the latter dominating the [FLP] in alliance with the corrupt trade union bureaucracy and careerist bourgeois politicians.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Library of Congress, “About The Producers News (Plentywood, Mont.) 1918-1937,” <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053305/> (accessed November 18, 2016); *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 433n; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 53.

<sup>73</sup> Max Shachtman, “On the Proposal for a New Farmer-Labor Party Fraud,” *The Militant*, vol. III, no. 32 (November 1, 1930): 3, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1930/01nov1930.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2014).

The letter quoted the Minneapolis branch's minutes of August 9, which documented O'Flaherty claiming that their new farmer-labor paper would cover class struggle with a "national and international perspective." It would "solicit the support of prominent Farmer-Laborites like Lundeen" (a former Congressman and future US Senator), but it would "not be the organ of any faction." Simultaneously, O'Flaherty would work for the new paper "in harmony" with the leadership of the CLA. Shachtman demanded, "What kind of a perspective? Lovestone's? Ours? The two differ sharply. Or will its 'national and international perspective,' i.e., its political outlook and policy, be neither Lovestone's nor ours nor that of the official [Communist] Party? Then whose will it be?" The intervention was partly based on principled opposition to left-right blocs:<sup>74</sup>

We think the envisaged composition of the editorial board is a guarantee that the paper will be anything but 'in harmony with the local E.C. and the N.E.C. of the League.' How will we be able to assume responsibility – without indelibly compromising ourselves – for a paper which sways helplessly between the Left Opposition and Lovestone or the Superior Finnish movement, or the Lundeenites or similar nondescript elements... The paper will either be torn to pieces by contending viewpoints as soon as an important [question] arises, or else it will go along with the Right wing combination represented by Lovestone, Halonen and others, and compel us to fight it openly from the beginning.

Recognizing that the "proposed paper is only the literary expression of the other proposal: the formation of a 'Farmer-Labor Party movement in the Northwest,'" Shachtman emphasized the historical and international significance of the tendency's opposition to two-class parties:

What becomes of our principled position on 'two class parties' in this situation? Has it lost its validity? We think not. Do the adventures with Raditch in Jugoslavia mean nothing? Does the criminal gamble of Stalin-Bucharin with the

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<sup>74</sup> After Communist Parties internationally had expelled both their left (Trotskyist) and right (Bukharinite) wings, some of Trotsky's supporters in other countries entered into unprincipled "left-right" blocs, resulting in the destruction of some national sections of the nascent International Left Opposition. Cannon and the leadership of the CLA fought to keep the American section from repeating these mistakes, and in general they sharply distinguished themselves from the Lovestone group, which invariably supported the AFL trade-union bureaucracy against the CP. See PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 53.

‘four class’ party of the Kuo Min Tang, which wrung the neck of the Chinese revolution and set back the world revolution for years, bear no warning for us? Does the ‘two class party’ formed by Stalin-Bucharin-Roy in India, which has left the Indian proletariat without revolutionary leadership especially in these critical days, teach no lessons? And finally, are the instructive and rich experiences with ‘two class parties’ in the United States, from 1924 to this day, to be lost not only upon Lovestone and the Stalinists but upon us Marxists as well?<sup>75</sup>

He then referred his comrades to the sharp conclusions reached on the FLP in recent articles by Minneapolis CLAers, especially those by Vincent Dunne and C. R. Hedlund cited above.

Shachtman closed by invoking Trotsky’s 1924 fight to pull the American Communists back from supporting the farmer-labor movement:

It is asked: What role have we to play in this ‘movement’? That was the question put by the great strategists of the Pepper-Lovestone-Bedacht school in relation to the LaFollette movement. Only with the aid of the Comintern, at that time under the direct pressure of the Russian Opposition, was the correct answer given. We can give the same reply now. Our role is to disclose the character of this movement publicly to the workers, to reveal its adventurist and opportunist nature, to fight intransigently against its deceptions. If Pepperism in 1924 was a tragedy, this pitiful caricature of 1930 will undoubtedly be, and is, a farce. We want nothing to do with it.<sup>76</sup>

In the following months the CLA grappled with the significance of the Minneapolis branch’s wobble toward farmer-laborism in the wider context of opportunist tendencies in the organization’s ranks. In a letter to Vincent Dunne, Cannon worried over “signs of the approach of an ideological crisis in our ranks,” one of which was the recent farmer-labor affair in Dunne’s branch. Cannon insisted that the CLA’s perspective had to be “an intransigent fight for principle as a faction of the Party,” noting that “Under the given conditions this view condemns us for the moment to the position of a comparatively small group and decrees our activity to be mainly propagandistic and critical.” Cannon squarely confronted the fact that “perhaps for a long time, perhaps for years yet—we will occupy the position of a minority.” He understood that “This

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<sup>75</sup> Shachtman, “On the Proposal,” 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

perspective is a hard one and so is the fight. But we can escape from it only at the cost of principle, and this means, in the end, disintegration and defeat. *Our strength is our platform!* If we forget that, we are lost.”<sup>77</sup>

Elements of CLA were having problems remembering this and sought “a way out of the situation by a shortcut under the enticing but thoroughly false slogan of ‘mass work.’” Cannon recounted Gerry Allard’s quit to rejoin the CP and organize Illinois miners in 1929, James Blugerman’s capitulation to the CP in Toronto in 1930, and ongoing sympathy in the New York CLA branch for Right Oppositionist Albert Weisbord, all of which were examples of opportunistic pursuits of mass work. Cannon continued, “The fourth example is the recent exchange about the Farmer-Labor Party. I don’t know to what extent the comrades in Minneapolis played with this project nor how much real difference you have with our letter after thorough reflection.” The most disturbing feature for Cannon was “the reaction to the proposal in the Minneapolis Opposition ranks” – that is, the impulse in the ranks to follow O’Flaherty into “mass work” in the farmer-labor movement. He insisted: “We should not gloss this over. Rather we should think very seriously as to what causes were at the bottom of it.”<sup>78</sup>

Cannon reiterated this point while debating Weisbord at a December 1930 New York branch meeting: “Impatience with the slow development of the Opposition in the principled struggle and the desire to get on with ‘mass work’ on a big scale was the motivation for the great and unpardonable errors of some of the Minnesota comrades in the recent Farmer-Labor Party affair.” Pointing to the danger of the CLA losing members to much larger political forces, Cannon stated, “We haven’t had many capitulators in America, thanks to the firm principled foundations upon which we built the movement, but every one of them saluted us with this slogan before he departed.

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<sup>77</sup> James P. Cannon to Vincent R. Dunne, December 16, 1930 and January 5, 1931, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 289-290.

<sup>78</sup> Cannon to V. Dunne, December 16, 1930 and January 5, 1931, 290-92.

Every one who deserted the banner of the Opposition ran away under a cloud of dust about 'mass work.'"<sup>79</sup>

Two months later, it was reported to the CLA's National Executive Committee in New York that the Minneapolis branch was finally "overcoming the difficulties" caused by their involvement in the farmer-labor newspaper. Later in 1931, T.J. O'Flaherty and a second former comrade, Oliver Carlson, sent the CLA a letter seeking readmission to the organization. The organization's response was appropriately strict: they demanded that the two state their current positions on the farmer-labor movement and the NEC's statement repudiating O'Flaherty's opportunist activities. There is no evidence that either O'Flaherty or Carlson were able to rejoin the politically toughened CLA.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Second Conference Reversal on the Labor Party Question***

In September 1931 the CLA held its second national conference, at which it dealt primarily with international questions, its relationship to the CP, and the labor party question. This last issue had been the subject of continued controversy since the founding conference, and now, with Trotsky's agreement, the CLA reversed its position and dropped the slogan. The Trotskyists' line change on the labor party compounded their theoretical confusion, as the conference theses codified the conflation of a labor party and a farmer-labor party – categorizing both as a "bourgeois workers' party" – and left open the possibility of working within either type of party without distinguishing between the two.

This round of the labor party debate took place in the distorting context of the "Dog Days" faction fight, a largely personalist clique fight within the Trotskyist movement between 1931 and 1933. This fight presaged the 1936-37 political fight during the SP entry and the 1940 split over defense of the Soviet Union with a nearly

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<sup>79</sup> James P. Cannon, "Our Policy and Present Tasks" (outline of speech), December 23, 1930, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 308.

<sup>80</sup> Minutes of CLA National Executive Committee, February 2 and July 3, 1931, Albert Glotzer Papers, box 6, folder 23, Hoover Institution Archives.

identical factional lineup: Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer against Cannon and those who supported his continued leadership. Initially the faction fight had an important political content, with the Cannon group supporting Trotsky's positions on international questions and the Shachtman group opposing them, but after Shachtman was won over to Trotsky's arguments there were no principled or programmatic issues in dispute. Yet the Shachtman group continued its efforts to topple the "Cannon regime" until 1933, when the upturn in American class struggle finally created new opportunities for proletarian revolutionists, opening the way for reconciliation and new collaborative work.<sup>81</sup>

In the early stages of the developing factionalism Shachtman was pursuing a resolution to the labor party controversy. The exchange of letters between Shachtman and Trotsky in the spring of 1930, cited above, was the continuation of a discussion that Shachtman initiated when he had visited Trotsky in Prinkipo in March of that year. In his response to Shachtman, Trotsky did not object to the characterization of the Minnesota FLP as a "labor party," though he had certainly been unambiguous in his analysis of farmer-laborism in his 1928 Critique. There is no evidence from the 1931 debate that any of Trotsky's American supporters attempted to reassert, to themselves or to Trotsky, that this Minnesota FLP was fundamentally a continuation of the farmer-labor movement that had supported La Follette in 1924; given the multitude of far more pressing concerns for Leon Trotsky in this period, it is quite plausible that the Americans' confusion over the class nature of farmer-laborism began without his noticing.

Leading up to the second conference Shachtman and his faction supporters began to argue that it was wrong to call for a labor party, rejecting the supposed inevitability of the reformist stage of political development that it represented. If both a revolutionary and a reformist course were open to American workers, communists should openly fight to build a revolutionary party, not an inherently reformist one. The CP had dropped the "labor party" cause in 1928, and by 1930 Jay Lovestone's Right Opposition group was

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<sup>81</sup> Palmer, 279-280, 283; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 2-4, 73.

agitating for a “labor party” that would have constituted a political bloc between themselves and the trade-union bureaucracy against the Communist Party. With the slump in class struggle there was no mass sentiment for an independent workers party for these forces to intersect, as there was in later years. Therefore the call for a labor party would have been understood by the CP membership as a reformist attack on the communist movement. As an expelled faction of the Party fighting for reinstatement, the Trotskyists could have damaged their cause by maintaining the slogan. Given this conjuncture, Trotsky supported Shachtman’s proposal to reverse the CLA’s line. The membership, including Cannon, was convinced by Shachtman’s arguments with little fanfare, but Shachtman treated this as a factional victory against Cannon, using the prestige of Trotsky’s support as a cudgel against the Cannon group in subsequent attacks.<sup>82</sup>

In codifying Shachtman’s position, the theses passed by the second conference reexamined the early communist movement’s use of the “labor party” in order to reject the slogan in absolute terms. They found opportunist conceptions behind it from the beginning, linking it to the La Follette affair: “Not by accident did this shameful period in the history of American Communism embrace also the disgraceful ‘maneuver’ with the petty bourgeois La Follette movement, and the flourishing of the ‘two-class party’ theory and practise.” They concluded that “All these conceptions and practises must be thrown overboard, because they were originally wrong.” Reflecting Shachtman’s denigration of the CLA’s roots in the Cannon faction of the CP, the theses alleged that “The Left Opposition, at its formative stage, leaned in the direction of this reformist perspective

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<sup>82</sup> PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 38-9; James P. Cannon, “A Reply to the Discussion,” *The Militant*, September 12, 1931, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 366; Martin Abern, Albert Glotzer, and Max Shachtman, “The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect,” June 4, 1932, *Dog Days*, 254-55.

which constituted to a certain extent an uncritical carry-over of the preceding group struggle in the party.”<sup>83</sup>

The theses also opposed farmer-labor parties, but in doing so they also codified Shachtman’s conflation of labor party and farmer-labor party. Addressing how reformist tendencies functioned as obstacles to working-class radicalization, they stated:

On the economic field, these barriers are represented in the trade union movement by the A. F. of L. bureaucracy, their socialist assistants, and the ‘Left wing’ progressive toadys [sic] of the Muste school. On the political field, most of these elements seek to erect a barrier in the form of a ‘Labor’ or ‘Farmer-Labor’ party, that is, a bourgeois workers’ party in the image of the British Labor Party.<sup>84</sup>

While they correctly understood that a two-class party could not lead a proletarian revolution, the Trotskyists had formally discarded the understanding that it was by nature a bourgeois party, on the other side of the class line from any type of workers party.

After dealing the question of advocacy of a labor party, the conference dealt with the question of potentially working inside such a formation, stating, “were there a mass movement which would organize a labor party, the Communists would have to take up the question of working within it as a revolutionary nucleus. But this is a different matter entirely.” They appeared to have left all tactical options open: “should a labor party come into existence upon a working class and trade union basis it would become necessary for us to consider our relation as Communists towards it, depending upon the general conditions existing.” However, the absence of any such developments made these tactical speculations irrelevant in this period.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> “Draft Thesis of the N.C. of the Communist League for the Third [sic] National Convention,” Supplement to *The Militant*, vol. IV, no. 12 (June 15, 1931): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1931/v4n12-sup-jun-15-1931.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2015); “Thesis for the Pre-Conference Discussion,” *The Militant*, vol. IV, no. 16 (July 25, 1931): 5, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1931/v4n16-jul-25-1931.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2015).

<sup>84</sup> “Thesis for the Pre-Conference Discussion,” 4.

<sup>85</sup> “Thesis for the Pre-Conference Discussion,” 5; Arne Swabeck, “Second National Conference Marks Step Forward,” *The Militant*, vol. IV, no. 26 (October 10, 1931), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/swabeck/1931/10/conference.htm> (accessed August 25, 2015).

Leon Trotsky read the CLA's second conference theses and found the new position on the labor party "excellent in every part." The following spring he contributed his own reasoning for the turn, later published as "The Labor Party Question in the United States," in which he argued:

since the United States, in the period from 1921 to 1924, has already had an important rehearsal in the creation of a labor or farmer-labor party, a resurrection of a similar movement cannot be a simple repetition of that experience, but a far more pregnant and more crystalized movement, either under the guidance of a revolutionary Communist party or under the guidance of reformist elements against a growing Communist party. And if even in 1921-24 the Communist Party did not find great possibilities for independent action inside the organization of an inchoate labor party, it would have less possibility in the new phase of an analogous movement.

Trotsky continued: "if the creation of a labor party would prevent, in a certain period, great successes of communism, our elementary duty must be, not to proclaim the progressiveness of the labor party, but its insufficiency, ambiguity, and limitedness, and its historical role as a hindrance to the proletarian revolution."

Trotsky's reference to the La Follette affair as "the creation of a labor or farmer-labor party" appears to echo Shachtman's mixing of the two concepts, but after thoroughly analyzing the "labor party" Trotsky ends his letter with a single, final point: "It is not necessary to say that the idea of a farmer-labor party is a treacherous mockery of Marxism." This should have reminded his American supporters that a two-class party was fundamentally different, a political force from the bourgeoisie's camp. But from this point forward, the distinction was effectively lost.<sup>86</sup>

The conditions that prevailed in the American workers movement over the next seven years generally militated against any further use of the labor party slogan. Once the upsurge of class struggle in 1934 opened possibilities for real mass work, and fusion

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<sup>86</sup> A great deal of confusion continued to surround the "labor party" question in this period, especially after Trotsky appeared to make contradictory statements on the subject in an interview with the *New York Times*. See: Leon Trotsky, "The Labor Party Question in the United States," May 19, 1932, *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1932*, 94-97; Albert Glotzer to Leon Trotsky, April 5, 1932, *Dog Days*, 196; Leon Trotsky to Albert Glotzer, May 1, 1932, *Dog Days*, 219.

with the Musteites created a qualitatively stronger tendency, the Trotskyists had to treat their own organization as potentially a burgeoning mass revolutionary workers party. In 1936-37 their entry into the Socialist Party required building and supporting that party. In both cases, raising the call for a “labor party” would have been counterposed to their immediate political needs and practical organizational developments. When the Stalinists put the popular front to work for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, the “labor party” came to mean class-collaborationist fronts for the New Deal Democratic Party. Only on the exceptional political terrain of the Northwest, where the Trotskyists continued to grapple with a two-class party, did the slogan remain relevant.

### ***Dog Days Factionalism in the Minneapolis Branch***

The only other notable product of the faction fight relating to the farmer-labor question is a singular piece of evidence of internal debate in the Minneapolis branch. Carl Cowl, the primary Shachtman faction supporter in the city, produced a document in July 1932 that at first glance appears to be a self-righteous defense of the Trotskyists’ founding position on the FLP and a stern rebuke of deeply ingrained opportunist impulses to support FLP candidates.<sup>87</sup>

Cowl railed against perceived bureaucratic abuses by the Cannon leadership in New York, and against Minneapolis branch leaders Vincent Dunne and Carl Skoglund – both stalwart Cannon supporters – for attempting to suppress the membership’s discussion of “the FLPism which has not yet been cleaned out of our ranks and which constantly crops up in new forms.” He claimed that in 1930, while they still had supporters in the FLP, some comrades advocated raising the slogan “Support the FLP into power and let them expose themselves.” He mocked their perspective of splitting the FLP along class lines: “Dunne’s well-known theories of successive left-wing splits in the FLP as the ‘role’ of the LO has lain strangely [quiescent] in recent times altho [sic] he

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<sup>87</sup> PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 77.

has at no time clearly disassociated himself from this idea, and might easily slip back into it unless definitive bars are laid down by the organization.”

Cowl’s attack drew a direct connection between opportunism toward the FLP and the CLA’s application of the “united front” tactic:

We have a totally wrong conception of the United Front in Minneapolis. A totally opportunist one. [R]epeatedly, almost on every new issue, comes proposals [for] ‘united fronts’ with this or that prominent trade unionist or Farmer-Labor Politician. For example Comrade Dunne’s famous election ‘united front’ with the FLP legislative candidates Maynard Peterson and Walter Frank whereby, if these skates would agree to accept certain minimum demands for the reform of the FLP they would receive the support of the League in the elections.

Cowl argued that failing to fight independently in their own name had seriously damaged the CLA’s work in the Minnesota labor movement: “Probably the biggest single factor responsible for our present loss of influence in the [trade unions] is our false conception of the Left Wing. For years we built a movement around an irresponsible adventurer like [Walter] Frank, concealing our face, meeting with him as an individual and allowing him to be the spokesman of the Left Wing.” Their maneuvers, Cowl noted, backfired when Frank took a trip to the Soviet Union and turned against the Trotskyists.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> This document leveled a great many charges, referring to several episodes that are barely (or not at all) covered by other sources and thus require further research. For example, Cowl accused Vincent Dunne of having advocated “a conference of the ‘left’, including the Lovestonites [sic], Holonenytes [sic], FLPites (left) ‘and all others not under the Stalinist whip’ (I.E. [sic] the exclusion of the Party),” which, like O’Flaherty’s newspaper, would have constituted an unprincipled left-right bloc against the Communist Party. The minutes of the National Executive Committee in February, March and April 1931 indicate that the CLA leadership was aware that the Minneapolis branch had initiated two recent conferences: “a progressive trade union conference” which “adopted several of our proposals for the unemployment situation,” and a defensive united-front conference including “various progressive labor elements” after police repression had “almost forced [the CP] underground” and broken up CLA meetings and shut down its hall. The minutes do not mention the Right Oppositionist and farmer-labor elements listed by Cowl. The NEC (which included Shachtman, though attendance was not recorded in the meeting minutes) endorsed both the Minneapolis branch’s actions without controversy. Also, Arne Swabeck (a Cannon supporter) reported to the NEC on April 13 that the Minneapolis branch had “organized a left wing in the trade unions”; he praised the branch, stating that “Our movement there is on the upgrade, the work of the branch being carried on effectively.” There is no evidence of discussion or dissent on this issue. See Carl Cowl, “Report to the Minneapolis Branch on the Internal Controversy (Synopsis),” n.d. [marked “mid-July 1932”], Max Shachtman Papers, TAM 103, box 6, folder 18, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, 1-3; Minutes of CLA National Executive Committee, February 2, March 9, April 13, April 27, 1931, Glotzer Papers, box 6, folder 23.

This “totally wrong conception” of the united front tactic was no aberration, as the American Trotskyists had uncritically carried over the Communist Party’s former perversion of the united front – the strategic orientation toward political blocs with “progressives.” Despite the sharpened opposition to “progressives” in Cannon and Dunne’s early *Militant* articles, the CLA continued to have problems, and Trotsky had criticized it in March 1930 for supporting “progressive” union bureaucrats in the coalfields of southern Illinois. They sought to correct this weakness; in one speech Cannon stated that “‘progressives’ are not a third tendency between procapitalist labor bureaucrats and communists, but are seeking to lead the labor radicalization into procapitalist channels.” In the *Militant* the following month Cannon cited and reiterated key points from his 1929 “The Communists and the ‘Progressives,’” concluding that “the estimate of them should be written in harsher words of condemnation. And this applies to the entire progressive leadership *without any exceptions*. Every single one of them, from Muste to Howat, has played the contemptible role of decoy for the reactionaries.” The CLA’s 1931 theses capture their contradiction, attacking these elements while upholding “the absolute need of, and excellent possibilities for the organization of the Left wing within these unions and for conducting the struggle for Left wing leadership.”<sup>89</sup>

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Unfortunately there is thus far no known evidence of a response to Cowl’s charges, which might have shed light on the incidents he cites. There is also no evidence of any consistent effort by Cowl to correct the CLA’s program with regard to the Farmer-Labor Party; instead, his references to the FLP serve as factional mud to sling at the “opportunist” CLA leadership. The bottom line for Cowl was tearing down Cannon supporters and glorifying Shachtman; naturally he extolled Shachtman for drafting the 1930 NC letter repudiating the branch’s new farmer-labor newspaper. Moreover, it appears that Carl Cowl was in fact a consistent ultraleftist, as the same political impulses driving his 1932 polemic against Cannon and Dunne led him to follow Hugo Oehler’s sectarian split out of the Trotskyist movement in 1935. Further research is required in order to establish the facts of the episodes referenced by Cowl, and to determine how Cowl’s accusations were understood and dealt with in the branch. There is no sign that his charges gained much traction; aside from some comrades among the youth, Cowl won no support for the Shachtman clique in Minneapolis. See PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 77-78.

<sup>89</sup> (Emphasis original). Cannon brought into the CLA the hard stance toward “progressives” that had developed with the Cannon-Foster faction’s rejection of the farmer-labor movement after the La Follette campaign, when Cannon had declared, “We are not progressives, but revolutionists.” In “The Communists and the ‘Progressives,’” published in the *Militant* one month after the 1929 “Platform,” Cannon attacked “progressive” trade-union leaders and social democrats because their role,

The contradiction led the Trotskyists into further opportunist stumbles, as evidenced by their continued softness in 1932-33 on the Illinois bureaucrats in their new form, the Progressive Miners of America. Another example is a 1933 article by Cannon that was supposedly meant as a critique of “Left wing” union leadership, but which itself stayed completely within the framework of trade unionism, mentioning neither the need for revolutionary Marxist leadership, nor a vanguard party, nor socialist revolution.<sup>90</sup>

Regardless, during these years the objective dearth of class struggle and the low political level of their opponents in the workers movement largely barred the CLA from

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“objectively speaking, is to express [working-class] radicalization in words, to harness it in action, and to head it off from any real collision with the capitalists and the AFL machine.” He exposed the sectarian CP for abandoning the united front tactic altogether, merely denouncing and then ignoring labor “progressives.” He also criticized the CLA for its recent mistakes in implementing the tactic, as it had rehabilitated one discredited “progressive” labor bureaucrat and taken a “noncritical attitude” toward miner union leaders, which undercut the militancy and communist influence among these workers.

Vincent Dunne, swimming in the sea of Northwest farmer-laborism, had also initially taken a ruthless attitude toward “progressives” and those leftist opponents who tailed them. He wrote of the FLP “blossoming” under the guidance of the “labor-farmer-compromiser type of leader, whose one burning desire seems to be junction, by any crossover, with some form of ‘progressive’ or ‘liberal’ political movement.” Dunne mocked their perspective of rapprochement with the Democratic Party, “hoping against hope that the national ‘progressives’ will come to their aid and lead them into the green fields of a new ‘liberal’ movement on a national scale.”

However, by failing to reevaluate the CP’s old strategy of pursuing blocs with “progressives” in the name of the “united front,” the CLA leadership showed that it had not fully assimilated a key feature of Trotsky’s communist politics. See James P. Cannon, “Our Aims and Tactics in the Trade Unions” (speech), July 27, 1924, *Cannon and the Early Years*, 222; James P. Cannon, “The Communists and the ‘Progressives,’” *The Militant*, March 1, 1929, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 131-32; V. R. Dunne, “The Minnesota F.L.P.: Six Years,” 3; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 64-70; James P. Cannon, “Limits of the United Front,” *The Militant*, April 1, 1931, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 337-8; “Draft of the Thesis on the Trade Union Question,” *The Militant*, vol. IV, no. 21 (August 29, 1931): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1931/v4n21-aug-29-1931.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>90</sup> Cannon’s messages to the American working class were one the subjects of factional clashes in this period. In 1933 Cannon delivered a speech to Illinois miners without identifying himself as a CLA spokesman, which Shachtman saw as further evidence that Cannon was an inveterate opportunist. It was in response to this episode that Trotsky wrote his powerful “Trade-Union Problems in America,” which laid out shrewd guidelines for communist work in trade unions while warning of the many pitfalls involved. His warnings about the revolutionary party’s “picked detachments” adapting and degenerating into opportunist “‘tailism’ (a real and serious danger)” would become relevant for the Trotskyists in 1934-35. See PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 65-70; James P. Cannon, “The Left Wing Needs a New Policy and a New Leadership,” *The Militant*, vol. VI, no. 43 (September 16, 1933), *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1932-34*, 265-269; Leon Trotsky, “Trade-Union Problems in America,” September 23, 1933, *Dog Days*, 591-593.

pursing united fronts or political blocs of any kind with anyone. Therefore the strategic orientation toward “progressives” was effectively not operational and had very little impact on their public work. Moreover, “In the early 1930s, ‘progressive’ elements in the AFL unions were generally organized by A.J. Muste’s Conference for Progressive Labor Action, the Socialist Party, or the Lovestoneites. As an expelled faction of the Communist Party, the League was careful not to enter into blocs with these forces against the Party and its red unions.”<sup>91</sup>

### ***Hard Work in Minneapolis***

Based on the Trotskyists’ newspaper of record, it appears that after the affair with O’Flaherty’s farmer-labor newspaper – and contrary to the charges raised by Carl Cowl – the Minneapolis branch of the CLA maintained a consistently revolutionary working-class line in its political struggles with the farmer-labor movement in the early 1930s. Their propaganda in the *Militant* occasionally revealed the theoretical unclarity on the class character of the FLP, but on the whole the Minneapolis Trotskyists demonstrated a clear opposition to any populist party, a Marxist understanding of the capitalist state even when run by such a party, and consistent critical support to the CP that aimed to return it to its Leninist roots.

In the spring of 1931 the CLA ran comrade John Brinda for Alderman of Minneapolis’ First Ward because the CP refused to run against the FLP candidate. The Trotskyists’ hard opposition to the FLP was perfectly clear and in this instance free of illusions about its class nature:

We urged the party comrades to put up a candidate, promising our support, especially since the Farmer-Labor party had filed a candidate. But they told us this question was already settled... We could not agree that the Farmer-Labor

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<sup>91</sup> The *Dog Days* introduction continues, “But the strategy of building a ‘left wing’ with progressives in the trade unions impacted the work of the American Trotskyists later in the decade.” Indeed, the “left-wing” bloc with the “progressives” of the farmer-labor movement would be a central feature of the Trotskyists’ opportunist trajectory toward the Minnesota FLP beginning in late 1934. See PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 65-6.

party should go unchallenged in this proletarian ward. Furthermore, of the 11 candidates filed, there was no representative of organized labor, no spokesman of the working class.

The Stalinists slandered Brinda, claiming that he was “an agent of the bosses” and an ally of the FLP, to which the CLA responded, “Any worker who reads the *Militant*, or followed our campaign against the Farmer-Labor Party last summer on the streets of Minneapolis knows this is a lie.”<sup>92</sup>

In the spring of 1932 the Minneapolis CLA branch reported on an unemployed demonstration held on Bridge Square that was suppressed by the police department of FLP Mayor William A. Anderson. They denounced Anderson’s efforts to prohibit workers’ meetings at that central rallying point and argued that “the true [role] of the Farmer-Labor Party city officials” was “utilizing the capitalist machinery of city government to suppress the working class rights.” Later that month CLA supporter Sara Avrin wrote an article that condemned Mayor Anderson’s scheme to force workers who received charity to perform unpaid maintenance work for the city. She pointed out that the FLP administration had “consistently acted in collusion with the Chamber of Commerce. Its role as a democratic cloak for vicious attacks of the bosses has become clear to all thinking workers... The workers of Minnesota have no interest in the capitalist parties including the Farmer-Labor Party.” A follow-up article insisted that “It makes no difference who originated the plan—the Citizens Alliance, the Tax Payers Association or the Farmer-Labor politicians in the Court House. The bald fact is: They who amassed profits from the workers’ toil are now trying to crawl out of their crisis by smashing labor conditions.” It ended by calling for a planned system of production and a workers government.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> “Results of the Minneapolis Special Election,” *The Militant*, vol. IV, no. 5 (March 1, 1931): 6, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1931/v4n05-mar-01-1931.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>93</sup> “Organization Notes: Minneapolis, Minn.,” *The Militant*, vol. V, no. 11 (March 12, 1932): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1932/mar-12-1932.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014); Sara Avrin, “Farmer-Laborites in Minn.,” *The Militant*, vol. V, no. 13 (March 26, 1932): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1932/mar-26-1932.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2014);

When Mayor Anderson appointed C. R. Hedlund to a class-collaborationist unemployment relief committee in 1932 Hedlund initially accepted the position, but the CLA pulled him out and disavowed the Mayor's attempt to co-opt their comrade. This caused the CLA center to worry about the Minneapolis branch's ability to defend the line against the FLP, but subsequent articles submitted by the branch for the *Militant* remained sharp.<sup>94</sup>

Clem Forsen attacked "the whole fallacy of the theory of two-class parties" and criticized the CP's past opportunism: "We must expose and not compete with" the FLP. He described farmer-laborism as "a bulwark against Communism in the masses," stating that the CLA would "support the Communist candidates in the city elections, and campaign for them on a clear-cut out-spoken Communist banner and program." The CLA then wrote an open letter to the CP on its electoral policy in Minneapolis. Although the letter portrayed the FLP as a labor party, referring to "the masses of organized labor that make up this party" who were merely betrayed by the party's "small business leadership," it ended by demanding that the CP "make a broad, intelligent, principle battle against Farmer-Labor reformism. Act like Communists in elections."<sup>95</sup>

### ***A New Orientation in a New Period***

The year 1933 ushered in a radically different political period for the international Trotskyist movement. As the crisis in Germany unfolded, the Nazis coming to power

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"Workers in Fight Against Forced Labor in Minneapolis," *The Militant*, vol. V, no. 25 (June 18, 1932): 1, 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1932/jun-18-1932.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>94</sup> Palmer, 41-42; "The Left Opposition At Work: Minneapolis," *The Militant*, vol. V, no. 36 (September 3, 1932): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1932/sep-03-1932.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>95</sup> Clem Forsen, "The Relief March In Minneapolis," *The Militant*, vol. VI, no. 9 (February 17, 1933): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1933/feb-17-1933.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2014); C. Forsen, "Stalinist Opportunism in Mpls. Elections," *The Militant*, vol. VI, no. 24 (April 29, 1933): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1933/apr-29-1933.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2014); C.L.A. (Left Opposition), "L.O. Addresses Party on Elections in Minneapolis," *The Militant*, vol. VI, no. 28 (May 27, 1933): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1933/may-27-1933.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2014).

with no effective resistance from the German Communists, the *Militant* went from weekly publication to three times a week. The CLA held regular mass meetings to openly discuss the developing events. Leon Trotsky called for a new party in Germany when the Communist Party there had conclusively proven itself impotent, then called for new parties internationally when it became clear that the Stalinists had strangled in all their parties any questioning of the disaster in Germany. This initiated the struggle to found the Fourth International. The Communist League of America, along with Trotskyist organizations around the world, shifted out of their existence as expelled factions of “official Parties” and into the task of build new revolutionary parties from the ground up.<sup>96</sup>

This coincided with an upturn in the American class struggle, and new political opportunities for the CLA laid the basis for a resolution of the organization’s factional rifts. The Cannon and Shachtman groups signed a “Peace Treaty,” and by early 1934 one comrade was complaining about the “Cannon-Shachtman leadership.” Their main internal antagonisms behind them for now, the Trotskyists turned “from almost pure propagandism directed to the CP toward intervention in the class struggle with the aim of linking up with the leftward-moving tendencies to construct the cadres of the revolutionary party.” The rise of the industrial union movement, and the leap in class consciousness that it generated, gave the Trotskyists fertile ground on which to build their party. They progressed rapidly toward their aim, fusing with the Muste tendency in 1934, doubling their forces through the Socialist Party entry in 1936-37, and founding the Socialist Workers Party in 1938.<sup>97</sup>

The Minneapolis branch would play an exceptional role in these developments. It included comrades with long and wide-ranging experience in the workers movement who

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<sup>96</sup> Palmer, 272; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 72-73.

<sup>97</sup> Palmer, 285; PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 73-74; George Breitman, “The Labor Party Question,” *SWP Discussion Bulletin*, vol. 33, no. 5 (June 1975): 12, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/idb/swp-1970-76-db/v33n05-jun-1975-disc-bul.pdf> (accessed August 31, 2015).

were able to take crucial leadership roles in America's first great proletarian upsurge. They were after all, as Palmer describes them, "a steeled cohort... the proletarian backbone of the American Left Opposition."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 45; Palmer, 272.

## Chapter 3

### The Heights of the Minneapolis Strikes

1934

The great tale of the organizing drives and strike upheavals that made Minneapolis a rallying cry around the country cannot be reproduced here. This research paper must give key events short shrift, winding around the real narrative arc to establish one essential point: that despite their incomplete assimilation of the fundamental difference between a workers party and a two-class party, in the Minneapolis strikes of 1934 the Trotskyists *acted* on the basis of stubborn opposition to the FLP, relying exclusively on the independent social power of the working class. Maintaining this program enabled them to steer a brilliant course through the strike wave, defeating not only the local bosses but also the guardian angel of local capital, Governor Olson.

In the escalating outbursts of class conflict, the Trotskyists and their allies in the leadership of General Drivers Union Local 574 exploited the basic contradictions of the Farmer-Labor Party to help secure their victories. As a bourgeois party entrusted by the capitalist class to administer the state apparatus, the FLP moved to crush the rabble when it rose in revolt. As the primary local fixture of farmer-laborism, organically linked with

the local AFL union movement, the party was utterly dependent on the tranquil participation and eager electoral support of that very same rabble. Therefore it could be maneuvered into surrendering generous concessions, or forced into a state of temporary paralysis, or even driven into a mortal crisis.

Falling into neither the sterile safety of ultra-left sectarianism, nor into the opportunist compromises that most ostensible socialists have pursued, the CLA leaped at the chance to organize a mass industrial union and lead it in struggle, and they did so with their communist banner held high. Even as they pursued every possible inroad into the AFL's "House of Labor," they campaigned ruthlessly against the craft-union bureaucracy that ruled the Federation. Even as they organized thousands of rank-and-file FLP supporters into their union, they commanded picket battalions in urban warfare against the FLP-controlled cops and National Guard, and waged a bold ideological battle against farmer-laborism in the pages of their newspapers. The Trotskyists' consistent, open insistence on working-class self-reliance had a critical impact on new leadership emerging from the trucker ranks. By the time Olson tried to behead the strike wave by arresting the Local 574 leadership, they had adequately educated and steeled the wider layers of militant unionists to the point that no one was fooled by Olson's "friend of labor" stratagems.

In the course of the 1934 strikes, the labor lieutenants of capital played their customary, treacherous role: International Brotherhood of Teamsters President Daniel Tobin disavowed the strikes and cut Local 574 off from badly needed resources, and the local AFL chiefs turned to Governor Olson to reestablish class peace. Responding to these reactionaries in defense of themselves and the ranks of workers they represented, the Local 574 leadership reached out to other AFL-organized workforces, rallying vital support from the most class-conscious elements of the Minneapolis labor movement. The focal point for their struggle for labor solidarity would be the Central Labor Union (CLU), the Minneapolis governing body for AFL unions.

In this city the CLA finally had the opportunity to build the left-wing union leadership it had been searching for. The Trotskyists started from scratch with Local 574 President Bill Brown, initiating a political bloc whose program was class war against the city's business owners, even though it would provoke the ugly side of the popular Farmer-Labor administration, and the organization of the unorganized on an industry-wide basis, even though it would draw the wrath of the AFL leadership and the industry bosses. Being part of this left wing brought new pressures to bear on the CLA, as their budding class-struggle allies were all supporters of the Farmer-Labor Party, their unions affiliated to the party and their officers delegates to its conventions. This was the pressure at work in the fall of 1934, when the CLA began softening its propaganda on the FLP. It was the same pressure, peaking during the spring 1935 elections, that drove the Trotskyists to cross the class line and give critical support to the FLP. But in 1934 they stood by their program. They told the working class the truth when Governor Olson sent in the National Guard, pushing the workers to oppose the troop mobilization when most thought Olson was only trying to help. In the aftermath of the strikes, they swam against the stream as the city's workers came out to support the FLP candidates in the November elections.

This epic year for American Trotskyism culminated in the Communist League of America fusing with A. J. Muste's Conference for Progressive Labor Action, forming the Workers Party of the US. Forging a broader collective of Marxist cadre, riding high on the victories in Minneapolis and Toledo, and running a powerful new industrial union, this organization was poised to throw itself into an insurgent workers movement that could have been rumbling toward an American socialist revolution.

### ***Building Local 574 up to the February Strike***

In the early 1930s a small group of CLA supporters were making their living in the Minneapolis trucking industry, and in the fall of 1933 they found a perfect ally in the

person of Bill Brown, the president of the tiny and stagnant Teamsters Local 574. Brown was a lifelong farmer-laborite and had a history of obedience to the local IBT bureaucracy, but was becoming increasingly frustrated and combative as the AFL craft unions remained impotent in the face of the persistent misery of the Great Depression. One journalist described Brown at this time as ““a cop-fighting, roistering truck driver who, on the side, was president of the puny teamsters’ local.”” Brown started sharing tavern tables with Vincent Dunne’s younger brothers Miles and Grant, both CLA supporters themselves, who soon let Brown in on their clandestine organizing efforts.<sup>99</sup>

Brown and fellow Executive Board militant George Frosig enabled the Trotskyists’ organizing committee to do an end run around the local IBT bureaucracy, and the results were rapid: the committee opened up an established AFL union to drivers and their helpers on an industrial basis, and Local 574’s membership quadrupled from September to November 1933. Brown and the Trotskyists purposefully avoided an immediate confrontation with the conservative Executive Board majority, planning first to flood the local with newly-organized workers who would then provide a base of support for a new left-wing leadership.<sup>100</sup>

To consolidate the drivers, Local 574 carried out an initial strike for union recognition in the coal yards in February 1934. The Executive Board requested official sanction for strike action from the IBT, knowing however that this would be denied. IBT President Daniel Tobin was a craft-union aristocrat, who “distrusted militants and change, and was especially hostile to communism, which he saw as destructive of ‘the Church, Mass, the beads, and the good Father.’” Led by officers of Tobin’s kind, the six Teamster-affiliated locals in Minneapolis had organized less than 1,000 workers between them, and none of them had won a strike for some twenty years. Tobin intended to keep it that way. He called on Minneapolis CLU leaders to oppose Local 574’s organizing

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<sup>99</sup> Palmer, 49-51; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 58-59, 66.

<sup>100</sup> Palmer, 51-53, 59; Knox (Part 2 of 4), 7.

work and pressure it to purge its ranks of the communists, and in response to the request for strike sanction he threatened to revoke the local's charter.<sup>101</sup>

However, the population's need for coal for fuel during the frigid Minnesota winter gave the truckers the advantage, and the coal yard bosses backed down. The February strike victory gave Local 574 great momentum; it would grow to 2-3,000 members by April, and to 7,000 by the summer. Likewise, the CLA branch grew rapidly, doubling its ranks from about thirty to over sixty between February and May 1934.<sup>102</sup>

### ***Exploiting the Governor's Popularity***

In the aftermath of the February coal yard strike, Governor Olson attempted to deflect the workers movement back into the safe channels of bourgeois democracy. Olson stood out as a maverick even by the standards of the FLP at the time, suggesting at one party convention that "private ownership may well have been saddling Minnesota with an unmanageable burden" and proposing nationalizations, though he would rapidly back away from such outbursts of bombast. While the FLP advocated state control of banks, mills, and grain elevators in order to restrict the power of corporations, it directed discontent against particular capitalist institutions rather than capitalism itself, shunning a revolutionary perspective. As Smemo notes, "Olson's reforms fell rather neatly in line with those of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal, namely a state social security program, a partial moratorium on farm mortgages, and a progressive income tax." Both politicians were equally committed to containing explosive working-class struggles, using moderate reforms to affect an "orderly constructive change" to stabilize a capitalist system in crisis.<sup>103</sup>

Regardless, Olson was widely regarded as a hero among the downtrodden workers of the cities and family farmers of the countryside. He was the first Farmer-

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<sup>101</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 47-49; Palmer, 51-59.

<sup>102</sup> Palmer, 57-60.

<sup>103</sup> Palmer, 64; Smemo, 12-14.

Labor governor in the United States, elected in 1930 in a landslide and easily re-elected in 1932. His organization of Ward clubs in 1933 had tripled the FLP's membership, the party expanding primarily in urban centers, and his administration enacted a series of popular reforms between 1933 and 1935.<sup>104</sup>

Dobbs describes Olson as "a real danger" because he was "a persuasive person, clever in his actions." Olson had worked hard to cultivate his image in the union movement, and most of the drivers and helpers that poured into Local 574 had deep illusions in "their" governor. Before 1934, "no union official had ever dared to cross him." Furthermore, the Teamsters local was likely already part of Olson's party, linked through the FLP's bloc affiliation of trade unions, when the Trotskyists first started working with Bill Brown.<sup>105</sup>

In early 1934, with no stabilization in sight and the working class finally rebelling against the misery of the Depression, Olson became "a veritable loose cannon of radical shots fired at a faltering capitalism." Panicky reactionaries may have seen "Olson paving the way to a Soviet Minnesota," but the leaders of Local 574 could tolerate no such illusions in their base if the workers were to achieve any gains. Palmer explains that the Minneapolis Trotskyists fully understood the pro-capitalist nature of farmer-labor politicians, but chose "to focus their early approach to Governor Olson not on his shortcomings, but on placing strategic stress on the Farmer-Labor Party leader's ostensible pro-union sympathies, which could be exploited to build labour-organization among the truckers." When the leaders of Local 574 pressured Olson to address an April 15 rally of workers, Olson sent his "philosophical anarchist" secretary with a statement, playing right into the union's hands:

Olson's message to the teamsters was, in Farrell Dobbs' words, 'even better for the union' than any appearance could have been. It distinguished workers' unions from company-unions, railed against the 'vested interests' that always did

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<sup>104</sup> Palmer, 34; Holbo, 302-303; Valelly, 135.

<sup>105</sup> Evidence indicates that all major Minneapolis AFL unions were affiliated with the FLP, though further research is required to confirm that Local 574 was as well. See Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 57; Walker, 204.

their utmost to thwart labour organisation and sustain 'their reign of exploitation of the working man and woman,' and championed workers for having utilised their collective strength to weather 'gun fire, injunctions, and prosecution by malicious propaganda.' Olson's message closed by urging Minneapolis labour to 'follow the sensible course and band together for your own protection and welfare.'

As Palmer remarks, "These words would come back to haunt the Farmer-Labor Governor."<sup>106</sup>

James P. Cannon later recalled that in the Minneapolis strikes, "Our people didn't believe in anybody or anything but the policy of the class struggle and the ability of the workers to prevail by their mass strength and solidarity."<sup>107</sup> This adherence to proletarian program made the Teamster victory in 1934 possible. At the same time, in order to maneuver against Olson effectively, the Trotskyists had to understand the contradictions of a Farmer-Labor government in power in order to best exploit them. Palmer credits the CLA with a keen appreciation of Olson's quandary:

given his political base in the Minnesota Farmer-Labor constituency, he could ill afford to be openly hostile to trade-unionism, and to act as an overt strikebreaker would cost him his political career. Yet in an unambiguous showdown between capital and labour, Olson was just the kind of figurehead who could tap into his seeming status as a friend of working men and women to take over the leadership of any strike and divert it into compromise and conciliation, siphoning away the potential of truly meaningful material advances and dampening down the possibility of workers developing radical, or even revolutionary, consciousness.<sup>108</sup>

Therefore the governor would be more susceptible to working-class pressure than most, but only up to a point. At every stage, he would be a wily and highly capable adversary, his real allegiance to the capitalist system he was so anxious to posture against.

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<sup>106</sup> Palmer, 63-65.

<sup>107</sup> Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism*, 147-148.

<sup>108</sup> Palmer, 72.

## ***The May Strike***

Having expanded beyond the coal yards to organize all the city's drivers, Local 574 launched another strike for union recognition in mid-May. In less than a week it reached its climax when a small army of pickets routed thousands of police and newly deputized company thugs in the famous "Battle of Deputies Run." Furious business owners demanded that Olson use the National Guard to crush the strike. While he called the soldiers up and had them at the ready, he would not deploy them. As Dobbs remembers, "Considerable nervousness had developed in the upper echelons of the local AFL officialdom about the course the strike was taking. So they decided to make a bid for a truce in the fighting and try to bring the situation under Governor Olson's control." Indeed, cracks were appearing in the AFL's sturdy edifice as CLA cadres in the electricians' union marched their workforce out to support Local 574, and the lathers and building trades unions declared sympathy strikes of their own. The leading bureaucrats organized a meeting that brought together Governor Olson, the commander of the National Guard, the chief of police, the city's AFL officialdom, and representatives of the striking drivers. Olson, faced down by the militancy of Local 574 and under pressure from panicking AFL leaders, held back the Guard and attempted to broker a settlement.<sup>109</sup>

The Trotskyists' propaganda at this point illustrates how their class-struggle program could leave no room for illusions in Olson. Reporting on the deadlocked negotiations that stretched for three days after the "Battle of Deputies Run," the *Militant* wrote:

The swift developments of the strike are putting the Governor on the spot. Whether or not to call out the Militia—he can't decide. No reliance can be put upon the Governor or the Labor Board to settle anything favorable for the workers. This is tirelessly explained by the militant leadership of the strike. All

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<sup>109</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 82-114; Palmer, 98-108.

energy and all hope is directed to the mass picket line, the largest and most militant Minneapolis has ever seen.<sup>110</sup>

In the weeks following the settlement – a partial victory that effectively brought union recognition but left other issues to be resolved – the CLA drew out essential lessons in its propaganda to arm the Local 574 leadership and ranks for the next battle with Olson. One article tore down the rhetorical façade of democracy that in normal times camouflages the state: “the workers learnt that ‘law and order’, ‘constitutional rights’, ‘liberty and justice’, ‘right to organize’ were hollow phrases used by the bosses to keep them in ignorance and subjection. No sooner did they learn than they swiftly translated these lessons into militant action.” The *Militant* criticized the workers who initially “had illusions about impartiality of the cops and the press,” but lauded them for adapting and learning rapidly in the course of strike: “The workers began to realize the seriousness of the struggle and settled down in real earnestness to the task confronting them... They were no longer a mass of strikers, they were soldiers obeying orders from their captains.”<sup>111</sup>

An editorial on the May strike pointed to the capitalist character of the executive functions of the state, regardless of the political party in control:

In that strike, and due to its able leadership, the workers involved received a valuable lesson and gained a real understanding not only of what the role of the capitalist state is—and more specifically the capitalist state with a farmer-labor governor at the head—but they also received a lesson and an understanding in the first fundamentals of how to begin to cope with that state.<sup>112</sup>

Mocking a lieutenant of Olson who had attempted to address a hostile mass meeting of workers, the Trotskyists exposed the true allegiance of an even higher power: ““And I say

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<sup>110</sup> F. K., “Minneapolis Shows the Way: Militant Mass Picket Line Routs Scabs, Cops, Special Deputies and Thugs and Stops All Commercial Transport,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 21 (May 26, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/may-25-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>111</sup> William Kitt, “A Lesson in ‘Law and Order,’” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 22 (June 2, 1934): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/jun-02-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>112</sup> “Editorial Note: The Minneapolis Strike,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 23 (June 9, 1934): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/jun-09-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

‘God speed you,’ if that means anything.’ It didn’t. Silence. Then a hoot from the audience. The workers are learning that God is certainly not on their side. God is against them. Yes, on the side of the workers is only right, a fierce willingness to struggle, and a growing determination to build a better world; a socialist world.”<sup>113</sup>

### ***Support from the Class-Struggle Allies***

After the May settlement Minneapolis employers began to flout the terms of agreement, trying to reduce union recognition to a dead letter. The CLA’s many enemies – the bosses’ Citizens Alliance, the city’s newspapers, Republican Mayor Bainbridge, Police Chief “Bloody Mike” Johannes, Daniel Tobin and the AFL officialdom – ramped up their red-baiting campaign, trying to discredit Local 574 and force it to purge the troublesome reds. Under intense pressure, and with their achievements still hanging in the balance, the Local 574 leadership aggressively sought out allies.<sup>114</sup>

When they initiated the drivers campaign the Trotskyists had relied on the history of radical labor struggle in Minneapolis to inspire support for their cause: “Some considered themselves socialists in a loose sense. Others had kept alive a spark of militancy from their IWW days. Once a real strike struggle got underway in the city, many of them could be expected to rally to the cause like old warhorses responding to the sound of a bugle.” Such support was emerging, but the same class struggle that awakened the “old warhorses” also polarized a wing of the AFL bureaucracy backward into the safety of the craft-union establishment. This polarization in the Northwest labor movement, and the relative weight of forces on each side, would be a critical question for Local 574’s survival.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> C.H., “Sidelights From the Great Battle of the Minneapolis Workers,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 24 (June 16, 1934): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/jun-16-1934.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>114</sup> Palmer, 128, 137-138; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 132.

<sup>115</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 54.

The Trotskyists made every effort to sway this balance when they could. As Local 574 prepared the third strike to force the city's bosses to recognize their union, a "campaign was launched to get public backing from unions in all the various trades. Virtually every member of Local 574 participated in the effort, pressing our case among other rank-and-file unionists and thereby helping to bring pressure on the AFL officialdom." The outbreak of class struggle had started to rouse workers throughout the city, giving the Teamsters an eager audience: "Strike talk is spreading to other industries. Barbers, auto mechanics, laundry and dry cleaning workers, ice wagon drivers, retail clerks, street railway workers, dental mechanics, upholsterers and building trades workers all have long-standing grievances. The notion of a united struggle for decent conditions is rapidly gaining ground." Local 574 fanned the flames and directed the rising militancy into support for their organizing drive. The solidarity would soon be reciprocated, as the Teamsters went on to lead unionization and strike campaigns for many of these same workforces.<sup>116</sup>

A political chasm separated the Trotskyists leading Local 574 from the most "progressive" elements in the local AFL unions. This did not, however, prevent the 574 leadership from maneuvering with other forces in the workers movement that were themselves incapable of leading the way forward. In Palmer's assessment, the Trotskyists had a "sophisticated set of understandings" that enabled them to constantly manipulate "their more conservative trade-union and reformist counterparts into situations where these 'alternatives' either had to stand with workers at least rhetorically, or else expose their vulnerabilities."<sup>117</sup>

This was demonstrated on the eve of the third strike, when Local 574 held a membership meeting to confront the "red scare" head-on. The thousands of truckers present gave Tobin's anti-communist attacks "a smashing repudiation" by unanimously

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<sup>116</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 128-129; James P. Cannon, "Central Labor Union Backs Drivers' Local," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 28 (July 14, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/jul-14-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>117</sup> Palmer, 72.

voting to endorse the policies pursued by Bill Brown and the Trotskyists. The meeting then passed a resolution to launch the third strike, and immediately sent representatives to put the resolution before the Central Labor Union. As Cannon reported, “Here, too, the response was unanimous. The resolution was adopted and the C.L.U. pledged full support to the coming strike. Thus Minneapolis labor gave an authentic class answer to the bosses and all their agents.” Local 574 had all the momentum, the pressure was on from the ranks of every industry, and the AFL bureaucrats had little choice as they were carried along on the tide.<sup>118</sup>

### ***Support from the FLP***

The real force galvanized by the outbreak of sharp class struggle lay in the union movement, but the strikes polarized the liberal and farmer-labor spheres as well, inspiring some to cross over to the camp of Local 574. Carl Skoglund and Vincent Dunne retained ties with a number of populist and social-democratic sorts from the 1920s, some of whom would emerge to play new roles in the rapidly changing political environment of the mid-1930s. The Trotskyists had to take advantage of support from every corner, especially when the class war took on the character of a mass united front against the widely despised police. For example, the CLA enlisted Herbert Solow, an experienced journalist with the *Nation* who would later work as editor for *Fortune* magazine, to work with Max Shachtman editing the *Organizer*, Local 574’s daily strike bulletin (the first of its kind in the American workers movement). Solow’s contribution was so impressive that the drivers voted him in as a lifetime honorary member of their union.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> “Daniel Tobin Goes to Bat For the Bosses,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 28 (July 14, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/jul-14-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014); Cannon, “Central Labor Union Backs Drivers’ Local,” 1.

<sup>119</sup> This included everyone from the top Minneapolis mob boss to friendly sex workers to random elderly women in the street. See Vincent R. Dunne, Jack Maloney and Asher Harer, “Chewing the Fat,” mp3 audio recording, n.d., Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On Line, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/audio/index.htm#roundtable> (accessed October 26, 2016); Palmer, 139.

Support also emerged from the Farmer-Labor Party. When the Trotskyists initiated the Minneapolis Central Council of Workers, an organization to coordinate strike support from the unemployed movement, delegates from the Farmer-Labor Party joined with those from local unions and cooperatives to support the group. During their preparations for the third strike, Local 574 maneuvered the AFL into organizing a parade on July 6, and lined up FLP Alderman Ed Hudson to be its Grand Marshal. As Dobbs recalls, “The union had obtained a fine horse for Hudson to ride. This seemed to please him greatly and we, too, were happy about it because such a prominent display of support would make it harder for him to chicken out on us when the going got rough.”<sup>120</sup>

Over the course of the three strikes, several Minneapolis FLP ward clubs stepped forward to volunteer their services to the Teamster-led strike committee. One dissident farmer-labor paper, the *Midwest American*, defended the Trotskyists against Olson, and Robert Cramer, editor of the CLU’s official *Minneapolis Labor Review* – who was “well ensconced in Farmer-Laborite circles” and “had Olson’s ear” – helped Local 574 by appealing effectively to the region’s farmers to support the striking truck drivers. When Local 574 demanded that the City Council fire Johannes and impeach Bainbridge, a bloc of FLP aldermen pushed through a resolution launching an investigation toward that end.<sup>121</sup>

Given the dominance of the Farmer-Labor Party in the region and the Trotskyists’ many years of work in and around the farmer-labor movement, it was inevitable that the 1934 strikes would bring the CLA into closer contact and collaboration with elements in the FLP. But because the Trotskyists were ruthlessly pursuing their class-struggle program, any such collaboration was an indication of contradictions in the policy of the liberals and farmer-laborites involved, not in the policy of the CLA. There was no indication at this stage that accepting such help would put them on an opportunist

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<sup>120</sup> Palmer, 62, 153, 183; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 128-129, 156; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 79-80; C.F., “MPLS Labor Notes,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 9 (February 24, 1934): 3, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/feb-24-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>121</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 155, 160; Palmer, 69-70, 185; Preis, 24.

trajectory. In any case, the true test of their position on the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party would come at the climax of the third strike.<sup>122</sup>

### ***The Showdown with Olson's National Guard***

In the opening days of the July-August strike, the state bared its fangs. Police opened fire on union pickets, killing striker Henry Ness and unemployed league member John Belor and wounding sixty-seven others in what would go down in local history as "Bloody Friday." The working class of Minneapolis came out in force, with over 40,000 taking the streets for an immense funeral march. The police retreated to the municipal court house, and the workers themselves organized security for the silent procession to the cemetery.<sup>123</sup>

The strike held strong however, infuriating the local ruling class and forcing Governor Olson to fulfill his function as the executive officer of the state's armed forces. Palmer praises Cannon's approach to the escalating tensions, as he knew that Olson could be pressured "only so far, to exercise his influence positively for the General Drivers' Union. Pushed beyond where he was prepared to go, Cannon understood that the Governor would then be backed into a corner where he would have to mobilise the National Guard in a 'naked strikebreaking action.'"<sup>124</sup>

Indeed, even while Olson was demanding that federal mediators be given a chance to "bring the warring sides of labour and capital together in a peaceful resolution," 400 more police officers were hired and armed with rifles, bayonets, and

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<sup>122</sup> As noted in the *Historiography*, Richard Valelly depicts these connections going much deeper. Among the FLP leaders that Valelly lists as being close with the Trotskyists are Aldermen Ed Hudson and I. G. Scott; Joseph Poirier, a founding supporter of the FLP who had worked with Vincent Dunne in the 1920s before becoming Olson's director of personnel in the state Highway Department; and John Rockwell, Olson's commissioner of education. He also mentions that Carlos Hudson, a Trotskyist who helped edit the *Organizer*, at one point drafted speeches for FLP congressman (and later US senator) Ernest Lundeen. Valelly gives no details on the nature of these connections or what the Trotskyists tried to accomplish through their "easy access to the inner circles of the Farmer-Labor party," but no other source indicates such cozy relationships. See Valelly, 115-116.

<sup>123</sup> Palmer, 172-73.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

machine guns. Olson had a declaration of martial law drafted in case “civil order” was threatened, and he stationed 4,000 National Guardsmen throughout Minneapolis.<sup>125</sup>

The leadership of Local 574 used its new *Organizer* strike bulletin to prepare the Teamster rank and file for a conscious battle against the governor. There was a necessary division of labor between the union’s bulletin and the CLA’s *Militant* in which only the latter would put forward a complete Marxist analysis of the Minneapolis events, but the 574 leadership used the *Organizer* to advance the essential elements of the CLA’s proletarian program that the drivers would need to win their strike. The most important point was that the state was fundamentally an organ of the ruling class, a machine of violent repression that could only serve capital in its inevitable clashes with labor. This meant that no matter what Olson and the FLP said or did, the police, the new deputies, the judges in the courtrooms, and the National Guard would all inevitably work to crush the organizing drive.<sup>126</sup> Even before the National Guard appeared on the streets, the *Organizer* came out against it:

Governor Olson, in his statement, said he will not take sides in the strike. But his action in mobilizing a battalion of the National Guard on the first day of the strike—is that not taking sides? Many workers will be keenly disappointed both with the statement and the action of Governor Olson. They voted for him in the firm conviction that he would side with them against the bosses. Union men and women have a right to doubt that anyone can be really neutral in the great struggle between capital and labor. But in any case they expected something more than neutrality from the Farmer-Labor Governor. They expected support of their struggle, not the threat of military force against them.

That is the only way the mobilization of the National Guard can be understood—as a threat against the strikers. That is why the workers who are enlisted in this fight for the right to live, demand and will continue to demand: WITHDRAW THE NATIONAL GUARD IMMEDIATELY!<sup>127</sup>

Convincing the workers of this position was especially difficult given the widespread efforts to reinforce the workers’ illusions in the Governor’s military

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<sup>125</sup> Palmer, 128, 173-174; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 144; Walker, 158.

<sup>126</sup> Palmer, 139.

<sup>127</sup> “Troops in Minneapolis — What For?” *The Organizer*, vol. 1, no. 6 (July 18, 1934): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n06-jul-18-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed December 24, 2015).

preparations. Of course Olson himself claimed that the National Guard would “defend” the strikers, but the same message was treacherously pushed by the AFL leadership. Decades later the effort to ideologically disarm the working class continues, with historian Valelly claiming, “In using the National Guard as he had, Governor Olson did something completely novel... Olson used the guard to break the open-shop system that had thrived in Minneapolis for two decades.” But these forces failed in July-August 1934, and the Local 574 leadership managed to imbue their ranks with the understanding – limited and transient, but sufficient for the purposes of this historic strike battle – that Olson could not be trusted.<sup>128</sup>

The governor may have dreaded the effects of martial law on working-class turnout for his coming reelection campaign, but a statement he issued at the time revealed his deeper loyalty to the capitalists’ law and order:

According to the Farmer-Labor Governor, a ‘state of insurrection exist[ed] in the City of Minneapolis and the County of Hennepin,’ the populace threatened by ‘tumult, riots, and mob violence.’ Civil authorities were demonstrably unable to restrain ‘Bodies of men [that] together by force have attempted to commit felonies and to offer violence to persons and property... and by force of violence to break and resist the laws of [the] State, imperiling the lives, health, and property and general welfare of the citizens.’ Olson aimed to make Minneapolis ‘as quiet as a Sunday School picnic.’<sup>129</sup>

The *Organizer* responded to Olson’s statement with a pedagogical explanation of the ABCs of the Marxist worldview:

In this war of poverty against wealth, of labor against capital, there is no room for a ‘No Man’s Land’ of neutrality.... You are either on the side of the men who strike, or you are on the side of those who want to smash the strike. You are either for the right to peaceful picketing, or you are for the ‘right’ of the police to massacre the pickets.... We never asked for protection from the Guard. We have no ‘property’ to protect. The employers have. It is their properties and their profits extorted from our labor that they want protected. It is their scabs, and

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<sup>128</sup> Palmer, 180-183; Walker, 198; “Drivers Ranks Hold Firm As Bosses Committee of 166 Begins to Crack,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 32 (August 11, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/aug-11-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014); Valelly, 114-115.

<sup>129</sup> Palmer, 179.

their scab trucks, sent out to rob us of our bread, that they want protected. We never called for the troops. The employers did. We call for their removal.<sup>130</sup>

The economic chaos caused by the strike was rapidly undermining Olson's image in "liberal capitalist circles," and "he wanted desperately to avoid further damage to his personal career." Federal mediators from Washington met with strike leaders, and Olson threatened to impose a deal through force of arms if they failed to reach an agreement. Local 574 accepted the resulting "Hass-Dunnigan plan," as it would establish the essentials of union recognition, but the trucking companies rejected it in a bid to force Olson to send in the Guard. This worked; true to his word, on July 26, Olson sent in his troops. The *Militant* reported, "Martial law was proclaimed here today by Farmer-Labor Governor, Floyd B. Olson, in an effort to break the general strike of drivers and helpers" and denounced Olson's demagogic attempts "to deceive the drivers that the troops have been called out to protect them."<sup>131</sup>

Olson claimed that the National Guard would issue moving permits to only those companies that agreed to the mediators' settlement, but it quickly became apparent that the National Guard was issuing permits indiscriminately to scab trucks, breaking the teamster strike bit by bit. Bill Brown denounced Olson at a July 31 rally some 25,000 strong, declaring that "the Farmer-Labor Administration is the best strike-breaking force our union has ever gone up against." The Teamster leaders could not allow the governor's trick to prevail; the next day they defied Olson's martial law by mobilizing thousands of pickets to stop the strikebreaking trucks. Olson then duly ordered the Guard to seize the Local 574 strike headquarters and arrest any leaders it could find. By locking up the core of the strike leadership – which included most of the Minneapolis CLA

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<sup>130</sup> "The Talk About Martial Law," *The Organizer*, vol. I, no. 10 (July 25, 1934): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n10-b-jul-25-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>131</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 68; "Drivers Ranks Solid Despite Provocation," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 30 (July 28, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/jul-28-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

branch's leadership – Olson intended to behead the insurgent workers movement and force more pliable leaders to step forward and accept a concessionary deal.<sup>132</sup>

Fortunately for the strikers, their leaders had prepared them well for such an eventuality. As historian Charles Walker writes, “The strike’s conduct had been such that a thousand lesser leaders had come out of the ranks and the pickets themselves by this time had learned their own jobs. The arrest of the leaders, instead of beheading the movement, infused it, at least temporarily, with a demoniac fury.” The union, “forced to go underground, used guerrilla-tactics that left Minneapolis awash with ‘hit-and-run’ devastation.” The National Guard chased union picket squads across the city, but could not stop them from destroying the scab trucking operations. The *Organizer* headlined “Answer Military Tyranny by A General Protest Strike!” and demanded, “Is there one fool who still thinks that Olson’s National Guard is here to help the strikers? Is there one scoundrel who will dare to say that the suppression of picketing, the raiding of our headquarters and the imprisonment of our leaders in a military stockade—while scab trucks roll with military approval—is a favor to the workers?”<sup>133</sup>

Meanwhile, Governor Olson tried to negotiate with a small committee of secondary Local 574 leaders, and though he stormed and inveigled, his “dizzying spin” did not phase them. They cracked some poignant jokes at the governor’s expense and insisted, “‘First you let out our leaders; after that we’ll talk.’”<sup>134</sup>

As clashes between workers and the state continued to escalate on August 1, the call for the general strike spread in union halls throughout the city. The National Guard occupied the Central Labor Union, driving officials from a dozen AFL unions into the street. Protests from the union movement rained down on Olson, as conservative AFL

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<sup>132</sup> Palmer, 186-189; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 68-69; Millikan, 177.

<sup>133</sup> Walker, 211; Palmer, 189-190; “Answer Military Tyranny by A General Protest Strike!” *The Organizer*, vol. I, no. 17 (August 1, 1934): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n17-aug-01-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>134</sup> Palmer, 193-94.

officials, terrified of a general strike, pressured the governor to give in to the Teamsters' demands.<sup>135</sup> Still the Trotskyists exposed the union bureaucrats:

The conservative labor leaders of the Central Labor Union went scurrying to Olson, pleading with him to free the Dunnes and Brown and return the Sutorious Garage to 574 because of the unpleasant situation which might have been created for them if this was not done.

The role of these leaders has been most timid and cowardly towards martial law and the raids on union headquarters. Every move of theirs in recent days has been to whitewash Olson and hide his strikebreaking acts. They attempt to explain the raid on 574 headquarters as an act to 'help' the strikers. Just how is not stated.<sup>136</sup>

This ferocious position against the AFL officialdom was not a popular one in the Minneapolis labor movement, and neither was Local 574 leadership's uncompromising line on Olson's troops. The understanding of the class nature of the state came from outside the ranks of the striking drivers, and it required a political struggle to drive that understanding deep enough that the strike might have a chance at victory. Looking back on this decisive moment just a few weeks later, the *Militant* recounted that:

when [Olson] called the troops onto the streets and declared martial law, opinion was general among the drivers that it was done in their interest. Pickets began to rely on Olson's soldiers. Knowing the class nature of the state, the leaders saw how fatal such an attitude would be for the strike. They were quick to act. The **Organizer**, at the risk of incurring the displeasure of the union men, pointed out the real purpose of the troops—to break the strike.<sup>137</sup>

To be sure, objective conditions played their part, as fresh proletarian struggle raised class consciousness and as Olson revealed his party's true nature by fulfilling the duties of his office. But the subjective factor – communist revolutionaries leading the strikes – was crucial. Olson failed to find a more malleable layer of workers behind the

<sup>135</sup> Palmer, 194; "Troops Take Over Labor Headquarters," *The Organizer*, vol. I, no. 17 (August 1, 1934): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n17-aug-01-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 69.

<sup>136</sup> "Drivers Ranks Hold Firm As Bosses Committee of 166 Begins to Crack," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 32 (August 11, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/aug-11-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>137</sup> "The Strike Triumphant," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 34 (August 25, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/aug-25-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

Trotskyists. Politically armed by their leadership, the drivers were able to treat the governor as the class enemy he was.

On August 2 Olson was forced to admit defeat; he returned Local 574's headquarters and released its arrested leadership. The November elections were approaching, and "labor peace" was as always vital to the FLP's electoral prospects. Olson changed tack, working to placate the insurgent truckers and pressure the recalcitrant trucking companies to back down. The employers held out for almost three weeks, giving the FLP ample opportunity to start salvaging Olson's reputation. The local AFL leadership, officially behind Local 574 again after the drivers' strike committee castigated Rob Cramer and other CLU representatives for their underhanded support to Olson's martial law, also got to work to refurbish "their" governor.<sup>138</sup>

Olson absolved the strike leaders, dropping the original pretext for their arrests. Trying to appear "even-handed," he sent the National Guard to raid the headquarters of the Citizens Alliance (the *Organizer* inadvertently helped Olson by demanding this very action from him). The officers of the National Guard and the capitalist families of the Citizens Alliance had been intertwined since World War I, so the latter was given enough warning that they were able to remove four suitcases of files before the troops arrived. While the raid revealed evidence of the Citizens Alliance infiltrating unions and coercing businesses, which was somewhat embarrassing to the Minneapolis bosses, it did not affect the outcome of the strike.<sup>139</sup>

In the pages of both the *Organizer* and the *Militant*, the Trotskyists continued to draw the lessons of the class struggle, reiterating their Marxist position on the Farmer-Labor Party and the state apparatus it controlled. A speech by CLA supporter Albert Goldman published in the *Organizer* contrasted the violence of the police and soldiers against the workers with Olson's posturing against the trucking companies: "alas, actions speak louder than words. And judging by the Governor's actions, one is justified in

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<sup>138</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 183-184, 188, 197, 217; Palmer, 196; Smemo, 39.

<sup>139</sup> Palmer, 196; Millikan, 177-178; Tanner (Part Two).

labeling Governor Olson as an enemy of the working class. He has given the bosses hard words and no blows; he has given the workers soft words and hard blows.”<sup>140</sup> Meanwhile, the *Militant* elaborated on the programmatic question at stake:

The mask is off. The ‘friend of the worker,’ the Farmer-Labor Governor of Minnesota has revealed himself to be the bitterest foe of organized labor, the shrewdest supporter of the bosses... Under the pretense of helping the strike, Olson has done his level best to crush it... This agent of capitalism, like all the rest, needed the mailed fist to get results for the employers.<sup>141</sup>

The Trotskyists initially excoriated Olson’s attempts to recapture his standing as a progressive: “Now that the damage has been done and the blow of martial law already delivered to the strike, Olson is making desperate if not successful efforts to retrieve his reputation as a pro-labor man in the eyes of the strikers.”<sup>142</sup> Trotskyist leader Hugo Oehler penned a thorough explanation of this duplicity:

In more than one statement the Governor has stated that he does not take sides with either the bosses or the strikers, that he is for law and order, and will take what action necessary for the good of the people to see that the necessities of life are moved... any one who says he is for the people and neither the bosses nor the workers is either a liar or a damn fool. It is also a well known fact that if the Governor, who is a ‘friend of labor,’ will not tolerate any strike that interferes with the necessities of life for the ‘people’ [then] the Governor is against the majority of the workers.... It is equally well known that any one who holds a strategical position such as a Governor, and says he is not taking sides with either the exploiters or the strikers, no matter how sincere he is, he can do nothing else than help the bosses. Neutrality in a class society always helps the strongest force. And since the bosses are in power neutrality plays into their hands. The words and deeds of Governor Olson in this strike proves this point conclusively.

Governor Olson is a petty-bourgeois radical. Even if he is the most honest and sincere man, and desires to help the working class, a radical type of reformer can in reality do nothing but help the bosses. The structure and framework of the capitalist system is so organized that it cannot be used for the

<sup>140</sup> Albert Goldman, “‘With Clenched Fists-!’” *The Organizer*, vol. I, no. 17 (August 1, 1934): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n17-aug-01-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>141</sup> “A ‘Farmer-Labor’ Strikebreaker,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 31 (August 4, 1934): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/aug-04-1934.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>142</sup> “Drivers Ranks Hold Firm As Bosses Committee of 166 Begins to Crack,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 32 (August 11, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/aug-11-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

benefit of the working class. It is an instrument for the capitalists, by the capitalists, and of the capitalists.<sup>143</sup>

Finally, after President Roosevelt sent another federal mediator to Minneapolis to help bring the employers into line, the Citizens Alliance broke. Olson and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party were supporting Roosevelt's New Deal, and Roosevelt was anxious that the Teamsters strike disappear from national headlines well before the November elections. On August 21 the trucking companies agreed to the provisions of the original Hass-Dunnigan plan, which secured for Local 574 official recognition, the right to represent its entire membership, and a standard minimum wage for all truckers.<sup>144</sup>

### *The Critiques of the Trotskyists*

The Trotskyist leadership of Local 574 was subjected to withering criticism both at the time of these events and during the eight decades since; many of these criticisms have in turn been debated at length by scholars and leftists. Those charges relevant to their struggle with the FLP relate to softness on Olson in their propaganda and to the repercussions of having abandoned the labor party slogan.<sup>145</sup>

Bryan Palmer, following Chris Knox, traces the weakness in the Trotskyist press to one of the first stages of the strike wave, arguing that the CLA revealed an "early

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<sup>143</sup> Hugo Oehler, "A Demagogue at Work: Olson's Role in the Strike," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 32 (August 11, 1934): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/aug-11-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>144</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 203-206; *Teamster Politics*, 70; Palmer, 213; Smemo, 40.

<sup>145</sup> Aside from the anti-communist tirades of the American ruling class and its kept media and academia, the Minneapolis Trotskyists have been accused of everything from failing to mobilize a political strike to overthrow the "fascist" Governor Olson to recruiting and operating on a shallow trade-unionist basis, neglecting their wider political work as revolutionary Marxists entirely. See "Editorial Note: The Minneapolis Strike," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 23 (June 9, 1934): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/jun-09-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014); James P. Cannon, "Minneapolis and its Meaning," *The New Internationalist*, vol. I, no. 1 (July 1934): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1934/meaning.htm> (accessed November 21, 2014); Palmer, 120-21, 260-61; Tanner (Part One); Smemo, 52; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 56.

The main points on the problems with propaganda and the labor party slogan are dealt with in Tanner's review of Palmer's *Revolutionary Teamsters*. This section elaborates on them. See Tanner (Part One) and (Part Two).

inability to mount a revolutionary critique of Farmer-Laborism.” Assessing their maneuvers in the lead-up to the May strike, Palmer questions the Trotskyists’ ability to understand “the extent to which Olson would inevitably turn against working-class interests” and argues that they “undoubtedly neglected to hammer home relentlessly how this seeming advocate of the producers was bound to turn against the very plebeian constituency that had propelled him into office.” Furthermore, while Palmer credits Cannon with personally anticipating the governor’s eventual ““naked strikebreaking action,”” he does not extend this understanding to the CLA as a whole or the Local 574 leadership under its influence. Instead he implies that the Minneapolis CLA branch had a tendency to capitulate to Governor Olson without Cannon’s firm hand correcting their course.<sup>146</sup>

However, there is little evidence of the Local 574 leaders’ discussions with the union ranks. The *Militant* gave almost no coverage to the Minneapolis situation between the February and May strikes; when it did, it did not mention Olson. When the newspaper began covering strike developments in late May with “Minneapolis Shows the Way,” it stated that the strike leadership “tirelessly explained” that the workers must not rely on Olson.<sup>147</sup>

Palmer does not take into account the CLA’s propaganda barrage against the Farmer-Labor Governor in the days leading up to August 1, which tore down the façade of the bosses’ democracy, exposed the class nature of the state, repeatedly identified Olson as the master of the National Guard mobilization, and anxiously warned the workers of the soldiers’ real role in the class struggle. Before, during, and immediately after the climax of the July-August strike, the Trotskyists’ propaganda did in fact “hammer home relentlessly” the idea that the Governor was an enemy. More importantly, the Minneapolis branch proved their line in action, helping to lead the workers to victory over Olson’s troops.

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<sup>146</sup> Palmer, 7, 72-73, 115, 142; Knox (Part 2 of 4), 12.

<sup>147</sup> F. K., “Minneapolis Shows the Way,” 1.

The timing of Palmer's charge may be somewhat misdirected, but it is true that in the aftermath of August 1, when Olson reversed course, raided the Citizens Alliance office, and helped Local 574 win a settlement, the CLA did begin to soften in its opposition to the FLP. The *Organizer* continued to uphold the need for working-class independence, declaring that "We are going to rely now in this critical period, as in the past, on our own strength and on the sympathy and solidarity of our fellow workers and brother unionists. That, and that alone, is the power that will bring us to victory." At the same time, however, the bulletin began to portray Olson as fundamentally responsible to the worker and farmer voters who had elected him, not to the capitalist class who controlled his party and the state apparatus he helped administer:

There is absolutely nothing strange in the fact that the Governor has made some concessions to this working class pressure. As Governor of the state he wields a great power, but it is by no means a completely independent personal power. As a Farmer-Labor Governor he is obliged to depend on the support of the farmers and the organized workers. They put him in office and they should not be the least bit bashful in presenting demands to him. He can ignore them only by committing political suicide.<sup>148</sup>

The *Militant* labeled Olson as "the shrewdest supporter of the bosses," an "agent of capitalism," a "liberal," and a "petty-bourgeois radical." The *Organizer* treated him as a contradictory leader of a reformist workers party. As Palmer points out, the Trotskyists "avoided declaring unequivocally that Olson was, indeed, a capitalist politician, albeit a 'progressive' and 'reformist' one, and Farmer-Laborism a capitalist political formation." The CLA's past ambiguity on the class nature of the FLP took on new significance in this context. Under the pressure of a union movement that held deep illusions in a bourgeois two-class party and with Olson rapidly recovering his reputation, reasserting that the FLP was some type of workers party amounted to an opportunist bending to the false

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<sup>148</sup> "The Road to Victory," *The Organizer*, vol. I, no. 20 (August 4, 1934): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n20-aug-04-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

consciousness of the Teamster base and the Trotskyists' fledgling militant allies in other AFL unions.<sup>149</sup>

In his critique, Palmer links the Minneapolis CLA's faltering line on Olson with the absence of the "labor party" slogan in their propaganda against the FLP. He argues that it was a mistake to reverse themselves on the question in 1931:

This mechanical rejection of the labour-party, posed amidst the factionalism leading up to 1934, thus limited the American Left Opposition, hobbling it at a time when working-class mobilisations suggested the possibility of new political breakthroughs. At precisely the point that it needed to be able to assert decisively that Olson's cross-class Farmer-Labor Party was not, in fact, a labour-party, but rather a third-party adjunct to the Roosevelt Democrats, the Communist League of America was handcuffed in its political critique. It could not bring itself to negotiate a creative path between the Scylla of opportunistic accommodation to the Farmer-Labor Party and the Charybdis of an altogether too wooden and sectarian rejection of the very possibility of American workers sustaining a genuine labour-party.

Therefore, argues Palmer, the Trotskyists were unable to pose any alternative to the FLP aside from their own "small and isolated Communist League of America," and this was an unviable perspective given the balance of forces.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Despite these criticisms, Palmer's overall evaluation of the Trotskyists' opposition to Olson is quite positive: "Nonetheless, the shortcoming aside, the Left Oppositionists guiding the General Drivers' Union were, indeed, capable of criticising Olson when the Governor clearly took actions that undermined the effectiveness of Local 574's strikes. The Minneapolis Trotskyists thus *generally* exhibited an acute understanding of how most effectively to negotiate the many contradictions – political and economic, organisational and ideological – at play in the complex weave of relations affecting the local class-struggle in 1934." See Palmer, 73, 122; "A 'Farmer-Labor' Strikebreaker," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 31 (August 4, 1934): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/aug-04-1934.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>150</sup> Palmer argues that the lack of the labor party slogan and murkiness on the class nature of the FLP caused a "curtailing [of] the *political* gains that the Communist League of America was able to consolidate on the back of the teamsters' rebellion." Palmer concludes with a wholly positive assessment: "on balance, the Trotskyist leadership of the teamsters, in spite of their failure to counterpose the need for a workers' party to Olson's governing Farmer-Labor formation, nonetheless acted astutely in pressing a successful strike-strategy. The Dunne brothers, Skoglund, and their CLA comrades understood exactly where Olson stood as a radically petty-bourgeois element, reliant on working-class support but committed to maintaining capitalist law and order. They steered a class-war course through the minefield of federal mediators, recalcitrant and reactionary bosses organised in the Citizens' Alliance, and a 'progressive' Governor whose charges included bayonet-wielding National Guardsmen." See Palmer, 121-123.

Palmer does not address the compelling arguments that led the CLA to drop the labor party slogan in 1931 or the subsequent national conditions that militated against the Trotskyists reviving it before 1938. He makes an important point, however, in recognizing the crying need for the slogan in Minneapolis. The Trotskyists' goal of building a mass revolutionary workers party demanded a concrete expression, especially when an outbreak of class struggle opened workers' minds to such a possibility. In the Northwest, where farmer-laborism still held sway, it was especially important to point the way forward to a *genuine* labor party, which would have meant breaking with the FLP or splitting it along class lines to form a new party. However, the Trotskyists were not searching for a solution of this kind. Within a few short months they would resolve their contradiction by going in the opposite direction, embracing an opportunist alliance with a wing of the farmer-labor movement.

### ***The November Elections***

In the fall of 1934, the CLA confronted the American bourgeoisie's electoral circus with its usual scorn. "Once again," the *Militant* announced, the workers "have the opportunity of voting while they starve." Hugo Oehler exposed the fundamental equivalence of the two major faces of capital, Democrats and Republicans, maintaining that "The whole difference revolves around the ways and means to patch up the capitalist system and to keep America on top of the heap of decaying world capitalism." The conflict between these bourgeois parties merely represented the struggle among the exploiters "for the spoils of exploitation."<sup>151</sup>

The CLA did not support any other parties in the workers movement in the 1934 elections, instead calling for support to its own candidates, in particular James P. Cannon for governor of New York. The *Militant* polemicized against the politically bankrupt

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<sup>151</sup> "Vote for the New Party in the Elections," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 41 (October 13, 1934): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/oct-13-1934.pdf> (accessed April 4, 2016); Hugo Oehler, "Hoover vs. Roosevelt," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 37 (September 15, 1934): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/sep-15-1934.pdf> (accessed April 4, 2016).

Socialist Party and Communist Party and vaguely listed “Farmer-Laborites” alongside them, calling “Don’t Vote for Parties of the Past!”<sup>152</sup>

The Minneapolis Trotskyists faced an actual Farmer-Labor Party, running with “the most radical” platform in its history, but they defied the local labor movement and refused to support Olson. The *Organizer* denounced the politicians of the two major capitalist parties: those who “make promises to labor which they do not intend to keep” and those who “do not even bother to promise.” It added to these two well-known categories of politicians “some smiling demagogue” who “comes along to slap labor on the back and make many promises. He creates a sensation by his glib statements and builds false hope in the minds of the workers which keeps them muddled and confused for a long time. But he will not, he dare not, keep his promises.” This was clearly a reference to Governor Olson and a warning against working-class illusions in his administration.<sup>153</sup>

On the other hand, the CLA made no attempt to seriously polemicize against the Minnesota FLP. By way of contrast, they did not hold back in their denunciation of Upton Sinclair’s “progressive” campaign for governor of California on the Democratic ticket. The Minneapolis branch also made no evident effort to educate its new recruits or Local 574’s growing base on the history of the farmer-labor movement and the Trotskyists’ opposition to it. According to Dobbs, the branch was too busy consolidating its new recruits and preparing for the fusion with the Musteites to “intervene to any great extent in the preelection activities.”<sup>154</sup> As he recalls:

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<sup>152</sup> “Vote for the New Party in the Elections,” 1, 4.

<sup>153</sup> Walker, 247; “No Friends to Reward,” *The Organizer*, vol. I, no. 47 (October 10, 1934): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n47-oct-10-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>154</sup> Dobbs reports that by the fall of 1934 the branch had reached about 100 members and close sympathizers, including recruits in various local trade unions and among students and intellectuals; “In the case of Local 574, a big and growing party fraction now existed.” See Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 213; *Teamster Politics*, 70; “Sinclair Plan a Daydream of Middle Class,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 35 (September 1, 1934): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/sep-01-1934.pdf> (accessed April 4, 2016).

The workers generally had mixed attitudes toward Olson. He was certainly no prize candidate in the eyes of most Local 574 members. Some simply stayed away from the polls, feeling no one deserved support. Many others voted for the incumbent governor as a lesser evil than the Republican. The latter view was prevalent to a considerable extent elsewhere in the trade unions, along with a significant amount of unqualified support for Olson. Taking the voting patterns as a whole, it was the working class that reelected him in 1934.<sup>155</sup>

Olson won by about 70,000 votes, down from his margin of 200,000 in 1932.

The economic chaos generated by the urban strike wave and the widespread perception of Olson as being sympathetic to the strikers crippled FLP support in rural Minnesota.

While Olson lost 95% of the state's rural counties, the FLP consolidated its strength in urban areas and "counted a rejuvenated labor movement as an important voting bloc."

Outside of the tiny Trotskyist organization, the loyalty of the working class to the Farmer-Labor governor grew.<sup>156</sup>

### ***The Founding of the Workers Party of the US***

During the final months of 1934 the Trotskyists conducted fusion negotiations with A.J. Muste's American Workers Party, a leftward-moving centrist organization that was open to the Trotskyists' authentic communist program after leading the great Auto-Lite strike in Toledo, Ohio, earlier that year. The "Declaration of Principles" adopted by the newly formed Workers Party of the United States (WPUS) restated a partial version Leon Trotsky's 1928 position on two-class parties: "any party which purports to represent two or more classes on an equal footing, or to direct its appeal 'to all classes,' is essentially a middle class party doomed to irresolution and surrender to the big capitalists in every decisive test." But instead of clearly labeling such a party a bourgeois party, it inherited the CLA's more recent conception, characterizing a farmer-labor party as a type

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<sup>155</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 70-71.

<sup>156</sup> Smemo, 42.

of “reformist party.” The Musteites had come to the fusion discussions with the same position.<sup>157</sup>

The new Declaration of Principles ruled out the possibility of supporting a farmer-labor party in an election, stating: “It is the task of the revolutionists to build their own party, not to engage in building up any party of reform.” In order to win over the rank and file of a labor or farmer-labor party, “the revolutionary party must at all times maintain its own political and organizational integrity and independence.” However, these passages are notably vague, and they expressly leave all tactical options open: “The Workers Party will work out its tactics toward these groups and movements in the light of its basic principles.”

Significantly, the new Declaration of Principles dodged the question of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. Instead it claimed ludicrously that “At present the Farmer-Labor party movement in this country is weak and inconsequential.”<sup>158</sup>

In the Trotskyists’ new monthly theoretical journal, the *New International*, Max Shachtman excoriated the reformists of the Socialist Party for adopting a motion to “support any [consolidation] with Farmer-Labor, Sinclair Epic, Progressive and other parties only if the principles and aims of socialism are not compromised.” He noted derisively that “The picture of such a consolidation is really too excruciating to contemplate.” Yet the Trotskyists were fusing with an organization that from its inception was well known for its advocacy of farmer-labor parties, and after its recent experience in Ohio dealt with the farmer-labor question by stating: “The tactics of a revolutionary party in dealing with right reformist groups must be very carefully

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<sup>157</sup> “Workers Party of the U.S. – Declaration of Principles,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 48 (December 8, 1934): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/dec-08-1934.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); *Toward An American Revolutionary Labor Movement: Statement of Programmatic Orientation of the American Workers Party* (pamphlet), 1934, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/pamphlets/tarlm.pdf> (accessed October 21, 2014), 25-26.

<sup>158</sup> “Workers Party of the U.S. -- Declaration of Principles,” 2.

considered. Mere opposition is too simple a solution.” No evidence suggests that this position was challenged during the unity negotiations.<sup>159</sup>

The WPUS also upheld the Trotskyists’ orientation toward “progressive” elements in the trade-union bureaucracy. The *Militant* announced the new organization’s policy: “All genuine left-wing and progressive elements throughout the country who will agree to work on the basis of the trade union policy outlined in the Declaration of Principles will be approached and invited to collaborate in the task of establishing a progressive movement.” The Principles outlined the class-struggle program counterposed to the reactionary policies of the old AFL bureaucrats and asserted that the Workers Party “will take the initiative in organizing the left and progressive forces to fight for a militant, class-struggle policy and leadership in the trade union movement.”<sup>160</sup>

A.J. Muste had been one of the prime targets for Trotskyist polemics against “progressives” during the slump in class struggle before 1933-34, but by the time of the fusion Muste and his comrades had been thoroughly transformed by their experience leading insurgent workers. The entire political terrain of the workers movement was shifting, and layers of “progressives” who had formerly earned Cannon’s castigation for playing their “contemptible role of decoy for the reactionaries” were now hurrying to catch up to the base of the class now in motion. As Knox points out, the orientation toward the labor left wing could “play a vital and useful role as long as the bulk of the reactionary AFL bureaucracy fought the establishment of industrial unions.” In the coming period, the efforts of the AFL bureaucracy to stamp out the inexorable rise of the industrial labor movement in the Northwest would propel the “progressive” opposition

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<sup>159</sup> Max Shachtman, “Right Face in the Socialist Party,” *The New Internationalist*, vol. I, no. 5 (December 1934): 133, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol01/no05/v01n05-dec-1934-new-int.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2016); Ross, 283; *Toward An American Revolutionary Labor Movement*, 26.

<sup>160</sup> “W.P. To Back Left Wing in Trade Unions,” *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 48 (December 8, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/dec-08-1934.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Workers Party of the U.S. -- Declaration of Principles,” 3.

toward the class-struggle camp of the Marxist revolutionaries, who were now well entrenched in the leadership of Minnesota's strongest union.<sup>161</sup>

Riding high on their victories in the class war, but equipped with an increasingly ambiguous program toward the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, the American Trotskyist movement launched itself as a new organization with new political horizons.

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<sup>161</sup> James P. Cannon, "Limits of the United Front," *The Militant*, April 1, 1931, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31*, 337-338; Knox (Part 3 of 4), 8.

## Chapter 4

### The Road to Critical Support

1935

In the spring of 1935 the American Trotskyists, abandoning their programmatic opposition to two-class parties, extended critical electoral support to the Minnesota FLP. With the survival of Local 574 and its red leadership in question over the winter of 1934-35, the Trotskyists sought and secured points of support in the labor and farmer-labor movements. In the process, they formed a political bloc with local AFL officials and Farmer-Laborites whose new mouthpiece, the *Northwest Organizer*, supported not only Local 574 and other militant unions but also, more importantly, the Farmer-Labor Party.

This new alliance may have preserved the Trotskyists' position in the Teamsters for some time, but it came with a high price. The Trotskyists reversed their stance on the FLP, granting it critical electoral support, and accepted a politically subordinate place in what they would have normally considered an unprincipled, class-collaborationist bloc. The new bloc and its weekly newspaper played a contradictory role for the rest of the decade, assisting the labor movement by organizing and rallying fresh waves of workers

into the unions, but also assisting the ruling class by helping to maintain one of its political parties intact and in power.

### ***The Winter of '35***

In the wake of the 1934 Minneapolis, Toledo, and San Francisco strikes, the American labor movement surged forward. These three cities taught the working class how it could fight and win. As the civil war between classes spread from coast to coast their examples “gave heart and hope to labor everywhere for the climactic struggle that was to build the CIO.” From the Trotskyists’ stronghold in Minneapolis the working class carried its new fierce militancy, systematic organizational connections, and revolutionary political ideas outward along interstate trucking routes to smaller industrial and commercial hubs in Minnesota and the surrounding states of the old Northwest. Local 574 took the initiative in establishing links with existing AFL and independent unions, helping them to organize the unorganized and win decisive class battles, thus bolstering fellow class-struggle militants at the expense of the entrenched craft union bureaucrats.<sup>162</sup>

At the same time, the Trotskyist leadership of the Minneapolis Teamsters could see the looming shadow of a backlash against the triumphs of the past year. The biggest labor battle in the region over the winter was a strike by Teamsters Local 173 of Fargo, North Dakota, which had been violently attacked by the state in January and was eventually broken with the help of IBT President Daniel Tobin. He denounced the strike leadership (which included Trotskyists from Minneapolis) in the pages of the local anti-union press, then revoked the local’s charter for falling behind on per capita tax payments to the International. Tobin also successfully pressured the Fargo Trades and Labor Assembly – the central body of the city’s AFL unions – to expel Local 173 from the “House of Labor.” Tobin had threatened Minneapolis Local 574 with disaffiliation in the

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<sup>162</sup> Preis, 33; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 50.

spring of 1934, and in the fall of 1934 had begun harassing the local about per capita taxes as well. In early 1935 the Workers Party of the U.S. was in the process of initiating a new legal defense organization, the Non-Partisan Labor Defense (NPLD), which modeled itself after the early CP's International Labor Defense. Upon hearing a report on developments in Minnesota in early March, Max Shachtman argued to the Political Committee – the organization's resident national leadership body located in New York – that the branch be advised to immediately set up a provisional NPLD organization. The Workers Party, even as it extended itself in the labor offensive, was anxious to prepare its branches and its allies for defensive actions as well.<sup>163</sup>

### ***The Origins of the Northwest Labor Unity Conference***

The Trotskyists had organized a preliminary conference in St. Paul in November 1934, which was attended by representatives from fifteen AFL and independent unions – including a full mobilization of Communist Party supporters, who tried unsuccessfully to hijack the conference. The delegates adopted the following six-point program:

1. For industrial unionism through amalgamation wherever possible and through building industrial unions in all mass production industries.
2. To promote class solidarity and reciprocal aid between all unions in times of trouble and strife.
3. For unity against vigilante, law and order leagues, 'citizens committees' and the like.
4. To promote working class education through forums, lectures, discussions, classes and an organ.
5. To infuse the labor movement with the class struggle attitude, to acquaint workers with the truth that the interests of the wage worker and those of the boss are antagonistic, and to oppose class collaboration.
6. To promote organization of unemployed workers for the protection of the unions as well as for the benefit of the unemployed.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 45-49, 54, 58; Palmer, 51-59; Minutes of WP Political Committee, March 11, 1935, James P. Cannon Papers (1944), box 43, (Microfilm edition, 1994), State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1.

<sup>164</sup> The *Militant* reported on the St. Paul conference, also covering up the FLP question with a vague reference to "Cooperation on a progressive basis." See "Minn. Union Progressives in Conference," *The Militant*, vol. VII, no. 46 (November 17, 1934): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1934/nov-17-1934.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

Farrell Dobbs depicts this as the construction of a class-struggle support network: its “sole objective was to aid all workers’ organizations in making labor unity more meaningful and productive.” In reality, this was the Trotskyists’ first step into a class-collaborationist propaganda bloc. Its professed commitment to “class struggle” and opposition to “class collaboration” covered up its position on the Farmer-Labor Party and its inclusion of active FLP elements. From its inception it projected establishing a newspaper, initially the idea of Julius F. Emme, a founding FLPer and CP member from World War I to 1925. Emme had been appointed by Governor Olson to be Secretary of the State Industrial Commission – the state agency that oversaw the Labor Bureau, which administered and enforced labor laws. He had used this position to organize the State Employees Association and wanted to launch a newspaper for the new union.<sup>165</sup>

The St. Paul meeting established a Continuing Committee of Emme, several union heads, and the three Trotskyist leaders Vincent Dunne, Carl Skoglund, and Farrell Dobbs. Through this committee the Trotskyists spent the following months consolidating their new bloc, which was soon named the Northwest Labor Unity Conference. After the successful 1934 strikes, other regional unions frequently called on Local 574 to help organize and bolster their own actions, and in the spring of 1935 the Trotskyists took these opportunities to hold NLUC gatherings with other militant unionists. Supporting a foundry workers’ strike in the town of Albert Lea may have helped secure the participation of the Independent Union of All Workers (IUAW) in southern Minnesota. Backing a desperate and bloody strike by the two Twin Cities garage mechanics locals may have been particularly important. These were Machinists Local 459, Emme’s union since 1913, and Local 382, the one Minneapolis union local still under the influence of the Communist Party. At first the Minneapolis Stalinists reluctantly supported the new

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<sup>165</sup> Emme’s new SEA state organizer and fellow delegate to the NLUC, Henry Schultz, had played an important role in the final Teamster strike of 1934 and was then recruited to the CLA. See Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 53; Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, “History of the agency,” *Department of Labor and Industry*, <http://www.dli.mn.gov/History.asp> (accessed January 19, 2017); Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 51-52.

bloc, but within a few short months they were looking for opportunities to turn against it. It is ironic, to say the least, that the Trotskyists established their own localized popular front, CP supporters in tow, several months before the Stalinists began to launch such formations themselves.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> The Continuing Committee was made up of “Frank Ellis and Joe Vorhees [sic] of Austin; Milton Carlson and R. C. Sermon of Duluth; J. F. Emme and O. R. Votaw of St. Paul; William Cruden of Fargo; Ray Dunne, Carl Skoglund, and [Farrell Dobbs] of Minneapolis.” See Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 52-53.

After the Albert Lea strike, Local 574 and its allies held an NLUC gathering in nearby Austin, at the headquarters of the IUAW. See “574 Boys Support Albert Lea Picket,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 11 (March 2, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/mar-02-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “Albert Lea Strikers Duped by False Lawyers,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 16 (April 6, 1935), 1, 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/apr-06-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

Emme was blacklisted and out of work in the St. Paul metal industry by 1928. He was unemployed until 1930, when his old FLP connections secured him his new position. Regarding the Third Period CP’s influence in an AFL union, Dobbs explains that Stalinist William Mauseth “and his close associates had played it cool during the ‘third period’ so as to avoid jeopardizing their standing within the [International Association of Machinists].” At the outbreak of their strike, their local was so isolated in the workers movement that they had no choice but to accept support from the hated “Trotskyites.” See Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 41-44, 51; *Teamster Politics*, 101; “Strike Shuts Garages in Twin Cities, by Special Correspondent,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 5 (January 12, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/jan-12-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “Union Victory Ends St. Paul Garage Strike,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 6 (January 19, 1935): 1, 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/jan-19-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “Garage Strike Ends in Gains” and “Progressives Seek National Organization,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 8 (February 2, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/feb-02-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “Conference Exposes Plots Against Progressive Unions,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

The WPUS national leadership in New York oversaw this work, covering it with regular articles in the *New Militant*. The center was clearly thrilled with the party’s progress in Minneapolis, consistently endorsing the initiatives taken by the branch. Likely referring to the planned NLUC organ, the PC tasked the Trade Union Committee with coming up with “suggestions for a progressive union paper.” In fact, the PC encouraged all WPUS branches to follow the example of Minneapolis and “organize local conferences wherever possible” in order to “build [the] national progressive movement.” However, in the early months of 1935 the PC was primarily concerned with a host of other pressing issues: the assimilation of the Muste group, kicked off with a national speaking tour by Muste and Cannon; the work of the National Unemployed League, a mass organization brought in with the Musteites; the founding of the NPLD and immediate high-profile legal defense cases such as the frame-up of 18 workers in Sacramento, California; outbreaks of class struggle in Akron and Toledo, Ohio; the scandalous zig-zags of the CP; the impending split in the SP; and international developments showing the signs of another world war brewing. See Index of the *New Militant*, 1935, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/index.htm> (accessed July 3, 2016); Minutes of WP Political Committee, February 21 and March 13, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43.

The Minneapolis Trotskyists were increasingly caught up in legal and social defense work in these months, and in this work they gladly accepted support from forces in the farmer-labor movement. Miles Dunne spoke before a Minneapolis FLP convention to rally support for the Fargo Teamsters and Local 574 organized defense meetings in the city that drew support from both unions and Farmer-Labor clubs. As the *New Militant* reported, “Tag days, dances and card parties are being given in Minneapolis to popularize the fight and to raise funds. Socialists, Farmer-Laborites, comrades in the Workers Party, trade unions, fraternal groups, etc. have been drawn into the defense movement.” Initially these efforts met with great success, and the Trotskyists believed their fortunes were on the upswing: “In short, it can be truthfully said that the conduct of the Fargo strike has contributed to raising the entire trade union movement in the Northwest to a new high level. The example, and the direct aid, of Local 574 has been the decisive factor in the Fargo resurgence.” Fargo would turn out to be an ugly defeat, but at this stage the Trotskyists were elated by the outpouring of support for their cause.<sup>167</sup>

In the course of these activities, the Minneapolis Trotskyists were subjected to a sharp increase of pressure to adapt to the FLP loyalties of the Northwest labor movement. The Farmer-Labor Party was gearing up to challenge incumbent Republican Mayor of Minneapolis A. J. Bainbridge, who was widely hated among workers for his strike-breaking role in 1934, in what would be a closely contested spring municipal election. Furthermore, Bill Brown, the Trotskyists’ most crucial ally in the city, was running on the FLP ticket for alderman of the city’s Third Ward. As Smemo notes, the clashes between Local 574 and Daniel Tobin, with the AFL establishment behind him, threatened to split the urban labor vote that was essential to the electoral successes of the FLP. It is likely that the AFL unionists and farmer-laborites that collaborated with Local 574 in

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<sup>167</sup> *The Militant* was renamed *The New Militant* upon fusion with the Musteites. See Robert Whitcomb, “16 Sentenced for ‘Riot’ in Fargo; Labor Aroused,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 11 (March 2, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/mar-02-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “Dan Tobin Rats on Fargo Driver But Ranks Remain Firm,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 15 (March 30, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/mar-30-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

these months were primarily concerned with the FLP's immediate electoral challenge, and the Trotskyists evidently preferred to avoid causing a serious disruption as they consolidated the NLUC.<sup>168</sup>

In the midst of all this, Minneapolis sent a group of comrades, including Carl Skoglund, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the March plenary meeting of the WP National Committee. At this plenum the Trotskyist leadership betrayed their historic position opposing support to two-class parties, authorizing the Minneapolis branch to give critical electoral support to the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party.

### ***The Pittsburgh Plenum***

At the Pittsburgh plenum a faction fight broke out with the sectarian group around Hugo Oehler, which James P. Cannon later described as a ““factional shambles such as I have never seen before in such a setting.”” Finally, on the fourth day of the plenum, the National Committee took up the “Minneapolis Labor Party Question.” After Carl Skoglund gave the report and other Minneapolis comrades weighed into the discussion, Cannon put forward the motion, previously circulated to NC members, “to allow [the] Minneapolis branch to support F.L.P. candidates in the municipal election.”<sup>169</sup> The plenum adopted a document, “Statement of National Committee on the Problem of the Action of the Minneapolis Branch of the WP in the Forthcoming Municipal Elections,” that was subsequently circulated in an internal discussion bulletin. It reads, in full:

The Minneapolis comrades explained that the Farmer-Labor Party which has the backing of all the unions in Minneapolis is campaigning for the overthrow of the

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<sup>168</sup> Farrell Dobbs would later claim that Bill Brown “considered himself a loyal Trotskyist and, politically, he was,” even though Brown never formally became a member of their organization. Cannon had no such illusions, instead characterizing Brown as having a ““sound class instinct.”” Bryan Palmer concurs, observing: “While far more militant than the conservatives on the Executive Board of Local 574, Brown was anything but a Trotskyist. A committed Farmer-Laborite, he took up political ground far closer to the mainstream than his new found Left Opposition allies.” See Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 38; *Teamster Politics*, 74; Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism*, 144; Palmer, 51; Smemo, 44.

<sup>169</sup> The motion itself is not attached to the minutes and no copy has been located. See PRL Introduction, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?*, 13-14; Minutes of WP National Committee Plenum, March 15-18, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43, 3.

reactionary lawyer, etc., who was responsible for terrorism against workers in last year's strikes at the behest of the employers. Though the primaries have not yet been held Farmer-Labor candidates have been selected. It was pointed out that if at this late date the W.P. put up its own candidates and thus divided the labor vote and made possible the return to office of reactionary officials, the W.P. would begin its public career in Minneapolis under circumstances which would make it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to explain its program and its attitude to the vast majority of the workers. The minds of the workers would for a long time be closed against all W.P. propaganda. The N.C. accordingly decided that although in general we do not hesitate to set up candidates of the revolutionary party against those of a reformist party and do not change our position with regard to labor party developments as stated in the Declaration of Principles and the memorandum of the Pittsburgh N.C.,

1. In view of the special circumstances in Minneapolis in the coming municipal election the W.P. will not put up its candidates but support the candidates of the F.L.P.
2. The W.P. nevertheless conducts its own campaign in the election under its own name and explains to the workers the exact reasons why it is not running any candidates of its own.
3. There is to be no affiliation with the FLP and it is to be made clear that this is a special decision and constitutes no precedent for future campaigns. The general policy of the W.P. is to run its own candidates.
4. The Minneapolis branch is to issue a leaflet for mass distribution explaining its position to the workers in this campaign including the position that the problem of the workers cannot be solved through any reformist party.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> "Statement of National Committee on the Problem of the Action of the Minneapolis Branch of the WP in the Forthcoming Municipal Elections," *Organization Bulletin*, no. 2 (April 1935), The Records of the Socialist Workers Party, box 10, folder 1, (microfilm edition, 1977), State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Originals in the possession of the Library of Social History, New York, New York, 12. The Pittsburg NC plenum minutes and statement refer to several matters that require further research:

- 1) While Cannon had circulated the motion and put it forward at the plenum, Carl Skoglund delivered the report, which suggests that the plan originated in the Minneapolis branch. However, no evidence of discussions or a proposal from Minneapolis has been located.
- 2) Upon learning that Minneapolis comrades had participated in an FLP nominating convention (representing Local 574, which was affiliated to the FLP from an unknown date), A. J. Muste put forward a motion that this issue be referred to the Political Committee, which would discuss it and issue a directive to the Minneapolis comrades regarding the practice. The minutes of subsequent PC meetings do not refer to this question and no such directive has been located. The NC statement declares that "There is to be no affiliation with the FLP," meaning that the WPUS itself would not affiliate, although it appears that the question of WPUS cadres leading a union local that was already affiliated was not formally resolved; instead, the Minneapolis branch was allowed to continue the practice as it saw fit.
- 3) One NC member, Arnold Johnson, voted against Cannon's motion to give critical support to the FLP. The minutes do not record any motivation for Johnson's vote, and no document written by him on the subject has been located. A year later Johnson defected to the Communist Party, and it was revealed

One could take issue with this statement for whitewashing the FLP, as it attacks Republican Mayor Bainbridge without mentioning Governor Olson, who was just as “responsible for terrorism against workers in last year’s strikes.” It also did not mention that the past November the Trotskyists had held fast against all pressures, withholding support from FLP candidates without discrediting themselves. It claimed continuity with the murky WPUS Declaration of Principles instead of the CLA’s founding documents, further codifying the Trotskyists’ muddled new view that a two-class party could stand on the proletarian side of the class line – a “reformist party.” But more importantly, by giving critical support to a capitalist party, the Trotskyists for the first time crossed the class line, betraying the basic principle of proletarian political independence. Explicitly capitulating to the existing farmer-labor loyalties of the Minneapolis trade-union movement, the NC discarded Marxist analysis in favor of a liberal methodology that justified political intervention on behalf of the “lesser evil” of two capitalist parties. They appear to have done so with a guilty conscience, promising themselves that it was an exceptional situation and that it would set no precedent.

At the same time, the WPUS published in the *New Internationalist* an article by Max Shachtman that may have served to reassure the organization that it was maintaining its principled position on farmer-labor parties. The article did not address the current situation in Minnesota or the new policy, instead recounting at length the La Follette debacle of the 1920s to polemicize against the contemporary labor bureaucrats, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party for trying to channel the workers movement into a quixotic quest for an ahistorical “labor party.” In the process, Shachtman appears to reassert the Trotskyists’ founding position that a farmer-labor party is a *capitalist* party, but he used confusing formulations: “There is no room in the present conditions of the class struggle for the stable, unartificial existence of a ‘class Labor’ party (to say nothing of the fantastic two-class ‘class Farmer-Labor’ party) which is distinct from a third

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that he had been voting the Stalinist Third-Period line in WPUS meetings in an attempt to disrupt the Trotskyists’ work, which could possibly explain his vote in this instance.

capitalist party as well as from the revolutionary party of the proletariat.” Again combining the concepts of “labor party” and “farmer-labor party,” Shachtman explicitly categorized *both* as bourgeois in nature:

*it is not the business of the revolutionary Marxists, above all in the present stage of the relationship between capitalist disintegration and social reformism, to initiate or to help organize and found in addition to their own party another party for the 'second class citizens', for the 'backward workers', a 'Labor' party, i.e., a third capitalist party, even if composed predominantly of workers.*

This was a deviation from the party’s typical stance, which lumped labor and farmer-labor parties into the same category as “reformist workers parties.” It is also an aberration in that it does not address potential tactical approaches to such a party already in existence. The WP’s Declaration of Principles had left such options open, as would its future propaganda.<sup>171</sup>

The WP in this period wrote increasingly often on the issue of the labor party, as the surging workers movement raised interest in the idea among wider layers of workers. The debate over this question escalated between the left and right wings of the Socialist Party, as various populist and liberal forces came together in attempts to form a third – sometimes “labor” – party, and as the CP joined the fray with a newfound opportunism. The Stalinists had suddenly reversed themselves on the labor party question in January 1935, the first step in the American CP’s lurch from its sectarian Third Period into its openly class-collaborationist “People’s Front” or “Popular Front” policy. Before this turn, the CP had “looked upon anybody who advocated the formation of a labor party as a deliberate agent of capitalism, a social demagogue and a social fascist.” Now, on surprise orders from Moscow, it embraced the slogan, and the Trotskyists castigated them for it. As Shachtman’s article in the *New International* demonstrates, when the Trotskyists wrote on the question of the labor party or farmer-labor party nationally, historically, or theoretically, they generally avoided mention of their policy in Minnesota.

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<sup>171</sup> (Emphasis in original). Max Shachtman, “The Problem of the Labor Party,” *The New International*, vol. II, no. 2 (March 1935), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1935/03/labparty.htm> (accessed November 21, 2014).

On the other hand, their articles on Minnesota dealt with the FLP there in isolation, treating it as an exception in the wider discussion.<sup>172</sup>

After the Pittsburgh NC plenum, one comrade who had been present wrote a document opposing the new opportunist policy for Minnesota. The document's author is unknown, but its more than eight pages of polemics against both the Oehler faction and the Cannon leadership indicate that it was written by a member of Martin Abern's clique. The author saw the decision on the Minneapolis situation as one example among many of Cannon's deep-seated opportunism, a constant charge leveled by the Abernites. The section on the Farmer-Labor Party appears almost as an afterthought toward the end of the document, and there is no evidence that its author wrote further on the subject, made the case to the Minneapolis branch, or put forward motions in any body. It did not mention the experience of the 1920s or the CLA's founding formal position, making no effort to pose the question as one of principle or program toward two-class parties. As with Cowl's 1932 document, the alleged problems in the Minneapolis branch were ammunition to hurl at Cannon and the party leadership.

At the same time this Abernite document sheds light on the discussions in the WP leadership, illustrating the importance of the labor party question and the struggle with Stalinism in the considerations of the Trotskyists at the time. Denouncing the decision to give critical support to the Minnesota FLP, the author argued that "It is most unfortunate that this action should be taken at the very time we are polemicizing against the Stalinists for their advocacy of the Labor Party. How can we be taken seriously if in words we polemicize against a certain course and in action, at the very first moment the matter becomes a practical issue, we cannot be distinguished from the Labor-Partyites?"

<sup>172</sup> Hugo Oehler, "Should Revolutionists Build a Labor Party?" (Part I), *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 9 (February 9, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/oehler/1935/02/labparty1.htm> (accessed June 22, 2016); and (Part II), *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 10 (February 16, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/oehler/1935/02/labparty2.htm> (accessed June 22, 2016); A.J. Muste, "Third Party Meet Sows Confusion; F.D.R. Safe," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 30 (July 20, 1935), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/muste/1935/07/3rdparty.htm> (accessed June 22, 2016); "The C.P. and the Labor Party," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 7 (January 26, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/jan-26-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

The author also opposed the decision on the grounds that it represented a capitulation to the farmer-laborite politics of the Minnesota working class, implying that the WP branch did not challenge these views in the militant workers it recruited. Rejecting the justifications that were expressed at the NC meeting – “that Local 574 is automatically part of the Farmer Labor Party, that it was not possible under the circumstances to do anything else, that our comrades and their position are well known, that we will make perfectly clear our attitude towards the Farmer Labor Party, etc.” – the author pointed to a deeper motivation: “Many comrades have made it plain that in Minn. we have gained members who do not draw a sharp distinction between belonging to the WP and belonging to the Labor Party.” The comrade concluded:

Evidently there was here an unwillingness in Minn. to swim against the stream, and an acquiescence on the part of our PC that borders on opportunism of the worst kind. It was our duty to put up our own candidates on their own platform and to attack the fakers. It was our duty to expose the whole fraud of a Farmer Labor Party and not to traffic with it in any way. Workers will take it, despite all our ‘independent’ campaigning, that we are lending support to the Farmer Labor Party and thus we will be covering it with the necessary ‘red’ to put it over on the working class. Instead of dispelling illusions we will help maintain them. In fact the very reason given, in [the] final analysis proves this: that without our support a reactionary old time politician may be elected instead of a Farmer Laborite. This is in essence the theory of the lesser evil, a theory that we must explode and not foster in the minds of the workers. Our tasks, it cannot be stressed enough, are revolutionary ones. We must separate the workers from the bourgeoisie, not aid in fostering bourgeois influence in their ranks. And this we do by our present stand.<sup>173</sup>

This would have been a powerful indictment if it were not undermined by the cliquism motivating the entire document. There is thus far no evidence that anyone, on the PC or in Minneapolis, took these charges as a serious political critique and responded to them as such.

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<sup>173</sup> (Emphasis in original). “The Party After the Pittsburgh Plenum,” no author, n.d. (hand-marked 1935), Records of the SWP, box 10, folder 1, 8.

Copies of this document can be found in both the SWP Papers and the Albert Glotzer Papers. It may have been circulated to the NC, but it is possible that it was only shared among the Abern group.

Neither the NC statement motivating critical support nor the Abernite document give any hint of the Minneapolis branch's immediate need for regional allies to help defend them against Tobin's bureaucratic attacks, or their efforts to organize such forces to participate in the Northwest Labor Unity Conference. The Pittsburgh NC meeting dealt with this issue separately under the very next agenda point, "Union Situation in Minneapolis and Fargo," and passed another motion put forward by Cannon that laid out necessary defensive measures. The resulting NC statement indicates that the Minneapolis comrades reported on the situation in Fargo and Tobin's moves against Local 173, discussing the "many indications of a concerted drive by the Tobin administration on the progressive and militant elements in the Northwest." The Trotskyists understood that Local 574 was next: "If the charter of 574 is lifted the union should protest the expulsion and conduct the whole struggle around a campaign for reinstatement." The NC voted "To begin again to publish the Organizer as already decided by the Minneapolis comrades, to take the offensive in exposing the conspiracy and forcing the official labor movement to line up in support of Local 574." Specifically, they sought to "Line up the [Central Labor Union] to continue to recognize Local 574 and continue the fight for reinstatement." This ambitious plan would be far more feasible with the WPUS now supporting the electoral campaign of the Farmer-Labor Party.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> As this statement shows, the Trotskyists' contradictory orientation toward progressives took on a new meaning in this period. At times the term was used to refer to unionists who favored industrial organizing campaigns and a class-struggle policy against employers, people with whom the Trotskyists could seriously collaborate. In the Northwest it also meant temporarily sympathetic layers of the trade-union bureaucracy and the Farmer-Labor Party; the PC accurately referred to the revived *Organizer* as a "progressive union paper." In that region, the Trotskyists started identifying themselves as progressives to better blend in to the movement. While their strategic orientation toward progressives was essentially non-operational before 1934, by early 1935 it appeared to them to have national applicability. In February the PC voted to support a New York-area organization called the Progressive Trade Unionists; in March they approved the Chicago branch's proposal to call a "progressive trade union conference." The Pittsburgh NC plenum resolution stated that "In every city where we have branches, steps should be taken immediately to organize local progressive groups around the general outstanding issues of the trade union movement such as amalgamation and industrial unionism, promotion of class solidarity, trade union democracy, solidarity between employed and unemployed, unity of action of the labor movement in its struggles." These groups were supposed to take the Northwest Labor Unity Conference as their model, and the NC considered making

### ***The Founding of the Northwest Organizer***

On April 13 the Minneapolis Trotskyists convened the first and last major gathering of the Northwest Labor Unity Conference in the Twin Cities. On the same day, Local 574 received a letter from Daniel Tobin informing the local that he had finally revoked their charter, expelling them from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the American Federation of Labor. The letter was presented to the assembled NLUC delegates, who were already fully prepared to take up 574's cause.

The Conference proceedings mostly concerned regional labor defense work, but they revolved in particular around the regional labor leaders that Local 574 had managed to draw in. One linchpin of the Conference was the delegation from the Austin IUAW: President O. J. Fosso, Business Agent Joe Voorhees, and Frank Ellis, a leader of the independent union with experience going back to the IWW, who chaired every session.<sup>175</sup>

Vincent Dunne introduced the other central pillar of the Conference in his opening remarks, giving a "short history of Emme's case" and speaking to the need for a labor newspaper. Emme had just been fired from his position on the State Industrial Commission for denouncing, at the Trotskyists' Austin NLUC gathering, a judge who had railroaded workers to jail in Albert Lea. The *New Militant* had already started

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Miles Dunne the national organizer "to further build and strengthen the groups... in preparation for the arrangements of a national conference to launch formally the National Progressive Movement." The Trotskyists, however, did not have the organizational strength or the objective openings to pursue this work outside of Minnesota. By July 1935 evidence of these aspirations had disappeared from PC minutes, and the *New Militant* reasserted a hard line against the "so-called progressive trade union leaders" for channeling rank-and-file radicalization into a historically bankrupt labor party. See "Statement by National Committee on Trade Union Situation in Minneapolis and Fargo," March 18, 1935, *Organization Bulletin*, no. 2 (April 1935), Records of the SWP, 12; Minutes of WP Political Committee, March 13, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43; "Statement by National Committee on Trade Union Situation in Minneapolis and Fargo," March 18, 1935, *Organization Bulletin*, no. 2 (April 1935), Records of the SWP, 12; Minutes of WP Political Committee, February 25, 1935, Albert Glotzer Papers, box 6, folder 28, 1; "Trade Union Proposals (Pittsburgh N.C. meeting)," n.d., Cannon Papers, box 43; A. J. Muste, "Third Party Meet Sows Confusion: F.D.R. Safe," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 30 (July 20, 1935), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/muste/1935/07/3rdparty.htm> (accessed June 22, 2016).

<sup>175</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 50; Minutes of the Northwest Labor Unity Conference, April 13, 1935, Farrell Dobbs Papers, box 15, (Microfilm edition, 1994), State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1.

defending Emme, a “progressive trade unionist,” and demanding his reinstatement – without commenting on the class nature of the Commission or the FLP administration in general. Emme had actually been making trouble for the Minnesota AFL since 1933, when he and his supporters spent several months attempting to secure an AFL charter for a new state employees union. Their efforts were stymied by the bureaucracy, but they decided in March 1934 to found the State Employees Association regardless. Emme made enemies in the AFL by bypassing the official red tape, and by early 1935 the AFL heads were already making preparations with the other Commissioners to purge Emme, taking their case to Governor Olson and possibly securing his assent (in any case, there is no evidence that Olson defended Emme’s appointment). Emme’s call for the impeachment of an anti-union judge at a Trotskyist-led conference gave the Commissioners the excuse they needed, and he was summarily excused and denied an appeal hearing. By the time of the April NLUC meeting the firing was “causing most widespread reverberations within the Farmer-Labor party and the trade union movement in Minnesota.” By allying with the Minneapolis Teamsters and their militant friends, Emme stood to gain support for his personal cause, but his independent state employees union also stood to benefit from participation in the newly cohered bloc of AFL unions now rallying around the now independent Local 574.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> The Trotskyists normally would have had nothing to do with an internal FLP spat concerning the personnel of a state labor board. No record has been found of discussion about the decision to defend Emme. See “Albert Lea Strikers Duped by False Lawyers,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 16 (April 6, 1935): 1, 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/apr-06-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “Conference Exposes Plots Against Progressive Unions,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Emme Discharge Not Closed Case to Unions,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 3 (May 8, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n03-may-08-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “State Executive Council Fears Results of Election in August,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 5 (May 22, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n05-may-22-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “State Employees Renew Affiliation Effort,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 6 (May 29, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n06-may-29-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

Based on their contributions as summarized in the Conference minutes, the Trotskyists' primary NLUC allies were essentially liberals. Voorhees gave the report on labor defense, concluding "that the final solution of labor defense question lies in educational work." Then Emme spoke on the discussion round to encourage labor reliance on the court system, explaining that "many things can be done with the law." He went on: "A peace officer can only do or assume certain things but because most of us do not know it, they assume many things they do not have the right to assume." He complained of police abusing arrest procedures but assured the Conference that "If we know something of the law, there are many things we can use to protect ourselves." These individuals showed no interest in waging class war against the Northwest employer class.<sup>177</sup>

Problems in the IUAW leadership broke out into a minor scandal at the NLUC meeting when Farrell Dobbs praised O. J. Fosso as "one of the originators of this Conference movement" during his report on the work of the Continuing Committee since the last gathering. Just the week before the *New Militant* had reported that Fosso had assisted in the railroading of the Albert Lea workers by pulling a labor lawyer off their case and convincing them to take a plea deal: "the Austin Union has unanimously demanded that Fosso resign from the presidency for his cowardly and stupid [advice] to the Albert Lea strikers, as well as for his general reactionary policies which he is trying to impose on the heretofore militant Independent Union of All Workers." After Dobbs' report Voorhees demanded that the Conference deal with Fosso, and they immediately voted to expel him. Voorhees also denounced one Kenneth Grogan, the president of the Albert Lea union in question, and the Conference voted to expel him as well, "for life and ten years." Dobbs avoids this embarrassing episode entirely in his account.<sup>178</sup>

Finally, Julius Emme gave his presentation on the need for a labor press, laying out the Continuing Committee's proposal to launch the *Northwest Organizer*. Dobbs'

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<sup>177</sup> Minutes of NLUC, 1-2.

<sup>178</sup> Minutes of NLUC, 3, 4; "Albert Lea Strikers," 1, 4.

history is open about Emme's role, explaining his background as a founding FLPer, his connections with Governor Olson and his termination from the governor's labor board. He recounts that Emme was central to establishing the new paper: "The layout for the *Northwest Organizer* was planned — and the contents of the first issue outlined — in a session at Emme's St. Paul living quarters, with [Vincent] Ray Dunne, Henry Schultz, and myself also present. For the first few weeks Henry and I got out the paper as best we could, with help from Ray on the editorial line."<sup>179</sup>

While the *Northwest Organizer* was officially the organ of the NLUC, it was intended to replace the *Organizer* as the mouthpiece of Local 574 (the original strike bulletin had been suspended in October 1934 due to lack of funds). The Trotskyists maintained editorial control and produced the paper, but it served all the NLUC participants in their various struggles. For example, William Cruden, president of the besieged Fargo Local 173, and his fellow union officers faced charges stemming from the Fargo strike and would later serve prison sentences; Frank Ellis and the IUAW continued to grapple with O. J. Fosso, who soon seized control of that union's newspaper; and Julius Emme continued his fight with the FLP leadership to regain his position with the State Industrial Commission. The paper was therefore quite eclectic; even the Stalinists participated sporadically.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> The *NO* would later be edited by Carlos Hudson, "a young Trotskyist intellectual with journalistic talent, who had helped out on the strike daily in 1934. He, of course, acted in consultation with the union leadership." Miles Dunne subsequently took over as editor, a post he kept until the paper was discontinued. See Minutes of NLUC, 4; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 51-55.

<sup>180</sup> Emme's cause gave the early issues of the *Northwest Organizer* some wildly contradictory attitudes toward government labor boards. The WP's *New Militant* consistently exposed New Deal legislation and state labor bodies as machinations of the capitalist rulers meant to suppress class struggle, combatting illusions in their supposed neutrality and the labor bureaucrats who preached reliance on them. After three months the *Northwest Organizer* reprinted a sharp *NM* article on the subject, but its own perspective ranged from Emme's liberal whining to mildly critical calls for accountability. Emme's open letter, published in the first issue, invoked the authority of "the people, who are the final court of appeal," and concluded: "it has been a dignified effort to establish for all time the principle that state employees are human beings and, as subjects of our state, entitled to the protections granted by the Constitution thereof. So far as I am concerned, this will never be a closed affair until that principle is established for all time." Several other articles advocating for Emme treated the State Industrial Commission (and the state as a whole) as a potentially evenhanded force; one editorial

Dobbs' glowing portrayal of the NLUC reflected its success in drawing together disparate political elements for both mutual defense and class-struggle offense around a program of mass industrial unionization, a breakthrough for the tiny Trotskyist tendency. The NLUC voted to support the WP's new Non-Partisan Labor Defense, giving the

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demand that he "receive a fair and impartial hearing." The *NO* drew no explicit class characterization, but it never contradicted Emme's liberal perspective. Articles on other state boards were not much better. One complained of the "feebleness of the National Labor Relations Board" and another attacked the regional labor board for being "dormant," as if these were pro-working-class institutions that did not function well enough. Another editorial defended these state agencies against more openly reactionary machinations: "Ineffective as was the NRA, with its section 7A, there is insistent demand from industry that it be abolished. Impotent as were the Labor Boards, the bosses did not like them." The paper reserved its real fire for local "diabolical devices" set up by employers, like the Committee of One Hundred and the Citizens Committee. The old *Organizer*, by way of contrast, had roared, "**Labor cannot and will not give up the strike weapon.** Labor has not in the past received any real benefits from the governmental boards and constituted authorities. What Labor has received in union recognition, wage raises, and betterment in conditions of work, has been won **in spite of such boards**" (emphasis in original). See Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 45-52, 62-63; "The New 'Magna Charta' for Labor," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 13 (July 17, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n13-jul-17-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Letters to the Editor," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 2, 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Conference Exposes Plots Against Progressive Unions," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Emme Discharge Not Closed Case to Unions" *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 3 (May 8, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n03-may-08-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "What About Emme?" *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 4 (May 15, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n04-may-15-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Biographies: Emery Nelson," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 5 (May 22, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n05-may-22-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "State Executive Council Fears Results of Election in August," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 5 (May 22, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n05-may-22-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Citizens Committee Move Started in Minneapolis: St. Louis Union Sees Committee in Action," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Where to from Here?," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "The Labor Board," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 11 (July 3, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n11-jul-03-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Remember the Past—No Truce," *The Organizer*, vol. I, no. 46 (October 6, 1934): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/theorganizer/v1n46-oct-06-1934-the-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Hillard H. Smith, "The Committee Of One Hundred," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 8 (June 12, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n08-jun-10-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Machinists' Union Supports Drivers," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 11 (July 3, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n11-jul-03-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

Trotskyists the resources necessary to, for example, bring comrade Francis Heisler from Chicago to represent the Fargo workers victimized by vigilante raids and police repression. Wide support for the NPLD in the Northwest may have helped get the new organization off the ground nationally. Moreover, the bloc's new newspaper was a fiery propaganda sheet, its six-point declaration of class war printed in its first issue and the slogans "ALL WORKERS INTO THE UNIONS; ALL UNIONS INTO THE STRUGGLE" spanning the bottom of every issue's front page. Originally conceived as a bi-weekly, it went weekly after its second issue, and its circulation soared, eventually even surpassing that of the CLU's *Minneapolis Labor Review*. Like the *Organizer* before it, the *Northwest Organizer* was in many ways a fighting union organ, and it would serve as the crucial collective organizer for many future proletarian struggles.<sup>181</sup>

However, the *Northwest Organizer* had to serve the Trotskyists' bloc with Emme, and every political bloc, as the old Bismarck adage goes, consists of a horse and a rider. The line change at the Pittsburgh plenum meant that Emme would hold the reins; in the pages of the *NO*, his bourgeois aspirations and loyalty to the Minnesota FLP trumped the Trotskyists' principles of proletarian independence and opposition to all capitalist parties. Moreover, in the context of the FLP's campaign for the spring municipal elections, which was "strongly backed by aroused AFL members throughout the city," launching a farmer-labor newspaper meant that the Trotskyists were finally joining "the movement," alongside all their NLUC allies, behind Minnesota's two-class party.<sup>182</sup>

Farrell Dobbs states that because Local 574 was appealing for broad support in the fight against Tobin, the *Northwest Organizer* "presented criticism" of the FLP "somewhat obliquely," but initially it presented no criticism whatsoever. The first issue of the new paper, dated April 16, featured a tiny single line at the bottom of the front page: "Support the F-L ticket in the city elections." The next issue elaborated with a

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<sup>181</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 54; Minutes of NLUC, 2; "Conference Shapes Action Program," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 1, 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Walker, 257.

<sup>182</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 73-74.

short statement: “Minneapolis workers will back Tom Latimer and the Farmer-Labor ticket in the coming city elections. **Bainbridge and Bloody Mike Johannes must go!** Union men and women will remember Bloody Friday. The brigands of the Citizens Alliance must be taken off our backs.” Governor Olson was absolved of any responsibility. The paper featured a celebratory report on Local 574’s unanimous vote to endorse its president, Bill Brown, for FLP alderman, using Brown’s credentials earned in the 1934 battles *against* the FLP to build support *for* it.<sup>183</sup>

Starting with Thomas Latimer, go straight down the line for the Farmer-Labor candidates. We call particular attention to the candidacy of Bill Brown for alderman in the Third Ward. Here is a man who has been tested in the fire of great workingclass [sic] battles—tested and found good. Support Bill Brown! Support the entire Farmer-Labor ticket. SMASH THE CITIZENS ALLIANCE!

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The *Northwest Organizer* had little to say about capitalist party politics at the national level. One editorial denounced the Republican and Democratic parties, portraying them as equally serving the capitalist class: “With a new presidential campaign just around the corner, the managers of the two old parties have already begun training for their traditional scrap,” the only bone of contention being “the right to exploit the workers.” The paper said nothing comparable about the electoral struggles between the Republican and Farmer-Labor parties in Minnesota. Instead, the FLP politicians were praised as “men and women who have given their pledge to recognize the workers of Minneapolis as citizens” and who would “allow workers full freedom to organize.” Even

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<sup>183</sup> (Emphasis in original). The *NO* only began to waver in its unqualified FLP support after Latimer tried to break the Flour City strike in July, and even then it raised criticisms only of Latimer, treating him as a treacherous exception in the otherwise progressive farmer-labor movement. See Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 74; *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Support the Farmer-Labor Candidates,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 2 (May 1, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n02-may-01-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014); “574 Endorses Bill Brown,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 3 (May 8, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n03-may-08-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>184</sup> “Defeat the Citizens Alliance Candidates,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 6 (May 29, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n06-may-29-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

Congressman Ernest Lundeen, a long-time anti-communist of the Farmer-Labor establishment, was quoted favorably.<sup>185</sup>

After the primaries, the paper exhorted the working class to “**Work harder than ever**” for the general election campaign: “Only by redoubling their efforts during the next month can the workers guarantee the defeat of the Citizens Alliance.” Local 574 held a series of rallies for Latimer and the FLP candidates, including one on the eve of the general election at their new headquarters.<sup>186</sup>

The “Northwest Labor Unity Conference” label wore off within a year, and collaborators from the labor movement and Farmer-Labor Party would come and go, but the *Northwest Organizer* held strong until the Trotskyists were finally ousted from the Minneapolis Teamsters in 1941. The early NLUC meetings constituted the Trotskyists’ opportunist vector on their way toward the FLP camp. But the newspaper it launched became the glue that bound together a six-year-long class-collaborationist political bloc, producing populist propaganda in the service of a succession of capitalist politicians. As such, the *Northwest Organizer* served as the “progressive” front for the Minneapolis Trotskyists, a protective shell that could safeguard their leadership of the city’s Teamster local under the blows of a powerful array of enemies.

Regardless of whether the Minneapolis Trotskyists were aware of the significance of their new newspaper, they knew that it was a dire necessity in the face of Tobin’s

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<sup>185</sup> “Straws in the Wind,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 4 (May 15, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n04-may-15-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “574 Endorses Bill Brown,” 1; “Defeat the Citizens Alliance Candidates,” 1; “Labor Looks at the Press,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>186</sup> (Emphasis in original). “Work Harder Than Ever,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 4 (May 15, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n04-may-15-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “F-L Rally Saturday,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 7 (June 5, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n07-jun-05-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

“Bill Brown Says,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 48 (March 18, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n48-mar-18-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

attacks. As Dobbs recalls, “Without the paper there is some doubt that the union could have weathered the storm that was soon to descend upon it.”<sup>187</sup>

### ***The Critical in Critical Support***

The politics of the *Northwest Organizer* must be contrasted with the Trotskyists’ analysis in the *New Militant* and in the Minneapolis branch’s election statement. The *NM* did not publish its announcement of critical support until May 18, a full month after the first issue of the *Northwest Organizer*. The election statement, which the *NM* article quoted heavily, is undated and may have been published earlier. The Minneapolis branch also requested from the center copies of the WP Declaration of Principles with its nominal opposition to farmer-labor parties for free mass distribution in the election campaign.<sup>188</sup>

The election statement announced the WP’s support for Thomas Latimer and the rest of the FLP slate, which included other popular FLP figures such as Mrs. Alfred Carlson and I. G. Scott, both of whom would soon be collaborating with Local 574. On an inside page it explained that the “Workers Party is not a part of the Farmer-Labor party and has no connection with it” and that the WP “declares that the Farmer-Labor officials will not and can not give the working class any real lasting benefits—these will have to be won by the workers themselves through their fighting organizations: the unions, unemployed organizations, and a revolutionary workers’ party.” Under capitalism, any party in office can only win a few crumbs for the working class; “Therefore, the only final solution for the working class is the revolutionary abolition of private property and the establishment of a socialist society.”

The statement declared that the FLP “is not truly a revolutionary workers’ party, nor can it become one,” because it puts its faith in parliamentary democracy, which the capitalist rulers will abandon if necessary. But it did depict the FLP as some type of

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<sup>187</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 55.

<sup>188</sup> Minutes of WP Political Committee, April 30, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43.

workers party: “The workers generally look upon it as their party. This is true insofar as it helps to put into action the demands of the trade unions and other workers’ organizations, or conducts agitation for the realization of these aims. This it has done in the past only when pressed by the militant action of rank and file workers.” The statement briefly mentioned the 1934 strikes, but it papered over Governor Olson’s role as the local commander-in-chief of the armed forces, referring to the class battles merely as an “example of how a union must oppose the weak leadership of the Farmer-Labor Party.” The article in the *New Militant* added a line on “the shooting of fifty workers and the death of two,” though it laid the sole responsibility for these crimes on Republican Mayor Bainbridge and police chief “Bloody Mike” Johannes. The only other notable difference in the *NM* article is that in its tortured efforts to explain its support to a capitalist party, it would not even name the candidates it was supporting.

Both the Minneapolis branch statement and the *NM* article linked critical support to the FLP with the working class’s ability to hold the party accountable: “Workers of Minneapolis: Elect the Farmer-Laborites to office **but watch their every move, do not trust them.** They will serve the workers’ movement only if the workers’ organizations force them to.” The overwhelming atmosphere of the FLP municipal campaign is evident in both pieces of propaganda. The *NM* stated, “Every worker in every trade union in the city is up in arms against the present Citizens Alliance administration.” Thus the task at hand could only be “to break the stranglehold of the Citizens Alliance on the local city government” – that is, oust the openly reactionary representatives of the bourgeoisie so that more “progressive” representatives could take their place.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> (Emphasis in original). “The Workers Party of the United States Calls Upon the Workers To Support the Farmer-Labor Ticket” (election leaflet), 1935, Records of the SWP; “W.P. Supports Election Battle Against Mpls. Reactionaries,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 22 (May 18, 1935): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/may-18-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

### ***Tensions Between the Center and the Base***

When the Workers Party leadership in New York was informed that Local 574's charter had finally been revoked, the PC swung into action. It scrapped the planned agenda for a New York local meeting and replaced it with points on Minneapolis and Ohio, concentrating on raising funds and support for WP work in those regions. At Vincent Dunne's urgent request, the PC voted to excuse Cannon from his duties as editor of the *New Militant* and send him immediately to Minneapolis.<sup>190</sup>

The PC and Minneapolis appear to have been in harmony on the NLUC bloc and the launching of the *Northwest Organizer*. The only controversy related to Local 574 was over the intensity of its efforts to win reinstatement into the AFL drivers' union and maintain its position in local AFL governing bodies, both the Minneapolis CLU and the Minnesota State Federation of Labor. This dispute appears to have been fueled by sentiments in the Local 574 ranks to strike out alone as an independent union, and the issue grew much more acute when it became entangled with the WP's internal faction fight with the Oehler group.

When the Local 574 leadership presented their plan to pursue reinstatement to a general membership meeting, they had to reign in a combative minority who wanted to forge ahead without IBT support. The *New Militant* reported, "The workers were not easily convinced, but at last accepted the words of Vincent and Grant Dunne, of Wm. Brown, of F. Dobbs and others of the executive, that no effort be spared to gain the favorable vote of delegates to the Central Labor Union and thus to prevent the expulsion of 574 from the local A. F. of L. central body."<sup>191</sup> The question of orientation toward the AFL or independent unionism may have been controversial at the Pittsburgh plenum, as

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<sup>190</sup> A health problem prevented Cannon from making the trip. See Minutes of WP Political Committee, April 28 and April 30, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43.

<sup>191</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 64; F.X. Ferry (Francis Heisler), "Tobin Lifts Charter of Drivers Union," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 19 (April 27, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1935/apr-26-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

the NC's statement on the "Trade Union Situation in Minneapolis and Fargo" had settled the issue rather sharply:

Under no circumstances affiliate with the Austin Union of all workers or proclaim any slogan of an independent union movement. The opinions in progressive labor circles in Minneapolis favoring a break-away movement from the A. F. of L. are decidedly incorrect. Our aim at the present period should be to steer all possible progressive elements into the A. F. of L. The idea of launching an independent union movement on the basis of small localities or isolated locals is fallacious. Local 574 would be destroyed if it began as an avowed independent union immediately after the lifting of its charter.<sup>192</sup>

However, the leadership of the WP Minneapolis branch may have been swayed by these "opinions in progressive labor circles." Cannon wrote Vincent Dunne in late April, objecting to a letter from Skoglund and Dobbs on the subject: "it was not very reassuring, still less the first number of the 'Northwest Organizer' which we received. There is not one line in the paper to indicate that 574 is fighting in earnest to maintain its status as an A. F. of L. affiliate, to say nothing of making this the [axis] of the paper's handling of the affair." After he saw the second issue of the *NO*, Cannon wrote a second letter, this time addressed to the whole Minneapolis branch: the paper "as indicated by its second number is still far from correct. What must be emphasized is the fight of Local 574 for reinstatement and the progress that is recorded in the struggle to secure trade union support for this fight."<sup>193</sup> The *New Militant* reflected Cannon's unambiguous line on the question:

The fixed policy at Minneapolis is to fight for every position and not give anything away... They appeal against the expulsion, and announce their intention to fight it out at every step and through every channel of appeal, up to the highest bodies of the A. F. of L.

Meantime they take their case to the Central Labor Union in Minneapolis, appeal directly to every affiliated local union for support and aid in their fight for

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<sup>192</sup> "Statement by National Committee on Trade Union Situation in Minneapolis and Fargo," March 18, 1935, *Organization Bulletin*, no. 2 (April 1935), Records of the SWP, 12.

<sup>193</sup> James P. Cannon to Vincent Dunne, April 30, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1; James P. Cannon to Minneapolis Branch, May 6, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1.

reinstatement, and prepare to carry the fight to the State Federation of Labor Convention.<sup>194</sup>

Minneapolis was apparently persuaded by Cannon's intervention, and the next issue of the *NO* carried articles on Local 574's progress with these AFL bodies and denounced rumors "that the leaders of this union want to withdraw from the Central Labor Union and start an independent movement. Nothing can be further from the truth. The actions of Local 574 speak most eloquently of their desire to remain as a part of the central body and the A. F. of L." The paper also spoke out against local sentiments "to return all local union charters to the A. F. of L. in a protest against the revocation of the charter of Local 574... we do not agree that this is the proper program. It would be a mistake for the unions to cut themselves adrift from the unification made possible through the A. F. of L." The real solution, the *Northwest Organizer* argued, was to replace the treacherous trade-union bureaucracy with "worthwhile, progressive elements."<sup>195</sup>

Cannon's May 6 letter also demanded that the Minneapolis branch immediately return to New York a letter Vincent Dunne had received from a comrade named Joseph Zack. Zack, a recent recruit from the CP who retained its Third Period dual unionist proclivities, had written Dunne to object to Cannon's position on Local 574 and the AFL and the NC resolution that codified it. Zack argued that, "the center of the fight must be to show Tobin and his fellow bureaucrats not only that you were able to organize the Minneapolis truckers without him but that you can continue as a union in spite of Tobin

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<sup>194</sup> "Local 574 Under Fire Again," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 20 (May 4, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/may-04-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

<sup>195</sup> "A False Rumor," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 3 (May 8, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n03-may-08-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "How to Stop Charter Revocations," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 6 (May 29, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n06-may-29-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

and Co., that is without and independent of them.” By expressing this opinion Zack became a lightning rod in the faction fight with the Oehler group.<sup>196</sup>

The WP leadership may have been anxious that Zack’s position could resonate with the Minneapolis drivers’ impulse toward an independent union, and that this might translate into a factional victory for the Oehlerites. The PC meetings throughout the month of May were largely taken up by factional bickering over the Zack case, as the Oehler group attempted to defend him against charges of indiscipline, but after a messy trial Zack was finally expelled. These were the weeks before the June NC plenum, at which the Cannon-Shachtman leadership was in a minority on most issues, outvoted by what was effectively an unprincipled bloc between the Oehlerites, the Abern clique, and A. J. Muste. Cannon’s vehemence against the *NO*’s shortcomings and Zack’s letter may have been fueled by increasing alarm over the course the faction fight was taking. In any case, the hysterical and heavy-handed reaction to Zack’s letter appears to have foreclosed any serious consideration of his position, which, given the subsequent rupture in the AFL between the craft bureaucrats and the industrial unions, was not an unreasonable one.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> (Emphasis in original). Cannon to Minneapolis Branch, May 6, 1935, 1; J. Zack to Vincent Dunne [typed copy enclosed with transcript of Cannon and Zack speeches], May 12, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43, 2; PRL Introduction, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?*, 14.

<sup>197</sup> The American Trotskyist movement at the time maintained “committee discipline” – the rule that members of elected leadership bodies could not discuss disputes in those bodies with the party membership. This “discipline” was in fact only honored in the breach and was subsequently rejected by Trotskyists as an infringement against Leninist norms of democratic centralism. The Cannon leadership’s initial outrage with Zack appears to have been based on his letter to Minneapolis violating this rule, but Zack soon aired his dissident position in a public forum, an expellable offense. See Minutes of WP Political Committee, May 6 to June 4, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43; PRL Introduction, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?*, 14-15.

The NC members from the Minneapolis branch, Vincent Dunne and Carl Skoglund, were unable to attend the June plenum “owing to financial difficulties and also [the] critical situation in Local 574.” The plenum was dominated by the faction fight, the WP’s perspective toward the growing left wing of the SP, and relations with other Trotskyist groups internationally. According to the minutes, neither Local 574’s struggle with Tobin nor the Minneapolis branch’s support to the FLP were discussed. See PRL Introduction, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?*, 14; Minutes of WP National Committee Plenum, June 1935, Records of the SWP.

While the Oehlerites defended Zack’s membership in the WP, there is no evidence that they took up Zack’s political position on Local 574. Nor is there evidence that they objected to the line change on the FLP, revealing a hollowness in their claim that Cannon was an opportunist. V. R. Dunne and Carl

### ***The Hearts and Minds of the Central Labor Union***

In the weeks following their expulsion from the IBT, Local 574 was buoyed by an outpouring of support from the Minnesota labor movement. The campaign to win the support of the Minneapolis Central Labor Union, regardless of Cannon's worries, was initially an unqualified success. While there is no explicit evidence that the Trotskyists' electoral support for the Farmer-Labor Party and the CLU's support for Local 574 was a *quid pro quo* exchange, it is hardly possible that they were unrelated. The first issue of the *Northwest Organizer* both supported the FLP and reported the CLU's backing of 574, and a month later the same issue of the *New Militant* that announced its critical support also included an article on 574's success with the central body. Supporting the FLP in a critical election was a demonstration that the Minneapolis Trotskyists were no longer implacable enemies of the farmer-labor movement. This was to be their ticket for reentry into the Northwest "House of Labor."

On April 15, two days after the NLUC gathering that founded the *Northwest Organizer*, the CLU held a stormy session at which Local 574 and its allies successfully held the line against Tobin. The CLU had received instructions from both Tobin and

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Skoglund were present when the faction fight reached its climax at the October NC plenum, but the plenum minutes indicate that their branch's new policy was not challenged in the debates. The Oehler group was defeated at the October plenum. They continued to violate party discipline and were shortly expelled. Founding a new organization, they published a pamphlet, "Position of the Revolutionary Workers League on Labor and Farmer-Labor Parties," which reiterated Trotsky's 1928 position against two-class parties, concluding that "A Farmer-Labor Party is a reformist bourgeois party. It cannot be an instrument of the proletariat, but is an instrument of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat." It identified Olson as one of the leaders of the national FLP movement and denounced the CP and SP for capitulating to him and to Roosevelt, but did not refer to the Trotskyists' position in Minneapolis. Likewise, the RWL's later "Appeal to the Membership of the Socialist Party" (written during the 1936-37 entry of the Trotskyists) only deals abstractly with the problem of the SP's "opportunist alliance with the Farmer-Labor Parties in Minneapolis and Wisconsin." See PRL Introduction, *Dog Days*, 77-78; Minutes of WP National Committee Plenum, October 5-10, 1935, Records of the SWP; L. Basky, "On the Cannon-Muste-Weber Resolution on the Socialist Party," n.d., Records of the SWP; "Building the American Section of the Fourth International: P.C. Resolution - Third Plenum of the N.C. (Adopted by Plenum)," n.d., Cannon Papers, box 43; "Position of the Revolutionary Workers League on Labor and Farmer-Labor Parties," n.d., Collection of the Prometheus Research Library, 4-7; Revolutionary Workers League, *An Appeal to the Membership of the Socialist Party* (pamphlet), n.d., Records of the SWP.

AFL president William Green to immediately expel Local 574, but delegates from a dozen local unions demanded that these instructions be disregarded. Repeatedly emphasizing the great gains made by the entire workers movement in the 1934 strikes, they “spoke with considerable heat about the impossibility of building the movement if the International officers were to be permitted the pleasant pastime of aiding the bosses and the Citizens Alliance by smashing militant unions.” Farrell Dobbs spoke for Local 574, explaining the phony nature of Tobin’s charges against them, and insisting that “Local 574 was, is and will be, in spite of all attempts to destroy it, the same General Drivers, Helpers and Inside Workers Union which will fight as in the past for the rights of the men in the trucking industry.” FLP Alderman Ed Hudson, representing the carpenters’ union, demanded that the CLU send a committee “right to Indianapolis to have it out with Tobin.” This committee was established and “instructed to meet with the officers of Local 574, gather material and carry the protest to Tobin and the A. F. of L.”<sup>198</sup>

The CLU committee “found every evidence of sincere effort by Local 574 to fulfill its obligations” to the IBT, “recommended that the Central Labor Union do everything in its power to restore the charter to 574, and called upon the local labor movement to give them full co-operation.” On May 8 the CLU unanimously adopted the committee’s report and voted to send a delegation to confront Tobin in Indianapolis and Green in Washington, D.C. At this meeting, however, Tobin’s orders were formally carried out by CLU Chairman T. E. Cunningham, who was by this time the acting President of the State Federation of Labor. Overriding objections from the committee and citing William Green’s threat to expel the Minneapolis CLU itself from the AFL, he officially unseated Local 574’s delegates. A majority of the delegates, however, insisted that the Teamster leadership continue to sit as unofficial delegates, and they remained.

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<sup>198</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 68; “Mpls. Central Labor Union Supports Drivers Local 574,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 1 (April 16, 1935): 1, [https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwest\\_organizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwest_organizer/v1n01-apr-16-1935-nw-org.pdf) (accessed March 5, 2016).

As Dobbs recalls, “On the surface, it might appear that we had lost a round, but in reality a deep polarization, largely favorable to us, was taking place in the AFL central body.”<sup>199</sup>

### ***Local 574’s Enemies Emerge***

In mid-June the CLU committee, after a dramatic meeting with Tobin in Indianapolis, returned to Minneapolis bearing a written set of requirements for Local 574 to qualify for reinstatement: all inside workers and independent truck owners were to be thrown out of the union; ice drivers, coal drivers, and taxi drivers were to be broken off into separate unions; all present officers and all active members of 574 were to be barred from membership; all future actions of the union would be subject to Tobin’s personal approval; and the Local would have to immediately pay its delinquent per capita tax. When the committee reported back to a CLU meeting, the body broke into a fierce debate. Some delegates ridiculed Tobin’s demands, moving that they be thrown into a wastebasket (the motion was ruled out of order). A motion to refer the matter to an IBT convention, while continuing to recognize Local 574, was suppressed before a vote could be taken. Local 574 representatives Brown, Dobbs, and Moe Hork were all denied speaking rights, and eventually a motion was passed referring the issue to the Teamsters Joint Council (TJC), the local IBT authority, so that it could carry out Tobin’s program. The Trotskyists did not recognize the seriousness of this attack and considered that “the reactionary bureaucracy was badly defeated,” because the “progressive thinking delegates” were still completely with 574, and would “carry their opinions back to their unions with a recommendation that they continue to support the drivers.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 70; “Central Labor Union Votes Unanimously to Back Recommendation of Special Committee to Restore 574’s Charter,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 3 (May 8, 1935): 1,3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n03-may-08-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Central Labor Union Backs Local 574,” *New Militant*, vol. I, no. 22 (May 18, 1935): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/may-18-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>200</sup> The Trotskyists had a similar experience at a convention of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor in August. Their propaganda before the convention denounced the incumbent State Federation Executive

Tobin's next move was to charter a new "Local 500," which was supposed to undermine 574 by cutting sweetheart deals with transfer companies. Working with new reinforcements from the International, the TJC attempted to bribe officers of 574 to join 500 and worked with employers to try to force truckers out of their real union and into Tobin's new operation. To combat these schemes, Local 574 initiated another bloc, the Joint Transportation Council, which included the Minneapolis AFL locals most central to the transfer business – the oil and gas workers of Station Employees Local 19802 and the garage mechanics of Local 382. Dobbs is frustratingly silent about the role of the Stalinists in this bloc, but from his account it is clear that this Council was, like the NLUC, a transient organizational vehicle that helped Local 574 further polarize the labor movement: "our relationship with these AFL unions helped to develop a nucleus around which to build an organized left wing in the Central Labor Union."<sup>201</sup>

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Council as "craft-unionists to a man" who needed to be replaced. At the convention their supporters were unable to win support for Local 574's reinstatement, but afterwards they publicly hailed the convention as a success because "the real intention" was simply "to acquaint the delegates with the truth about the charter revocation." In a report to the PC the Minneapolis branch blamed "reactionary unionists" for blocking their efforts at the convention, but in their propaganda they reversed their attitude, dropping all criticisms of the state AFL leadership and their craft union policies, instead declaring that "There is ample evidence to indicate that this was the most progressive and fruitful convention held in many years." See Palmer, 228; "Tobin Invokes New Union-Buster Move Against 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 8 (June 12, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n08-jun-10-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "State Executive Council Fears Results of Election in August," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 5 (May 22, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n05-may-22-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Minutes of WP Political Committee, August 27, 1935, Records of the SWP, 1; "Local 574 Makes Gain At Red Wing," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 18 (August 21, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n18-aug-21-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014).

<sup>201</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 70-71; Palmer, 229; "Tobin Henchmen Continue Fight on 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 10 (June 26, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n10-jun-26-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Traitor Corcoran Continues Union Busting Attempt," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 12 (July 10, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n12-jul-10-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Corcoran Continues Attacks on Members of Local no. 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 13 (July 17, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n13-jul-17-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

### ***Local 574 Forges Ahead***

Throughout these months Local 574 was on the offensive. It responded to Tobin's attack by launching an organizing campaign to complete the unionization of the Minneapolis workforce of truckers and their helpers and settle grievances with companies who were refusing to comply with their contracts. Over the summer of 1935, Local 574 recruited steadily while it forced one company to renew its contract with better benefits, won outstanding back pay from another, pressured a plumbing company into rehiring a fired union organizer, negotiated a new contract for taxi drivers, and launched two "quickie" strikes against the Lucas Ice Company and Ferris Transfer Company, bringing both workforces union recognition and contracts in accord with 574's blanket agreement. The local also established a Federal Workers Section to carry on the work of the Minneapolis Central Council of Workers, linking the unemployed movement directly to Local 574. It built club rooms and a library at its headquarters, and organized a carnival to raise funds for the fight against Tobin. Throughout these months, Tobin's agents on the TJC continued to nip at the heels of Local 574, but by late July, they had only managed to convince a total of 19 drivers to abandon their 5,000 union brothers, and three of these soon returned to Local 574 "in a very penitent mood." In early August, Local 500 sent drivers to cross Local 574 picket lines at the struck D. M. Gilmore Plumbing Company and La Belle Safety Storage Company, but none of them made it through. Under pressure, the Minneapolis transfer companies collectively chose to rebuff Tobin's "union" and renegotiated their blanket agreement with 574, conceding an across-the-board wage increase.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> "Organization Drive on All Fronts Begun by Local 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 4 (May 15, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n04-may-15-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "New Recruits Coming Into Truck Union," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 5 (May 22, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n05-may-22-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Skellet Co. Is Bannered By Local 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 9 (June 19, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n09-jun-19-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Driver of Plumbing Firm Reinstated by Officers of Union," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 12

As Local 574 grew, so did the Workers Party. In July Vincent Dunne traveled to North Dakota to address an audience of several thousand at a Farm Holiday picnic, and in consultation with the PC, the Minneapolis branch began preparations for a farmer conference in the Dakota-Montana region. The WP had grown to about 60 members in eastern North Dakota and western Montana, “including all of the best former C.P. material.” Ironically, through these recruits the WP gained control of the *Producers News* in Plentywood, Montana, the same farmer-laborite newspaper that the Minneapolis branch had tried to collaborate with in 1930. The PC in New York discussed the development, apparently without reflecting on the opportunist stumble in 1930, and voted unanimously to “draft a letter giving advice and guidance on the policy to be pursued by comrades in connection with the *Producers News*.” In these months the WP also carried its momentum into southern Minnesota, founding new branches in Albert Lea and Austin.<sup>203</sup>

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(July 10, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n12-jul-10-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Ice Producers Sign Delivery Agreement with Local no. 574,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 11 (July 3, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n11-jul-03-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Strike Brings Signed Agreement at Ferrins,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 17 (August 14, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n17-aug-14-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 72-75, 80-81; “574 Launches FERA Federal Workers Unit,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 9 (June 19, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n09-jun-19-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “General Drivers To Have Club Rooms, Library,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 9 (June 19, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n09-jun-19-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “A Call to Action,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 9 (June 19, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n09-jun-19-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, n.d., Cannon Papers, box 3; “Sabotage, But Not a Split,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 15 (July 31, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n15-jul-31-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Local 500 Attempts to Play the Role of Strike-Breaker,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 16 (August 7, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n16-aug-07-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Strike at La Belle Won by Local no. 574,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 17 (August 14, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n17-aug-14-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>203</sup> Charles Taylor remained editor of the *Producers News* until its demise in March 1937. Further research is required to examine the politics of the paper and Taylor’s relationship with WP supporters during this period; Minutes of WP Political Committee, July 29, 1935, Glotzer Papers, box 7, folder 1; Library of Congress, “About The *Producers News* (Plentywood, Mont.) 1918-1937,” <http://>

In the summer of 1935, the Minnesota labor movement was still on its honeymoon with Mayor Thomas Latimer. He had narrowly defeated the Republicans, and as the latter-day Farrell Dobbs explains, the workers “felt they now had a representative in City Hall who would help fight the bosses instead of using his powers against labor. But it was soon to be discovered that the assumption was mistaken.” Indeed, after barely one month in office, Latimer proved to be just as vicious a strikebreaker as Bainbridge had been, personally leading scabs and police through picket lines. By September his police had murdered two and injured dozens, at one point dragging Vincent Dunne off a picket line and severely beating him.<sup>204</sup>

But in the weeks before Latimer started fulfilling the functions of his office, the Trotskyists were still trying to maintain a collaborative relationship with him. With the one-year anniversary of the killings of Henry Ness and John Belor approaching, the *Northwest Organizer* called for a memorial on July 20, replete with wreathes, crosses, and a drum corps, and featuring as its principle speaker Mayor Latimer. Bill Brown chaired the proceedings, and several labor officials gave speeches, including Roy Weir, full-time organizer for the Central Labor Union; Robert Cramer, editor of the Minneapolis CLU’s *Labor Review*; I. G. Scott, FLP alderman and Plasterers’ Union official; and Miles Dunne representing Local 574. The mayor, however, was a no-show, and Local 574 sent a delegation to his office demanding an explanation. The *Northwest Organizer*’s coverage of the memorial did not mention Olson’s role in the 1934 strikes and whitewashed the FLP.<sup>205</sup>

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[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053305/](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053305/) (accessed November 18, 2016); “Workers Party Booms in the Northwest,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 35 (August 24, 1935): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/aug-24-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>204</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 75.

<sup>205</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 71; “Memorial for Ness - Belor On July 20th,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 12 (July 10, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n12-jul-10-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Latimer To Be Main Speaker,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 13 (July 17, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n13-jul-17-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Workers Honor Ness and Belor,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 14 (July 24, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n14-jul-24-1935-nw-org-.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

The Minneapolis Trotskyists' opportunist pandering to the city's Farmer-Labor elites helped build their expanding political bloc. As Dobbs writes, "Under the impetus of the July 20 demonstration, new steps were taken to build an organized left wing within the Central Labor Union. A special conference of AFL unions was called on the initiative of the garage workers and filling stations attendants. Local 574 was invited to attend with full voice in the deliberations." Sheltered by their Joint Transportation Council allies, Local 574 lined up what appears to be the same set of AFL unions that had originally supported their November 1934 conference in a unanimous vote for a resolution demanding their reinstatement in the IBT and AFL bodies. This bolstered 574's influence in the region's ongoing organizing and strike efforts, and helped them to renegotiate their blanket agreement with the transfer companies from a position of strength.<sup>206</sup>

This point in time, on the eve of Latimer's "betrayals," marks a high point in the saga of the Minneapolis Trotskyists. True, Local 574 was exiled from the official labor movement, but the authority necessary to make that exile a reality was being undermined from every angle. The decision to give critical support to the FLP, in the context of the Teamsters' aggressive expansion, was treated simply as one necessary maneuver among many. At this point, the Trotskyists had no immediate cause to doubt the wisdom of their decision.

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<sup>206</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 72.

## Chapter 5

### The Road to Entry

1935-36

The Minneapolis workers' honeymoon with their new Farmer-Labor mayor did not last long. It was inevitable that class struggle would break out again, and when it did Mayor Latimer proved to be, unlike Governor Olson, "no skilled manipulator between hostile classes." In late July 1935 Latimer tried to break the first strike he faced; in August he tried to break the second, his police targeting Vincent Dunne with a brutal beating; in September his police went on a rampage, killing two and wounding dozens. After supporting Latimer's election the Trotskyists were loath to break with him, but as the working class turned against the mayor the WP did too. However, after giving it critical support, they would never break with the Farmer-Labor Party itself. Leading elements in the FLP establishment reacted with horror to Latimer's carnage, and as the party began to polarize, the Trotskyists inserted themselves into the growing rift, becoming champions of "real" farmer-laborism against its debasement, of the blameless

rank-and-file base against the party's "treacherous" leaders, of the "progressive" wing of this capitalist political machine against the "reactionary."<sup>207</sup>

At the same time, the Minneapolis Trotskyists and their industrial Teamster union intersected the rise of the wider industrial labor movement, led by John L. Lewis' Committee for Industrial Organization, becoming the focal point for militant organizing in the Northwest. The Local 574 leaders made an obvious target for the distressed AFL chiefs, who in November launched an anti-communist witchhunt to stamp out the upsurge in Minnesota. This precipitated a massive crisis in the Farmer-Labor Party, briefly opening the possibility of splitting the party along class lines. But the Trotskyists lacked the necessary programmatic tool, embodied in the labor party slogan, to pursue this course. After giving support to the FLP they were increasingly blinded by opportunism, and by the fall of 1935 they were so disarmed that they let the moment slip away. In the aftermath, they helped repair the damage and resuscitate the hated Mayor Latimer.

Furthermore, with the Trotskyists' position at the head of Local 574 still in jeopardy, and the Communist Party finally gaining enough strength to pose a serious threat, the WP carried out an entry into the FLP in early 1936 to reinforce its miniscule representation in party bodies. Over the following five years, the Trotskyists would wage an unprincipled struggle against Stalinists and anti-communist farmer-laborites for control of the disintegrating FLP, always giving public electoral support to their ally of the day. They were no match, however, for the CP's popular front, which won far greater support by more fulsomely pandering to the farmer-labor movement and by backing the 1936 re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

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<sup>207</sup> Walker, 250.

### *Latimer's Scabs*

In July 1935, International Association of Machinists Local 1313 prepared a strike, by July 24 shutting down three large and several medium-sized companies in Minneapolis. With the turn to the popular front the Stalinists' influence had quickly spread from Local 382 to Local 1313, but despite CP efforts the Local 1313 leadership decided to bring in two members of Local 574 to serve on its strike committee. On the third day of the strike, Mayor Latimer personally led a detail of 68 police officers, escorting about 30 strikebreakers, into the Flour City Ornamental Iron Works. Latimer's effort was spoiled when, at the end of the day, the small group of scabs exited the plant to face a picket line of roughly 1,000 furious iron workers. No one attempted to work the next day, and Local 1313's pickets locked the plant down.<sup>208</sup>

The Trotskyists had helped mobilize the powerful picket lines against Latimer's attack, but they responded mildly to it in the *Northwest Organizer*, simply echoing Local 1313's calls for "restitution" and "accountability."<sup>209</sup> They complained that Latimer's action was "a clear cut repudiation of the strike policy of the Farmer-Labor platform on which he was elected," and requested that the mayor

make partial restitution to the workers by complying with the demands of the strike committee of Local 1313—close the Flour City Ornamental Iron Works, issuing an immediate statement to the public that he is doing this because the company has proven itself to be incapable of conducting a business without disturbing the peace; question each of the employees [sic] of the company, individually, including those who were discharged for union activity before the strike was called, to ascertain the true facts surrounding the controversy; issue a public statement on the basis of this investigation, this statement to be prepared

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<sup>208</sup> "Local 1313 Asks Aid from Drivers," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 10 (June 26, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n10-jun-26-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Local no. 1313 Fights Injunction," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 14 (July 24, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n14-jul-24-1935-nw-org-.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Metal Workers' Strike Is Solid," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 15 (July 31, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n15-jul-31-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>209</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 90-91.

in the spirit of union principle. This is the very least which Mayor Latimer can do.<sup>210</sup>

The *New Militant* took a similar approach, referring vaguely to the WP's election statement warnings, without mentioning the fact that they had supported Latimer: "The sight of a Farmer-Labor Mayor acting as a scab herder is causing thousands of serious workers to do some hard thinking this last week. It wasn't for this that the Farmer-Labor ticket was swept into office. These workers are beginning to see what the local branch of the Workers Party set forth in the election statement is true." It avoided any analysis of the class interests governing Latimer's strikebreaking or the class character of the FLP itself. Instead, the *NM* whimpered, "Latimer has not yet explained why he took the scabs in. He must be made to answer for this act."<sup>211</sup>

The following month Latimer's attacks became personal. On Friday, August 16, the American Federation of Hosiery Workers declared a strike against the Strutwear Knitting Company in Minneapolis. When Local 574 came out in support the following Monday, Vincent Dunne was dragged off the picket line by police and forced inside the plant where he was severely beaten by police and strikebreakers. Dunne was subsequently convicted of "failing to obey the command of an officer" and sentenced to 15 days in jail.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> "Metal Workers' Strike Is Solid," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 15 (July 31, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n15-jul-31-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Close the Plant, Mayor Latimer," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 15 (July 31, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n15-jul-31-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>211</sup> Northwest Correspondent, "Iron Workers of Minneapolis Reform Ranks," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 33 (August 10, 1935): 1, 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/aug-10-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); Smemo, 56-57.

<sup>212</sup> Palmer, 233; Smemo, 57-58; "Strike Ranks Growing Fast at Strutwear," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 18 (August 21, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n18-aug-21-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014); "Ray Dunne Brutally Clubbed, Booted by Police," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 18 (August 21, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n18-aug-21-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014); "Ray Dunne Verdict Will Be Appealed," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 24 (October 2, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n24-oct-02-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

The *Northwest Organizer* reacted by denouncing the police violence and calling for militant unionism and solid picket lines as the key to victory. An editorial suggested that the municipal election had involved the deceit of the working class, and that the new city administration was by its nature on the side of the bosses, but the paper initially did not name Latimer or the Farmer-Labor Party as the forces responsible for the police action. It ended:

Many workers who were deceived before the election are now completely undeceived. They now realize clearly that strikes are strikes, bosses are bosses, police are police, city administrations are administrations sworn to uphold the law, the law of the boss. The only road to the unionization of Minneapolis is the road of militant unions and solid fighting picket lines. There is no substitute in any shape or form, either economic or political.<sup>213</sup>

The *New Militant* railed against Latimer, pointing to the his quickly established pattern of strike-breaking actions. On the other hand it alibied him by labeling his policy “weak-kneed and vacillating,” as though a stronger mayor would have curbed the police repression. The *NM* also pointed to the increasing outrage among working-class FLP supporters who felt betrayed by the new Farmer-Labor administration:

All this is doubly disgraceful after Latimer’s repeated campaign pledges not to use the police force for strike duty. The rank and file of the Farmer-Labor party is becoming more and more outraged at these actions on the part of its standard bearer. As for the working class of Minneapolis, it is rapidly coming to understand what this kind of a labor program means. Tom Latimer does everything Bainbridge did, and does it more subtly and therefore more dangerously.<sup>214</sup>

If they had opposed Latimer’s campaign, the Trotskyists would have been in an unprecedentedly powerful strong position with the workers of Minneapolis. They showed no signs, however, of reexamining their decision to support him.

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<sup>213</sup> “Once Again, the Police!” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 18 (August 21, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n18-aug-21-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014).

<sup>214</sup> “Dunne Slugged in Clash in Mpls. Hosiery Strike: Farmer-Labor Mayor Again Gives Scabs Police Protection,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 35 (August 24, 1935): 1, 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/aug-24-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

Five days after his police beat up Vincent Dunne, Mayor Latimer held a conference of anti-communist AFL bureaucrats at his office, which planned and launched a press campaign to smear the Local 574 leadership as criminal “racketeers” in order to justify further police repression. This conference included P. J. Corcoran and Gene Speilman; John Geary and Cliff Hall of Tobin’s “Local 500”; George Lawson and T. E. Cunningham, the Secretary and President, respectively, of the State Federation of Labor, Minnesota’s ruling AFL body; and about twenty local AFL union business agents. Coming out of the conference Latimer assured “all possible police protection to employers” victimized by the “racketeers,” effectively announcing an open policy of state violence against Local 574. Responding to these attacks, A. J. Muste issued a directive from the center to all WP branches informing them of the “combination of reactionary trade unionists, Chamber of Commerce, Farmer-Labor politicians, etc.” attacking Local 574: “The struggle in Minneapolis is of national importance. The Political Committee has offered full cooperation to the Minneapolis comrades. All party branches and members are instructed to hold themselves in readiness to cooperate in every possible way.”<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Shortly after the anti-racketeering campaign began, Mayor Latimer announced the founding of his Employer-Employee Board, which would supposedly have the power to ban strikes, then arbitrate disputes peacefully. T. E. Cunningham joined the board as one of three labor representatives, and many of the same union bureaucrats involved in the anti-racketeering campaign also supported it. Latimer invited Local 574 to join the board, but the truckers union denounced the entire project as a class-collaborationist scheme to undermine the unions, arguing that “In the end this board will completely betray the workers.” They published in the *NO* an open letter addressed to the FLP Central Committee, the Central Labor Union, and all local unions rejecting Latimer’s offer: “We call upon all trade unions, railroad brotherhoods, and workers’ political and fraternal organizations to repudiate the Minneapolis Employer-Employee Board and to demand of Mayor Thomas E. Latimer that he refrain from this and similar actions that he has committed which are subversive to the interests of Labor.” See “Tobin Agents Meet Latimer; Plan Betrayal of Strikers,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 19 (August 28, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n19-aug-28-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); A. J. Muste to WP branches, August 29, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 43, 1; “Mayor Latimer Attempts to Introduce Compulsory Arbitration in Local Labor Disputes—Reactionary Union Leaders Aid,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 21 (September 11, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n21-sep-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “The Latimer Board,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 21 (September 11, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n21-sep-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “An Open Letter,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22

The *Northwest Organizer* and *New Militant* addressed the attacks by reiterating Latimer's campaign pledges and casting his actions as post-electoral capitulations to the employers. The *NO* asked questions like "Does he perhaps represent the employers as Farmer-Labor mayor?" but did not offer clear answers, and spent much ink arguing that the FLP could not afford to lose the votes of the more than 10,000 Minneapolis workers organized in independent unions. Reflecting the polarization in the FLP against Latimer, the *NO* stated, "Mayor Latimer is not the Farmer-Labor Party. He neither makes nor controls the policies of that party. Who is Mayor Latimer to say that the Farmer-Labor Party does not want the support of workers outside of the American Federation of Labor?" The paper concluded that "At this time we demand that the Farmer-Labor Party clarify its position in regard to so-called 'outlaw unions.' If they do not want the support of workers in these unions then let them say so plainly. Our future political course will be largely guided by their actions." The *NO* denounced the labor leaders cooperating with Latimer as a "sorry set of the most irresponsible scandal-mongers," "labor lieutenants of capitalism," who "betray the workers to their enemies, mislead them and deceive them." The *New Militant* differed in its coverage by also making criticisms of the role played by the CLU and its full-time organizer, Roy Weir.<sup>216</sup>

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(September 18, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Local 574 Executive Board to Hennepin County Central Committee of the FLP, Minneapolis CLU, all Trade Unions and Railroad Brotherhoods, September 20, 1935, Dobbs Papers, box 15; Smemo, 58.

<sup>216</sup> "To All Union Men and Women," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 19 (August 28, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n19-aug-28-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "A Question to the Farmer-Labor Party," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 19 (August 28, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n19-aug-28-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Local 574 Demands That Cunningham Bring Proof of 'Racketeering' Charges," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 20 (September 4, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n20-sep-4-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Labor Skates, Mayor, Bosses Form Alliance To Smash Local 574," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 36 (August 31, 1935): 1, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1935/aug-31-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

## *The Flour City Killings*

On September 10 and 11, street battles between Local 1313 pickets and the police broke out at the Flour City iron works, where the owners had tried to restart operations with another scab work crew. Each night the police attacked the 5,000-strong picket line with tear gas, clubs, guns, and an armored car. They wounded dozens, and on the second night killed two people – striker Melvin Bjorkland and 18-year-old bystander Eugene Casper. The Minneapolis working class erupted in a series of mass meetings and demonstrations, and the city administration was forced to evacuate the scabs and company gunmen from the plant to St. Paul. Mayor Latimer was booed down attempting to address a Farmer-Labor Party mass meeting. He then sat on the stage “like a whipped dog” as FLP politicians and union leaders including Local 574 officers denounced him. The crowd cheered as FLP State Representative Sam Bellman demanded that all the police involved be fired and Alderman I. G. Scott called for Latimer’s resignation as mayor and his expulsion from the FLP. Miles Dunne and Bill Brown also spoke; Brown “completely exposed the gutlessness of Mayor Latimer, told the crowd how a true working class mayor would have acted even though it led to his impeachment, and called for immediate removal of the police butchers.” One iron worker got past the mayor’s bodyguards to crack him on the jaw before he could escape in his waiting limousine.<sup>217</sup>

This meeting was the first public expression of the growing polarization in the Minnesota FLP. In later years, as the party fragmented and collapsed, the lines between the warring camps became murky, erratic and contradictory, but at this initial stage the rupture grew along relatively clear left-right lines. The Citizens Alliance and reactionary

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<sup>217</sup> “Latimer Breaks Up Picket Line,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 21 (September 11, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n21-sep-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Minneapolis Labor Hits F-L Mayor: Two Workers Dead, Many Wounded, By ‘Farm-Labor’ Cops,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 38 (September 14, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/sep-14-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Minneapolis Workers Battle; Mass Uprising against Traitor ‘Labor’ Mayor,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 39 (September 21, 1935): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/sep-21-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

craft-union bureaucrats rallied around the new mayor, while leftist radicals and industrial-union militants mobilized alongside Farmer-Labor Party elements most sensitive to the spike of working-class pressure. In this heated atmosphere, even the Hennepin County Central Committee of the FLP, overriding objections from the Mayor's office, followed the CLU and the Machinists International in endorsing Local 1313's strike against Flour City.<sup>218</sup>

Dobbs recalls that the working class's reaction to Latimer's attacks enabled Local 574 "to initiate a broad left opposition within the labor movement, centered around three issues of immediate urgency: rejection of all forms of class collaboration with the bosses; working-class solidarity and reciprocal aid in labor struggles; and full trade-union support to the unemployed." Dobbs does not mention that this "broad left opposition" was also centered on ongoing support of the Farmer-Labor Party – which would only qualify as "rejection" of class collaboration if the FLP was a workers party – or that this "broad left opposition" revolved around the loyal opposition of lifelong Farmer-Labor leaders whose participation could only refurbish the image of their party. He does not see it as an extension of the class-collaborationist bloc around the Northwest Labor Unity Conference and the *Northwest Organizer*, though that is effectively what it was. Dobbs also does not mention that this "broad left opposition" included the Communist Party, which was about to emerge as an important factor in the Minnesota labor movement.<sup>219</sup>

### ***The CP's Popular Front***

In mid-1935 the Communist Party of the USA took Stalin's turn to the popular front to its logical conclusion by embracing the American farmer-labor movement, most significantly in Minnesota where it had roots and regional state power. In May, the CP Central Committee instructed the party membership to join and support farmer-labor

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<sup>218</sup> "Latimer Opposed to Strike Endorsement," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 21 (September 11, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n21-sep-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>219</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 75-76.

organizations nationally, and in Minnesota the Stalinists rushed into the FLP. They set up new Farmer-Labor Clubs, front groups that existed only on paper, to gain greater representation in the FLP, and soon won support from Farmer-Labor politicians who saw them as a fresh source of support. Inside the FLP the Minnesota Communist Party rapidly gained influence, by March 1936 boasting forty delegates to an FLP nominating convention. This also quickly translated into increased power in state and local government.<sup>220</sup>

In November the Stalinists finally felt strong enough to turn against the Trotskyists and Local 574, and in early 1936 the two tendencies began to openly clash. However, in the early months of the CP's entry into the FLP there is little evidence in the Trotskyist press of Stalinist activity in Minnesota, and almost none in the *Northwest Organizer*. The *New Militant* had polemicized against the Stalinists in the leadership of Local 1313 for their self-imposed isolation at the beginning of their strike; this did not stop Local 574 from joining their strike committee and mobilizing a thousand truckers to bolster the Machinists' picket lines. At the FLP mass meeting described above, Local 1313 officer and CP supporter Harry Mayville expressed the new popular-front line as he assured FLP supporters that "'your party is not rotten. I and my party want to see a mass Farmer-Labor party in the state and city.'" The Trotskyists' response to the CP's opportunism was: "Now we of the Workers Party know better than Mayville that the Farmer-Labor rank and filers are certainly not 'rotten'; but we also know that if ever the workers have had a chance to see the complete impotence of reformism, it has been in this state and city during the past few years." A few weeks later the Minneapolis Trotskyists mocked the local CP for its erratic line on the FLP: "Today it has made a right-about-face and meekly seeks admission into the—Farmer-Labor party!"<sup>221</sup>

<sup>220</sup> Gieske, 211; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 93; Haynes, 13.

<sup>221</sup> Northwest Correspondent, "Iron Workers of Minneapolis Reform Ranks," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 33 (August 10, 1935): 1, 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/aug-10-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); "Minneapolis Workers Battle; Mass Uprising against Traitor 'Labor' Mayor," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 39 (September 21, 1935): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/>

The *New Militant* had denounced the Stalinists for advocating a labor party starting in January, but had little to say about the CP's embrace of the national farmer-labor party movement, perhaps because, as Smemo observes, by the late summer of 1935 the two organizations' approach to the biggest FLP in existence was "almost identical." In June they held a public debate at which the Stalinists opposed granting the FLP electoral support while the Trotskyists embraced it, but both groups shared the perspective of a militant labor movement bringing pressure to bear on the party, attempting to hold it accountable or even transform it to better meet the workers' interests. When the CP Central Committee ordered its supporters to join the FLP in August, it instructed them to isolate and attack the Trotskyists in the party. Initially the CP supporters were too weak to attempt this. Faced with the unassailable popularity of the Teamster leaders, the Minneapolis Stalinists maintained their position in Local 574's bloc of fifteen unions and campaigned for its reinstatement in the AFL. Given that this was the Minneapolis Trotskyists' overriding priority, it is not surprising that they were quiet about the Stalinists' growth and FLP entry during these months.<sup>222</sup>

Smemo argues that at this juncture "the Trotskyists hoped to translate their newfound organizational strength into political power within the Farmer-Labor Party. However, the Trotskyists' vision of transforming the Farmer-Labor Party into an outright labor party clashed with the Farmer-Labor leadership's efforts to build a strong cross-class electoral coalition." While the Trotskyists were officially *not* trying to transform it

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<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/sep-21-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); "Mpls. W.P. Shows True Role of F-L Party," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 46 (November 9, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-09-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>222</sup> The other conflict with the Minnesota Stalinists before November came when the CP tried to organize a "strike" – actually a consumer boycott of meat – through a liberal and Farmer-Labor women's organization, a crude attempt to frame up Local 574 drivers as "scabs" for unknowingly violating the boycott. The stunt fell apart when Bill Brown and Miles Dunne asked some pointed questions of the "strike committee" meeting on the eve of the boycott. See Smemo, 50, 60, 70; "Dunne Blasts C.P. in Debate: After Complete Rout Stalinists Apologize For Disruption," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 26 (June 15, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/jun-15-1935.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2014); Open letter from Communist Party, Dobbs Papers, box 15; "M'pls. CP'ers Picket Drivers Local 574!" *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 44 (October 26, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/oct-26-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

into a “labor party,” fighting for militant class-struggle politics inside this capitalist party put the Trotskyists at a distinct disadvantage. The Stalinists, on the other hand, equipped with their new full-blown class-collaborationist program, were well qualified to play the role of the “revolutionary Marxist” face of the Farmer-Labor Party, helping to keep militant layers of the working class corralled as voting cattle for FLP politicians. Over the next six years, the Trotskyists diligently tried to reap the rewards of their opportunist policies of critical support, class-collaborationist blocs, and entry in the FLP, but were always outmaneuvered and outclassed by the Stalinists, who were far more adept at this sort of treachery.<sup>223</sup>

In the early fall of 1935, however, the CP did not yet have the political clout to prevent the Minneapolis Trotskyists from gaining traction with FLP politicians and cohering a political bloc with them.<sup>224</sup>

### ***Latimer on Trial***

In the aftermath of the Flour City killings, the Minneapolis Trotskyists made some sharp, principled statements about the capitalist system that had largely disappeared

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<sup>223</sup> Smemo, 2.

<sup>224</sup> During these months the Workers Party center continued to monitor developments in Minneapolis, focusing on efforts to rally support for Local 574’s reinstatement in the AFL. In August Cannon wrote to Vincent Dunne that “It ought to be possible now to sum up the results of the tactic elaborated at the Pittsburg Plenum to meet the threatened expulsion proceedings which, in the meantime, became a reality.” Cannon noted the need for “an exact accounting” of their policy in Minneapolis, but only discussed their tactical decisions to organize through an AFL union and fight for reinstatement when the bureaucracy pushed them out. He argued that the “most decisive factor in the Minneapolis successes” was “the party” – referring to the Workers Party, not the much larger party to which the WP was capitulating. Cannon depicted the WP as “crystallizing in the course of a long and stubborn struggle over the most remote international questions (Russia, China, Anglo-Russian Committee), and bringing this struggle to fruition in the soundest, most stable and conspicuous success in mass work on a local scale. Let the short-cut-to-mass-work experts chew upon that!” Dunne shortly sent a report to the Political Committee, which recounted recent success with the *Northwest Organizer* and ongoing work toward reinstatement. The PC pushed for Local 574 to carry this campaign to a September IBT convention in Portland, Oregon, but the Minneapolis branch decided it would cost too much money to send delegates and take them away from important tasks at home. See James P. Cannon to Vincent Dunne, August 21, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1-3; Minutes of WP Political Committee, August 27, 1935, Records of the SWP, 1; Minutes of WP Political Committee, September 9, 1935, Records of the SWP, 1.

since the 1934 strikes. The *Northwest Organizer* put no faith in the grand jury investigation, predicting that it would only absolve the real culprits, and stated forthrightly that “This crime was a natural product of the struggle between the exploiters and the exploited, between capital and labor, another violent rape of human life for the preservation of property rights.” However, the Trotskyists’ fierce propaganda barrage was now directed only at the wing of the FLP that stayed loyal to Latimer.<sup>225</sup>

When Latimer excluded witnesses to the September 11 police attacks from his grand jury investigation, the *NO* called a public trial under the auspices of the Non-Partisan Labor Defense: “the people vs. Mayor Latimer, Police Chief Forestal and the city administration.” The Trotskyists had recruited two prominent FLP politicians to the NPLD National Executive Committee, including Hennepin County FLP Central Committee member Mrs. Alfred Carlson, who opened the trial proceedings. Bill Brown presided as judge and Francis Heisler of the Chicago WP branch was prosecuting attorney. After hearing the testimony of twelve witnesses, the jury of over 800 workers “unanimously convicted Farmer-Labor Mayor Thomas Latimer and his administration as exclusively responsible.” The meeting passed a resolution demanding “the immediate removal of Chief Forestal and the suspension of Officers Goergan and Ohman and every police officer who was detailed or who took part in the attack” and “that charges be immediately preferred by the proper authorities with the Civil Service Commission against the police officers.” These proceedings would not have discomfited the bulk of the FLP leadership or the party’s furious urban rank-and-file supporters.<sup>226</sup>

<sup>225</sup> “Workers’ Blood On Their Hands,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>226</sup> The Trotskyists also recruited Herbert Solow, editor of the original *Organizer* and honorary member-for-life of Local 574, to the NPLD National Executive Committee. See “Minneapolis Workers Battle; Mass Uprising against Traitor ‘Labor’ Mayor,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 39 (September 21, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/sep-21-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Minneapolis N.P.L.D.” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 41 (October 5, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/oct-05-1935.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2014); “Jury Finds Latimer Guilty!” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf>

That week Vincent Dunne wrote a letter to James P. Cannon in New York reporting on the escalating crisis, predicting that “A deep-growing [sic] struggle within the F-L party will unfold itself [if] a left-wing is sufficiently clear-headed and well-prepared. I consider this of national importance, especially in view of the C.P.’s labor party line.” It is not clear if Dunne was predicting labor’s split from the FLP or a transformation that would leave that party intact, but in any case he was thrilled with the prospects. Dunne displayed no illusions in the anti-Latimer posturing within the FLP, stating acerbically that the Farmer-Labor *Leader*, “the official mouthpiece of Olson... is making a direct and open attack upon Latimer, with the evident purpose of clearing the skirts of the F-L party, in regard to the killings.” Moreover, he had heard that “Olson and the Farmer-Laborites in general are going to make a vicious attack on the Left, starting, so the information says, with Local 574... We also have information that an A. F. of L. official from Washington arrived in town yesterday. We believe that Olson is preparing to unite with the A. F. of L. top leaders in attempting to purge the movement of the reds and the left-wingers.”<sup>227</sup>

The Trotskyist press reflected little of Dunne’s concerns. Both the *New Militant* and *Northwest Organizer* whitewashed Olson and “the Farmer-Laborites in general.” Both papers explicitly named Latimer and his police as solely responsible for the Flour City killings, drawing parallels back to the killings during the 1934 strikes which they now attributed solely to Republican Mayor Bainbridge. The *New Militant* did state that “Governor Olson, eager to place his heel on Latimer’s neck as a maneuver to get back in the good graces of the Minneapolis workers, has mobilized 150 national guardsmen in St. Paul and is keeping them in readiness for any further outbreaks,” but did not demand that

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(accessed March 5, 2016); Palmer, 139; “Editor’s Note,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Latimer Convicted As Murderer At Mpls Mass Trial,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 39 (September 21, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/sep-21-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Resolution,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>227</sup> Vincent R. Dunne to James P. Cannon, September 20, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1.

they be withdrawn. It advertised a Worker's Party meeting, "Three Months of Farmer-Labor Rule in Minneapolis: What They PROMISED and What They GAVE!" at which V. R. Dunne would address questions such as "can the Farmer-Labor Party be reformed?; what is the meaning of the present attacks upon progressive trade unionists in Minneapolis and throughout the nation?; what is the attitude of a real workers' political party toward the trade unions?" The *Northwest Organizer* on the other hand was completely silent about Olson and the National Guard and did not advertise the WP meeting on the FLP.<sup>228</sup>

### ***The "Broad Left Opposition" in the FLP***

In early October Julius F. Emme died after a long illness. The *Northwest Organizer* had nothing but praise for the politician: "Emme is gone, but he has left us the most lasting of all memories. He has started dozens of young, courageous, intelligent workers on the proper road to the final emancipation of the working class. No greater tribute can be paid to any man." The pallbearers at Emme's funeral included labor bureaucrats, Farmer-Labor politicians, and *Labor Review* editor Rob Cramer; Trotskyist C. R. Hedlund gave the eulogy. The original axis of the propaganda bloc was gone, but by this time other prominent FLP politicians had effectively taken Emme's place in the Trotskyists' popular front and in the pages of its weekly farmer-laborite newspaper.<sup>229</sup>

<sup>228</sup> "Minneapolis Labor Hits F-L Mayor: Two Workers Dead, Many Wounded, By 'Farm-Labor' Cops," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 38 (September 14, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1935/sep-14-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); "Latimer Convicted As Murderer At Mpls Mass Trial," 1; "Workers' Blood On Their Hands," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Jury Finds Latimer Guilty!" 1; "Minneapolis Workers Battle; Mass Uprising against Traitor 'Labor' Mayor," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 39 (September 21, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1935/sep-21-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>229</sup> "Labor Mourns Passing of Fighter," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 25 (October 9, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n25-oct-09-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Emme's Death Shrouds Workers In Sadness," *The Minneapolis Labor Review*, no. 483 (October 11, 1935): 1, [http://www.minneapolisunions.org/labor\\_review\\_archive/about.php](http://www.minneapolisunions.org/labor_review_archive/about.php) (accessed June 27, 2017).

The *NO* had fawned over Representative Sam Bellman and Alderman I. G. Scott when they attacked Latimer at the mass FLP meeting after the Flour City killings, stating that they “deserve a good round of applause for the really fine positions they took at the Thursday night protest meetings. That is the way workingclass representatives should act; and when they DO act that way, they should be shown that we admire them for it and are behind them 100 per cent.” Figures like Bellman and Scott were depicted as champions of the Farmer-Labor ranks trying to reclaim their party from the FLP “bureaucracy.” At one stormy meeting of the FLP Hennepin County Central Committee “perhaps 90 per cent of the delegates... were for the expulsion of Mayor Latimer,” but “Every healthy manifestation of the real sentiment of the rank and file Farmer-Laborite was suppressed and stifled” by the FLP leadership. The paper condemned this as “one of the most shameful betrayals of the working class interest that has ever been displayed in a Reformist Party.”<sup>230</sup>

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Local 574’s September and October gatherings were called as generic “conferences” instead of as NLUC meetings, though evidence suggests that they were composed of the same set of AFL unions operating on the same program, still collectively supporting the *Northwest Organizer*. However, the Trotskyists continued to hold industrial union organizing meetings under NLUC auspices with their allies in the wider Northwest through the February 1936. When Daniel Tobin finally accepted the Minneapolis Teamsters back into the IBT in June 1936, Brown and the Trotskyists gained control of the Teamsters Joint Council, and in August transferred official control of the *Northwest Organizer* to the TJC. Regardless of what organization the *NO* formally represented, the Trotskyists maintained editorial control. See “Packing House Workers Are for Industrial Union At Mason City Meeting,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 39 (January 15, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n39-jan-15-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Meat Packing Local Start Union Drive,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 42 (February 5, 1936): 1, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n42-feb-05-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Industrial Unionists Meet,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 42 (February 5, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n42-feb-05-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Minneapolis Unions Join Lewis Set-Up,” *The New Militant*, vol. II, no. 7 (February 15, 1936): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1936/feb-15-1936.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2014); “Statement of the Ownership, Management, Circulation, Etc.” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 27 (October 23, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n27-oct-23-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>230</sup> “Labor Looks at the Press,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 8, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Another Reformist Betrayal,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 27 (October 23, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n27-oct-23-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

Scott and fellow Alderman Ed Hudson sat on the city's Welfare Board, and the *NO* became their press agent as they struggled with their more conservative counterparts in the city administration. The paper cheered them when they attempted to deliver on one of the FLP election planks – a 35% increase in relief allowances for the unemployed – which Mayor Latimer then duly canceled.<sup>231</sup>

The political line taken in *NO* editorials increasingly waffled between class struggle and class collaboration. One expounded on the need for a workers press, exposing the irreconcilable class interests behind the capitalist newspapers that belied their claims to “non-partisanship and neutrality.” Another was a paean to class harmony, arguing that business owners and their employees shared a common interest in the unionization campaign. A boss could only hate the unions until he dealt with one; then “Experience teaches him that unions are a healthy influence in industry.” Workers had successfully negotiated new contracts and “Great gains for the industry have already been made under this new setup.” The only people criticizing Local 574, supposedly, were those who were “not aware” of all the “good work” it was doing. The *NO* frequently praised the “peace” with the bosses and with the entire labor movement that 574 was achieving. This liberal line was starkly at odds with Local 574's practical policy as it helped lead strike after strike in these months.<sup>232</sup>

<sup>231</sup> “Tear Gas — Not Bread,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 8, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>232</sup> “Pro-Labor,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 28 (October 30, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n28-oct-30-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Industry + Union = Progress,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 26 (October 16, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n26-oct-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Traitor Corcoran Continues Union Busting Attempt,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 12 (July 10, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n12-jul-10-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Toward Stability,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 20 (September 4, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n19-aug-28-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Local 574 States Position,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 34 (December 11, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n34-dec-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

Another example is a statement to the press issued by Local 574 that read: “General Drivers Local #574 is decidedly in favor of industrial peace and will continue to do everything in its power to maintain

### ***The “Broad Left Opposition” in the Workers Movement***

In the local unions Local 574’s “broad left opposition” continued to expand. Unorganized workforces, including candy workers and young women chicken pickers, called strikes and poured into Local 574’s hall looking for guidance. The Trotskyists helped them win their strikes and establish new unions, proceeding through the AFL’s proper channels by bringing in CLU organizer Roy Weir and helping the two workforces apply for AFL charters.<sup>233</sup> At the same time they continued to hold NLUC-style conferences. The highest priorities for this bloc of fifteen unions were the reinstatement of 574 and the campaign to save the FLP from Latimer, but it also assisted the Teamsters in their industrial organizing drives. Local 574 and its fourteen allied union locals held a conference on September 30 to take a stand against the “right-wing block in the labor movement with the city administration.” Embracing industrial unionism as the necessary form of organization, the delegates adopted a proposal for “closer co-operation between trades.” They passed resolutions demanding that the CLU carry out its promise to organize the unemployed; that the FLP grant the obstructed 35% increase in relief; that the FLP expel Thomas Latimer; that Latimer’s Employer-Employee board be dissolved (explicitly reaffirming the right to strike); and that the AFL immediately reinstate Local 574 with all rights and privileges. The resolutions were sent to Daniel Tobin, William Green, the Minneapolis Central Labor Union, and the State Federation of Labor. Miles Dunne also spoke in defense of their ally Walter Frank of the Lathers, who had recently been unseated as a delegate to the CLU.<sup>234</sup>

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peaceful relations with employers. However, as a legal organization of workmen, the union reserves the right to organize and to strike and peacefully picket when such action is necessary...” See “Statement to press,” August 26, 1935, Dobbs Papers, box 15.

<sup>233</sup> “Candy Workers Are Organizing,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 27 (October 23, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n27-oct-23-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Chicken and Candy Workers Organize and Strike,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 44 (October 26, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/oct-26-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016).

<sup>234</sup> Walter Frank, business agent of the Lathers Union, vacillated between the Trotskyists, the CP’s popular front, and the CLU’s anti-communist “moderate” bloc. As historian Haynes notes, “Frank was

Local 574's enemies in the trade-union bureaucracy were frustrated. Pat Corcoran of the Milk Wagon Drivers and Tobin's Teamsters Joint Council had tried to undermine Local 574 by founding a dual laundry drivers union. They held two secretive meetings at the Central Labor Union headquarters, but had to cancel the second when loyal 574 drivers showed up. Tobin stuck to his tried and tested formula, threatening to revoke the charter of the St. Paul IBT local unless it cut its ties with Local 574. Minneapolis City and Sanitary Drivers Local 664 was threatened with the same at a Joint Council meeting, but their representatives were undaunted, voting "solidly against a motion to issue a public statement naming 574 as a permanent 'outlaw.'" The *Northwest Organizer* reported that at this meeting, Joint Council organizer Cliff Hall "almost broke out in tears as he related that it was impossible to get 574 members to join the dual 'union,' Local 500."<sup>235</sup>

Since Local 574 "carried far more weight in the trade-union ranks than did the Tobinites who strove to isolate the local," Tobin turned to AFL President William Green

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particularly valued for his popularity among building trades union leaders. He possessed a secure base in his own small union and devoted much of his time to assisting other building trades locals or participating in politics. Frank espoused a highly idiosyncratic Marxism, supporting first one faction, then another, in accordance with his personal analysis of the situation. At various times he cooperated with the Popular Front, with the Trotskyists, and with the Central Labor Union's moderate bloc." See Haynes, 28; "Conference Call," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 76; "Reinstatement of Local 574 Demanded by Conference of Delegates from 15 Unions," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 24 (October 2, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n24-oct-02-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "15 Unions for Recharter of Drivers' 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 24 (October 2, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n24-oct-02-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Minutes of Trade Union Conference, September 30, 1935, Dobbs Papers, box 15.

<sup>235</sup> "Local 400 Tries to Bust Laundry Union," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 24 (October 2, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n24-oct-02-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Corcoran Holds Mass Meeting of 4 Drivers," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 25 (October 9, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n25-oct-09-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Tobin Lashes Out At St. Paul Union," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 26 (October 16, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n26-oct-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Tobin's Gang Passes Buck at Portland," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 26 (October 16, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n26-oct-16-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

for help. In addition, Mayor Latimer made a trip to Washington D.C. “to appeal to Green to help him against the unions, declaring that ‘Progress has been and is being endangered by industrial strife.’” The famous Atlantic City AFL convention, at which United Mine Workers of America President John L. Lewis delivered his “punch heard round the world” after the advocates of industrial unionism were defeated about 18,000 votes to 11,000, did not take place until mid-October; the founding of the Committee for Industrial Organization would follow shortly on November 9. But in the weeks before these events, William Green and his fellow labor statesmen were working to crush the industrial union movement in the egg. The red leadership of Local 574 in Minneapolis, on the forefront of the proletarian upsurge, was a prime target for AFL reaction. William Green dispatched his lieutenant, one Meyer Lewis, to rescue the Northwest and its mutinous AFL movement from the spectre of communism.<sup>236</sup>

### ***The Meyer Lewis Campaign***

Green’s agent spent about five weeks in Minneapolis preparing his witchhunt before stepping out on October 30 with both barrels blazing. In a statement to the press, which made headlines in capitalist newspapers across the country, Meyer Lewis declared an official AFL “national drive against communism.” Minneapolis was to serve as the headquarters for the national purge. Lewis laid out a “4-point plan” and stated that “It is of the utmost importance that the citizens of Minneapolis, regardless of class or creed, regardless of financial status and regardless of belief shall co-operate 100 percent” to

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<sup>236</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 77; “Green Trains Guns on Militant Minneapolis Labor; Appeals to Open Shopperry Against Local 574,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 45 (November 2, 1935): 8, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-02-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); Preis, 41-42; A.J. Muste, “Build the Left Wing, Is Real Lesson of AFL Convention,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 44 (October 26, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/oct-26-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); Ross, 365; Preis, 43.

“purge the city of communism.” This was the only way to achieve the AFL’s goal: “complete and underlying peace for business men.”<sup>237</sup>

Union protests poured in to William Green, forcing him to reign in his henchman. After four days of cocky posturing and sensational newspaper hype, Green repudiated Lewis’s announcement, stating that “The A. F. of L. has not launched a national drive... the situation... in Minneapolis... is a purely local one and possesses local significance only.” The “red drive” was officially reduced to cleaning out just four Minneapolis unions: Local 574, Machinists Local 382, Metal Workers Local 1313, and Station Employees Local 19802 (the four unions in the bloc that together composed the Joint Transportation Council). It was soon clear, however, that all of Local 574’s allies were in Lewis’ crosshairs.<sup>238</sup>

After his false start, Lewis would spend months trying to get his witchhunt off the ground. His primary source of Farmer-Labor support was Mayor Latimer, and his primary source of labor support was the anti-communist bureaucrats involved in Daniel Tobin’s maneuvers against Local 574. The city’s businessmen were “cheering themselves hoarse for the Green drive” and the Citizens Alliance publicly endorsed it. All the major Twin Cities newspapers were eager to support Lewis. His allies in the AFL bureaucracy joined the capitalist press in embracing his plan to enlist the fascistic American Legion in the campaign.<sup>239</sup>

<sup>237</sup> Walker, 260; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 77; “Minneapolis Progressives Rally For Defense of Drivers Local 574,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 46 (November 9, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-09-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>238</sup> “‘Big National Drive’ Is Big Flop,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 29 (November 6, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n29-nov-06-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014); “Green Trains Guns on Militant Minneapolis Labor; Appeals to Open Shoppery Against Local 574,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 45 (November 2, 1935): 8, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-02-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); Mpls. Labor Slams Union-Busting Campaign,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>239</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 77; “Bring On Your Vigilantes,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 25 (October 9, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n25-oct-09-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Bust the Union Busters! Demand the Removal of Splitter

Lewis' success with the open enemies of the working class exacerbated the fissures in the labor movement and in the FLP. Dobbs writes that Lewis' open attack on the most militant workers "served to broaden and deepen the rebel trends inside the AFL. That, in turn, precipitated a panic within local bureaucratic circles. A flurry of protests against the Lewis approach followed, sent mostly to national labor figures other than Green and Tobin, asking that they intervene in the situation."<sup>240</sup>

In the *Northwest Organizer*, the Minneapolis Trotskyists opposed the campaign on the basis of their consistent advocacy of the class-struggle program of industrial organizing against the class-collaborationist program of craft unionism. The AFL misleaders were afraid of losing their privileged positions in their job trust system; "Therefore, under the subterfuge of a 'red drive,' they seek to destroy the progressive upholders of industrial unionism."<sup>241</sup>

However, the Workers Party focused much more heavily on the Green campaign's significance for the Farmer-Labor Party, and in the process the Trotskyists implicitly reasserted their political support for the FLP. As the *Northwest Organizer* explained:

Why is Green concentrating on Minneapolis?... Because the workers of Minnesota, in general, have built up a Farmer-Labor Party and elected a Farmer-Labor administration, thereby ousting the Republican machine from office. William Green is a Republican wheel-horse, working together with Daniel Tobin and the other Democratic wheel-horses in the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor. The old capitalist parties want to make a drive on

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Lewis!" *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 29 (November 6, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n29-nov-06-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014); "Mpls. Labor Slams Union-Busting Campaign," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); "Meyer Lewis' Record Shows 13 Times At Bat; No Hits, No Runs, 13 Errors," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>240</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 78.

<sup>241</sup> "'Big National Drive' Is Big Flop," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 29 (November 6, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n29-nov-06-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014).

Minnesota for the coming elections. They want to tie the Minnesota workers and farmers to the kite of the old capitalist parties again.<sup>242</sup>

One editorial concluded:

The FLP has its base in the unions. Most of its support and a great part of its leadership comes from the ranks of the unions. The Green drive will lop off the Farmer-Laborite unionists just as quickly as it attacks any other group. The FLP is faced squarely with an issue which cannot be dodged. If it stands aside, the Green machine will cut it to pieces. It must take a firm stand against the tactics of Meyer Lewis and aid the progressive unions in defeating him.<sup>243</sup>

The Trotskyists were pessimistic about the possibility that the AFL heads would back down, even with elements of the FLP in their corner. Farrell Dobbs explains that protests from the FLP to Daniel Tobin were ineffective because,

Politically, the IBT head was a Roosevelt Democrat. His attitude toward the Farmer-Labor Party was conditioned accordingly. Since Roosevelt had a loose alliance with the FLP, Tobin raised no objections when IBT affiliates in Minnesota supported its candidates over those of the Democrats. But he wasn't about to let FLP problems take priority over his bureaucratic interests within the Teamsters.<sup>244</sup>

Throughout the winter of 1935-36, the Trotskyist newspapers excoriated the AFL bureaucracy, entertaining no illusions that the craft unionists in control could play any "progressive" role in the class struggle.

On the other hand, the Trotskyists were optimistic about their prospects of collaboration with the Farmer-Labor Party in the struggle against the Meyer Lewis campaign. Continued complaints about the Latimer wing notwithstanding, the Minnesota FLP was depicted as more "progressive" than ever. The *New Militant* recognized that Lewis would have the support of the mayor and those Farmer-Laborite AFL bureaucrats

<sup>242</sup> "Bust the Union Busters! Demand the Removal of Splitter Lewis!" *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 29 (November 6, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n29-nov-06-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014).

<sup>243</sup> *The New Militant* made the same defense of this position. See "What About the Farmer-Labor Party?" *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 29 (November 6, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n29-nov-06-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014); "Mpls. Labor Slams Union-Busting Campaign," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>244</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 78.

who supported him through such bodies as the "Employer-Employee Board," but it predicted that the major institutions of the FLP would come out against the campaign. Lewis claimed he would get the support of the FLP women's clubs and veterans organizations, but the Farmer-Labor Women's Federation and Veterans Association had recently held meetings denouncing Mayor Latimer as a murderer and calling for his expulsion. The Trotskyists also predicted that the FLP Hennepin County Central Committee and "the many Farmer-Laborite aldermen and state representatives" who had been outraged by Latimer's police attacks would line up against Lewis. The *New Militant* crowed, "The Green challenge is accepted! The fight to the finish is on. It is a fight of progress against reaction... against all the vile weapons that William Green, the Citizens Alliance, the Farmer-Labor Mayor, the police and other scoundrels will bring into play."<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Regardless of their outward optimism, the Minneapolis branch appealed to the WP center for support, and the Political Committee again took action. Minneapolis proposed that the party turn the *Northwest Organizer* from a weekly into a daily; the PC initially disagreed because Local 574 faced a drawn-out battle for reinstatement, not a strike situation. But when Minneapolis repeated the proposal with some urgency, the PC approved it (the branch may not have had the capacity, as the *NO* remained a weekly). The PC also agreed that "All branches and other possible contacts be mobilized for wide circulation" of the *NO*. The center motivated support to Minneapolis with the argument that "Essentially this is a drive against industrial unionism and every manifestation of progressivism in the unions," but did not mention the FLP's electoral prospects vis-à-vis the "old capitalist parties." The PC took measures to raise funds from national trade-union leaders and to initiate united fronts with the SP and CP against Green, and voted to send George Clarke to help with editorial work on the *NO* (there is no evidence that Clarke made the trip). Max Shachtman was present in the Northwest in late October and early November, giving talks on the impending world war in Minneapolis, Albert Lea, and Austin, Minnesota, and in Plentywood, Montana. The *New Militant* reported that these meetings were very well attended, that in Albert Lea "the County Committee of the Farmer-Labor party postponed its regular meeting downstairs to attend the Shachtman meeting in a body," and that in Plentywood the talk was chaired by *Producers News* founder and editor Charles Taylor. In December James P. Cannon may have visited Minneapolis on his way to a Cedar Rapids, Iowa meeting of the Northwest Labor Unity Conference where he spoke on the growing national movement for industrial unionism. There is no evidence however that either Shachtman or Cannon were involved directly in the struggle against the Green campaign in Minneapolis or gave editorial assistance to the *Northwest Organizer* at this time. See "Green Trains Guns on Militant Minneapolis Labor; Appeals to Open Shoppery Against Local 574," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 45 (November 2, 1935): 8, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-02-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); "Minneapolis Progressives Rally For Defense of Drivers Local 574," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 46 (November 9, 1935): 1, 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-09-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); Minutes of WP Political Committee, November 4, 1935, Glotzer

This optimism was quickly vindicated, as elements of the FLP and “its base in the unions” rushed to defend Local 574. All fourteen AFL union allies showed up for another conference with 574 scheduled for October 30. It convened just a few hours after Green and Lewis announced the national campaign and passed a resolution condemning it as an attack on all progressive tendencies in the labor movement. In the following days Minneapolis FLP Clubs started passing resolutions against Meyer Lewis as well.<sup>246</sup>

When Local 574 held a rally on November 8, over 3,000 workers packed the drivers’ hall and overflowed into the surrounding streets. The popularity of Bill Brown, Carl Skoglund, and the Dunne brothers had grown during the recent fights with the strikebreaking mayor, and now it reached a new height. At the rally FLP politicians I.G. Scott and Sam Bellman joined with 574 leaders and the officers and ranks of sympathetic unions in voting unanimously “to endorse the policies and principles of Local 574 and to support it in its fight against Splitter Lewis.”

With support for Local 574 peaking in the FLP’s urban base, Scott and Bellman had more Farmer-Labor weight behind them than in their previous collaboration with the drivers. Scott was impressed with the massive show of solidarity, and in his speech

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Papers, box 7, folder 1, 1; Minutes of WP Political Committee, November 11, 1935, Records of the SWP; A. J. Muste to all WP branches, n.d. [hand-marked “1935?”], Records of the SWP; “The Minneapolis Labor Movement: The Facts,” n.d. [enclosed with A. J. Muste to All WP Branches, n.d.], Glotzer Papers, box 10, folder 2, 1-2; “Party at Work,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 44 (October 26, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/oct-26-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “Hundreds Turn Out for Shachtman Meetings,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 46 (November 9, 1935): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-09-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Shachtman Gets Rousing Reception in Minneapolis, Plentywood Meetings,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “N. West Militants Meet,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 51 (December 21, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/dec-21-1935.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2014).

<sup>246</sup> “Minneapolis Progressives Rally For Defense of Drivers Local 574,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 46 (November 9, 1935): 1, 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-09-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Third Ward F-L Club Opposes Meyer Lewis,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 30 (November 13, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n30-nov-13-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Junior Farmer-Labor Club Condemns Lewis,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 30 (November 13, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n30-nov-13-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

“suggested that a dose of ‘outlawry’ would probably be a real aid to many unions that are now asleep.” Scott continued,

‘The world is moving to the left... The large vote for industrial unionism in the A. F. of L. convention is a sign of hope for the American workers. Local 574 is the one really bright spot in Minneapolis, and the eyes of the state and the nation are upon it. It must be defended. Its organ, the Northwest Organizer, the best labor paper in the northwest, must be kept going. I am always ready to aid Local 574.’

Bellman declared that Meyer Lewis was getting “great newspaper publicity because the press is interested in breaking up the labor movement,” but “if 574 is beaten it will be a death blow to all the unions.” Bellman went on: “‘If the labor unions are broken up, the liberal political organizations will also fail... Local 574 is carrying the banner of progress for the workers, and we must give our solid support.’”<sup>247</sup>

Finally, Vincent Dunne gave a speech on “the more serious and fundamental aspects of this struggle.” He addressed the rising movement for industrial unionism, arguing that leaders like John L. Lewis were responding to this pressure “because they are interested in maintaining their positions,” but the “arch-reactionary craft-union fakers” realized that they must “tear the unions apart, terrorize the workers, and strike fear into all of those who are making the drive for industrial unionism.” He then turned to the question of the FLP, reiterating the line taken in the Trotskyist press:

‘Minnesota is like an island that is looked upon by the workers of the rest of the country, struggling for their rights. Whatever you may think of the Farmer-Labor Party, you must recognize that it represents a new course—the workers here have struck off upon the path of independent political action through the Farmer-Labor Party. Bill Green, the old Republican wheelhorse, and other craft unionists, closely allied with the two old capitalist parties, resent this political expression of the workers. And so they come here hoping to smash the Farmer-Labor Party.’<sup>248</sup>

<sup>247</sup> “3000 Workers Endorse 574,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 30 (November 13, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n30-nov-13-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>248</sup> In the following weeks Dunne gave a public lecture series at WP headquarters: “What Is a Labor Party?”; “Can a Labor Party Promote Trade Union Organization?”; “Can Labor Parties Prevent Imperialist War?” See “V. Dunne Lashes Fakerdom Before Mpls. Mass Meeting,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 1, 3, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “V. R. Dunne to Give Series of Lectures,” *The Northwest*

The following day, the *New Militant* published a statement by the Minneapolis branch that captured the agonizing contradictions of their position. In the main it was an attack on the FLP, citing the warning given before the spring elections – “Elect the Farmer-Laborites to office but WATCH THEIR EVERY MOVE...” – then listing its many “betrayals.” It made the case that a “real workers’ party” would have “ousted all reactionaries from appointive offices... shaken up the relief administration, put in progressives, retained the 35 per cent relief, and fought for further increases!” Unlike the FLP administration which was responsible for the “gross mismanagement of strikes,” a “real workers’ party”

would have used the police to shut down the plants and keep them shut down until such employers would concede the demands of the trade unions. A real workers’ party would never tolerate such butchers as Forestal, Ohman and Goergan on the police department. And if the business men objected? A real workers’ party would still fearlessly proceed in the above manner, and if necessary, be forced out of office rather than betray the workers into the hands of their mortal enemies, the employers.<sup>249</sup>

These lines reduce the issue of state repression to the minor difficulty of a few “bad apples” among the police and push the illusion that the capitalist state apparatus can be made to work for the interests of the working class. It is remarkable, however, that at this juncture the Trotskyists were compelled to counterpose to the FLP a “real workers party,” effectively raising momentarily the “labor party” slogan. There could not be a clearer indication that the slogan was necessary in an arena with a “two-class party.”<sup>250</sup>

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*Organizer*, vol. I, no. 32 (November 27, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n32-nov-27-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>249</sup> “Mpls. W.P. Shows True Role of F-L Party,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 46 (November 9, 1935): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-09-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 76-77.

<sup>250</sup> Fighting against the Stalinists’ “labor party” without a “real workers party” slogan of their own resulted in an accusation of syndicalism against the Minneapolis Trotskyists, a charge they rejected rather defensively in the *Northwest Organizer*. See: “The WPA Conference,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 41 (January 29, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n41-jan-29-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

The statement then called on workers to quit the FLP and join the Trotskyist movement – but it conceded that if they were not yet convinced of this necessity,

we say: Stay in the Farmer-Labor party and seriously and conscientiously work within its ranks to make it function for the workers. It is our studied opinion that such work is hopeless, is doomed to failure. All history mocks at the idea of a reformist party winning any permanent gains for the workers. But if you still feel the need of attempting such a fight, make the attempt. The Workers Party of the U. S. will aid you in every possible way.

Finally, it resuscitated the Trotskyists' formal opposition to a two-class party as spelled out in the WP Declaration of Principles – “any party which purports to represent two or more classes on an equal footing, or to direct its appeals ‘to all classes’ is essentially a middle class party doomed to irresolution and surrender to the big capitalists in every decisive test.”<sup>251</sup>

In September, Bill Brown had publicly dismissed the FLP as “dead” and had threatened to fight for “a real producer’s party.” The November statement concluded that the FLP’s betrayals were “enough to damn a party forever in the eyes of honest working men and women” and called for workers to withdraw from the party. Smemo points out that “Such threats rang hollow,” and it is true that just eight months after they endorsed Latimer the Trotskyists had slipped too far from their founding program to see its basic relevance, even when objective conditions gave them the perfect opportunity to apply it. The practical revival of the labor party slogan at this moment shows that the Trotskyists were teetering between opportunist conciliation and the path of struggle.<sup>252</sup>

### ***“Disaster All Along the Line”***

The pressure on Governor Olson at this point must have been immense, as the FLP’s *Leader* quickly came out with a front-page article denouncing William Green’s campaign, linking it, as the Trotskyists did, with “an attempt on the part of the two old

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<sup>251</sup> “Mpls. W.P. Shows True Role of F-L Party,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 46 (November 9, 1935): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-09-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 76-77.

<sup>252</sup> Smemo, 65.

capitalist parties to break up the third-party movement in Minnesota.” Despite the governor’s best efforts, he stood on shaky ground as the crisis unfolded.<sup>253</sup>

The Minneapolis CLU’s *Labor Review* maintained a stony silence throughout the campaign, mentioning Meyer Lewis only to portray him as a helpful AFL official visiting town to help with organizing efforts. But on November 12 its editor, Robert Cramer – a linchpin in the class collaboration between the AFL and the solidly bourgeois tops of the FLP – sent a frantic telegram to FLP Senator Henrik Shipstead in Washington, D.C. Cramer protested that William Green’s campaign “threatens to split labor movement here in two.” Fearing that the FLP could be splitting along class lines, Cramer warned that “split in labor movement will mean split in political movement and disaster all along the line.” He begged Shipstead to act immediately: “you can render your friends in the labor movement here most valuable service and save situation by seeing Green at once and asking him to have Lewis hold action regarding Central Labor Union in abeyance until Green makes impartial investigation.” Shipstead called William Green but was apparently rebuffed.<sup>254</sup>

On the same day that Cramer sent his telegram, Meyer Lewis held a meeting with local union business agents, but he and his supporters had to hastily adjourn to prevent the outraged majority from putting the meeting on the record in favor of Lewis’ immediate removal from the city.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> “Latest Facts on Mpls.,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 1, 3, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Mpls. Labor Slams Union-Busting Campaign,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); Smemo, 65.

<sup>254</sup> *The Minneapolis Labor Review*, Labor Review Archive Project, [http://www.minneapolisunions.org/labor\\_review\\_archive\\_about.php](http://www.minneapolisunions.org/labor_review_archive_about.php); Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 78; Cramer, telegram to Senator Henrik Shipstead, November 12, 1935, Dobbs Papers, box 15.

<sup>255</sup> “Meyer Lewis’ Record Shows 13 Times At Bat; No Hits, No Runs, 13 Errors,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 2, [https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwest\\_organizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwest_organizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf) (accessed March 5, 2016).

That night, when Lewis tried to speak at a University of Minnesota student forum on “The Red Purge in Minneapolis,” Bill Brown and Vincent and Grant Dunne sat in the front row, terrifying the beleaguered bureaucrat.<sup>256</sup>

Even the staunchest craft unionist leaders were crumbling under the pressure, as T. E. Cunningham publicly “denied that he knew anything of the plans of Lewis,” and six members of the Teamster’s Joint Council, which Lewis claimed had pledged to “reorganize” Local 574, denied “that Lewis has ever spoken to them or that they have ever seen him.” Even the city’s businessmen, after celebrating Lewis’ arrival, turned down his proposal to break all contracts with the drivers’ union. In the days after the November 8 mass meeting, Tobin’s little “Local 500” lost seven of its 16 remaining members to Local 574.<sup>257</sup>

The “red drive” reached a miserable climax when Meyer Lewis appeared before the Central Labor Union on November 13. Lewis intended to secure the CLU’s endorsement of his branding 574 a “permanent outlaw” union and his decision to revoke the laundry workers’ charter, with the goal of forcing all of 574’s AFL allies to break relations. It turned into “one of the stormiest sessions the C.L.U. has ever seen,” with about fifty delegates demanding the floor to denounce Lewis; “There were not ten people in the hall who wanted to defend Lewis and certainly no one who dared to do so.” Even Chairman Cunningham had to come out against Green’s agent. The delegates voted to establish a special committee that would “repair the damage done by Lewis” and reestablish working relations with Local 574. As the *Northwest Organizer* reported, “The

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<sup>256</sup> “Local 574 Goes to College; Lewis Gets It on the Chin,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 1, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Meyer Lewis Has to Catch Train – After Students and President Get Thru with Him,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 48 (November 23, 1935): 1, 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-23-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014).

<sup>257</sup> Latest Facts on Mpls.,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Meyer Lewis’ Record Shows 13 Times At Bat; No Hits, No Runs, 13 Errors,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

meeting finally adjourned in an uproar shortly after midnight. Plain clothes cops were present to whisk Lewis out of the meeting and see him safely to his scab hotel.”<sup>258</sup>

By this point, the Meyer Lewis campaign had created such a deep crisis that the possibility of splitting the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party along class lines was palpable. Even without the Trotskyists’ intervention, the objective class contradictions of the two-class party were pushing the proletariat’s subordination to the breaking point. If the Trotskyists had reasserted their principled opposition to two-class parties and their program of proletarian political independence – in the form of the “labor party” slogan or otherwise – the Workers Party might have played the essential leadership role in this opening, purposefully breaking the Minneapolis working class from the party of their oppressors.

However, their opportunist program of critical support to the FLP and blocking with its “progressive” wing blinded the Trotskyists to their task as proletarian revolutionaries. Instead, they further consolidated their class-collaborationist bloc with sympathetic Farmer-Labor politicians and increasingly politically liquidated into the farmer-labor movement. From this position, the Minneapolis Trotskyists sought to merely pressure the FLP to represent its working-class constituency by defending Local 574 against the destructive attacks by the AFL bureaucracy. At this juncture, such efforts served to repair the open rifts in the FLP and reinforce the sway of this bourgeois party over the Minnesota workers movement.

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<sup>258</sup> Lewis revoked the charter of Dry Cleaners Local 18005 when it refused to repudiate its support of “outlaw” Local 574. See “Mpls. Labor Slams Union-Busting Campaign,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 47 (November 16, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-16-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Laundry Workers Hit Lewis Program” and “Lewis Routed In Assembly,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

## *The Rise of the CIO*

Despite the outpouring of support in early November for the Minneapolis Teamsters, it was at this moment that the Stalinists chose to decisively turn against Local 574's bloc. The officers of Machinists Local 382, led by CPers William Mauseth, Herman Hussman, and Hillard Smith, boycotted the November 8 rally. Their press reversed its line on Local 574, attacking its leadership and joining the chorus of smears from Latimer, Lewis and the Citizens Alliance. The Stalinists, however, had miscalculated. Once it was clear that 574 would weather the storm, the leadership of Local 382 realized their "mistake" and sent a delegation to 574 seeking reconciliation. They were told that they would have to prove themselves by their future actions. After this, the Stalinists stayed quiet in the CLU as Meyer Lewis was raked over the coals, and the *NO* had nothing to say about any further CP activity until the following spring.<sup>259</sup>

For the moment the Minnesota Stalinists were eclipsed by greater forces; by late November an impressive array of national labor leaders had sided with Local 574 against Green's attempted purge. Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party; Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and future vice president of the CIO; and Emil Rieve, president of the American Federation of Hosiery Workers, all pledged their support to the Trotskyist-led trucker local. Alexander McKeown, vice president of the AFHW, was present in Minneapolis to help conduct the ongoing Strutwear strike. When Meyer Lewis tried to line McKeown up against Local 574, the latter insisted that 574 was the one force keeping the strike alive. Lewis had initially opposed the Strutwear strike but now he reversed himself, "formally announcing that the A. F. of L. was standing behind the hosiery workers' strike to the fullest extent." More

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<sup>259</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 101; "Local 382 Must Fight," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 30 (November 13, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n30-nov-13-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Stormy C.L.U. Rally Mpls. Voices Protest," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 48 (November 23, 1935): 1, 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-23-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); "Central Labor Union Holds Stormy Meet," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 35 (December 18, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n35-dec-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

declarations of support came from the *Progressive*, official organ of the LaFollette movement in Madison, Wisconsin, and from as far away as Oakland, California, where the American Federation of Teachers drafted a resolution defending 574 for their state convention.<sup>260</sup>

While the “broad left opposition” around Local 574 initially beat back Meyer Lewis in Minneapolis, it was the cohering of the industrial movement nationally that put the final nail in his coffin. News of the Atlantic City convention in October, the founding of the CIO in early November, and John L. Lewis’ resignation from the AFL on November 23 put wind in the sails of the union militants of the Northwest even as Meyer Lewis attempted to isolate and shut them down. The *NO* and *NM* reported avidly on these developments, and the *WP* sent Vincent Dunne to attend the Atlantic City convention, after which he gave a public talk on the progress of industrial unionism.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Sidney Hillman, telegram to William Green, Dobbs Papers, box 15; “Hosiery Workers Promise Support,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Norman Thomas Pledges National Support to Local Drivers Union,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Carl O’Shea, “M. Lewis Reported Retired,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 49 (November 30, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-30-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Stormy C.L.U. Rally Mpls. Voices Protest,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 48 (November 23, 1935): 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-23-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “LaFollette Paper Rebukes Wm. Green,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 32 (November 27, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n32-nov-27-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Okland [sic] Teachers Aid 574 at State Meet,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 34 (December 11, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n34-dec-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>261</sup> For the Trotskyists’ analysis of these developments, their evolving perspective toward the rising CIO leaders, and their complete unwillingness to strike out independently of the AFL in any industrial organizing, see “A. F. L. Convention Will Be Discussed,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 27 (October 23, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n27-oct-23-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “An Indictment of Craft Unionism,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 27 (October 23, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n27-oct-23-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); A.J. Muste, “Build the Left Wing, Is Real Lesson of AFL Convention,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 44 (October 26, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/oct-26-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); “J. L. Lewis Rocks A. F. of L.,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 32 (November 27, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n32-nov-27-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Arne Swabeck, “Who Are the New ‘Progressive’ Leaders in the A.F. of L.?” *The New*

Minneapolis sat in the northwest corner of America's massive and largely unorganized meatpacking industry, and the Trotskyists participated in packinghouse workers' organizing meetings and conferences beginning in December 1935. James P. Cannon's single visit to the region in this period was for a meeting of the Northwest Labor Unity Conference in Austin, Minnesota, which centered on the meatpacking organizing drive and passed a resolution calling "for a policy of class struggle and for industrial unionism as a necessary modern form of labor organization." In Cannon's absence the Political Committee apparently attempted to discuss "the bearing of the John L. Lewis movement on the Minneapolis developments," but postponed the point until Cannon and the Minneapolis comrades could write up their thoughts on the subject "to assist us in the discussion on this important matter."<sup>262</sup>

By early February 1936 the local meatpacking drive, headed by some of the Trotskyists' primary NLUC collaborators, linked up with the national movement as the CIO demanded an unrestricted industrial charter from the AFL for all meatpackers. The

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*Militant*, vol. I, no. 49 (November 30, 1935): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-30-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); "Upheaval in the A. F. of L.," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 33 (December 4, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n33-dec-04-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Conference Call," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 22 (September 18, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Demand Industrial Union," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 41 (January 29, 1936): 1, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n41-jan-29-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Industrial Leaders Lash Out at Green and Craft Unionists in Open Letters," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 41 (January 29, 1936): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n41-jan-29-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Executive Board of Local 574 Again Publicly States Aims, Purposes and Position of General Drivers Union," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 1 (April 22, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n01-apr-22-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "The C. I. O.," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 2 (April 29, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n02-apr-29-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Progressive Slate Wins in Auto Union," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 3 (May 6, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n03-may-06-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>262</sup> "Progressive Unionists Confer," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 34 (December 11, 1935): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n34-dec-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "N. West Militants Meet," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 51 (December 21, 1935): 1, 2, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/dec-21-1935.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2014); A.J. Muste to James P. Cannon, December 11, 1935, Cannon Papers, box 3.

last known meeting of the Northwest Labor Unity Conference took place in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in conjunction with a meatpacking conference that founded a regional Committee for Industrial Organization for the packinghouse industry. Likewise, in Minneapolis the Trotskyists joined with 21 other unions (including those of the NLUC bloc) in founding the “Permanent Committee for Industrial Organization,” which was directly connected to John L. Lewis (while Lewis could not attend, he sent a telegram to be read to the gathered delegates). What remained of the NLUC organization was subsumed into the rising CIO movement at this time.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> “Meat Packing Local Start Union Drive,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 42 (February 5, 1936): 1, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n42-feb-05-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Industrial Unionists Meet,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 42 (February 5, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n42-feb-05-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Minneapolis Unions Join Lewis Set-Up,” *The New Militant*, vol. II, no. 7 (February 15, 1936): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1936/feb-15-1936.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2014).

The Trotskyists attempted to affiliate Local 574 to the CIO, sending a delegation (including Farrell Dobbs, Vincent Dunne and Carl Skoglund) to Washington DC to meet its national leaders. John L. Lewis and company, attempting to get their fledgling movement off the ground, chose to avoid an all-out battle with Daniel Tobin and the IBT, and sent the dissident Teamsters on their way. Dobbs and Dunne spoke on the results at a mass meeting hosted by Local 574, and Dobbs wrote a report on the trip for the *NO*, which was critically supportive of the CIO. The ensuing polarization between the industrial and craft union movements became the primary dividing line in Minneapolis AFL bodies. When the CLU held elections for its officers in January, the *NO* argued that it was “supremely important” that the supporters of industrial unions win as it would put the labor movement in “progressive hands.” Local 574 appeared quite pleased with the results and repeated “its pledge of solidarity and support to the Minneapolis Central Body.” See Palmer, 229-230; Mickey Dunne, “Keeping Step With 574,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 45 (February 26, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n45-feb-26-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Mickey Dunne, “Keeping Step With 574,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 48 (March 18, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n48-mar-18-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Union Rally Packs Halls Friday Night,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 49 (March 25, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n49-mar-25-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Farrell Dobbs, “The National Labor Front,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 50 (April 1, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n50-apr-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “The Central Labor Union Votes,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 40 (January 22, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n40-jan-22-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “The New Broom,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 41 (January 29, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n41-jan-29-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

By early 1936, Local 574 enjoyed, according to its president, “the best organizational opportunities that have ever presented themselves to our union. Workers everywhere are clamoring for union organization.” The Meyer Lewis campaign hardly put a dent in Local 574’s expansion; during the month of November the local recruited 117 new members and reinstated about 200. Over the winter of 1935-36 Brown, Skoglund and the Dunne brothers traveled to meetings across the Northwest, helping to launch organizing committees and spreading the word about the industrial union movement. In April, Local 574 reported that their membership had almost tripled during their year in exile. All told, 38 new unions were chartered in the region between the 1934 strikes and 1936. As the backbone of this offensive, the Minneapolis Teamsters earned deep respect and widespread support from the exploited classes of the Northwest.<sup>264</sup>

It was in this context that the bulk of the Minnesota labor movement and FLP decisively hardened up against William Green’s purge campaign. In early December more of the leading cadre of the Farmer-Labor Party came out for Local 574; the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Central Committee adopted a resolution “denouncing Meyer Lewis’s policies as tending to disrupt the organized Labor Movement and divide the liberal political forces,” with only two dissenting votes. The *NO* applauded this

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<sup>264</sup> “Bill Brown Says,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 52 (April 15, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n52-apr-15-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “November Banner Month Despite Lewis,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 38 (January 8, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n38-jan-08-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Palmer, 225; “Mankato Drivers To Form Union,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 36 (December 25, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n36-dec-25-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 40 (January 22, 1936), <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n40-jan-22-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

In January Local 574 held its first election since it was exiled from the AFL, which its leaders saw as a rank-and-file referendum on their conduct during the last nine months. While less than fifteen percent of the membership bothered to vote, those that did so overwhelmingly supported the reelection of Brown and the Trotskyists. See “Local 574 Elections Return All Officers and Trustees to Office,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 39 (January 15, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n39-jan-15-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Executive Board of Local 574 Again Publicly States Aims, Purposes and Position of General Drivers Union,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 1 (April 22, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n01-apr-22-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Walker, 251, 265.

action as it placed “the entire Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Unit, whose membership embraces thousands of Trade Unionists, as standing opposed to so-called Red drives in the Labor Movement.” At a December 9 rally for the Strutwear strikers, Rob Cramer of the *Labor Review* reportedly praised Local 574 along with the rest of the speakers. The Trotskyists’ optimistic predictions had nearly all come true; the Farmer-Labor Women’s Federation soon convened to denounce Lewis as well.<sup>265</sup>

Local 574 declared Meyer Lewis “retired,” and Lewis returned to Washington, D.C. to consult with Green. The drivers welcomed the CLU’s peace offering and started holding meetings with its special committee, but they remained adamant in their demand that the local AFL body fight for 574 (and now Dry Cleaners Local 18005 as well) to be reinstated with full jurisdictional rights restored. The executive board issued a statement that concluded, “Pending our reinstatement as a duly chartered local of the Teamsters International, we desire to live in peace with the general labor movement as represented by the C. L. U. and to co-operate with it in all matters.”<sup>266</sup>

But the AFL could not give up the campaign. Lewis was soon sent back to Minneapolis to set up an official “AFL Office,” and started preparing more maneuvers against Local 574. When the city’s top AFL leaders met Lewis again, the *Northwest Organizer* protested that this was a violation of the CLU truce and wrote threateningly:

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<sup>265</sup> “Henn. F. L. P. Group Hits at ‘Red Purge,’” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 34 (December 11, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n34-dec-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Strutwear Workers Hold Mass Meeting,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 35 (December 18, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n35-dec-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “F-L Women Condemn Latimer and Lewis,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 38 (January 8, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n38-jan-08-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>266</sup> Carl O’Shea, “M. Lewis Reported Retired,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 49 (November 30, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-30-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); James P. Cannon, “Lewis ‘Purge’ Stopped Cold,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 48 (November 23, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-23-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); Carl O’Shea, “M. Lewis Reported Retired,” *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 49 (November 30, 1935): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1935/nov-30-1935.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2014); “Local 574 States Position,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 34 (December 11, 1935): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n34-dec-11-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

“We know the plans that were made there. We know the name of every man that was in the room.”<sup>267</sup> An editorial warned that Local 574 “is not deceived in regard to the so-called ‘hands off’ policy adopted by the Central Labor Union”:

at the top of the Minneapolis Trade Union movement there are those who, for trade union political reasons, desire to see us swept aside. We know and realize that this truce has been entered into sincerely and honestly by most of the Minneapolis Trade Unionists but we also know that behind the back of these people, there will be carried on a campaign that will be aimed at elimination.<sup>268</sup>

However, Lewis never could conquer the CLU. He faced another miserable night in its hall, taking flak from the pro-574 unions for his “Hitler-like” plot to take control of the city’s AFL institutions. The delegates voted to establish a second special committee to deal with “Splitter” Lewis.<sup>269</sup>

In mid-January the AFL’s Executive Committee continued to issue instructions to William Green with clever new maneuvers for their agent in Minneapolis. A March report from Meyer Lewis to Green reveals that Lewis had taken the purge campaign into the FLP where the reds were now embedding themselves. In April, Lewis would help lead a gang of Tobin’s mercenaries in a campaign to destroy Local 574 through sheer political terrorism, but this too would fail.<sup>270</sup>

### ***Olson and the Teamsters Mend the Party***

Governor Olson may have saved his two-class party from “disaster all along the line” by backing Local 574 against the Lewis campaign. In the aftermath, the FLP

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<sup>267</sup> “City Gets A. F. of L. Office,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 35 (December 18, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n35-dec-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>268</sup> “We Are Not Deceived,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 35 (December 18, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n35-dec-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>269</sup> “Central Labor Union Holds Stormy Meet,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 35 (December 18, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n35-dec-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>270</sup> Minutes of AFL Executive Committee, January 15-29, 1936, Dobbs Papers, box 15; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 79; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 114-120.

leadership was anxious, as they had been after the 1934 strikes, to rehabilitate the party's image with its urban working-class voter base, leading them to take a conciliatory attitude toward ongoing organizing drives and strike activity in Minneapolis. Mayor Latimer, in particular, faced a hard path back into the good graces of the workers.<sup>271</sup>

Over the winter the FLP had no choice but to come out in support of the Strutwear strike. In mid-December the Strutwear owners discovered a legal trick to involve U.S. Marshals, who were able to break through the picket lines and start moving goods. This led to a clash on December 26, when 600 pickets caught a crew of strikebreakers trying to leave the plant. The next morning, Mayor Latimer called on Governor Olson to send in the National Guard, and the Governor agreed. The soldiers escorted scabs to safety and established a "military zone" around the plant, driving the strikers away, but Olson issued a statement that Strutwear would remain *closed* until the workers and owners could reach a settlement.<sup>272</sup>

Olson and Latimer kept the Strutwear plant closed for three months, first under National Guard and then police control, eventually putting enough pressure on the

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<sup>271</sup> After the 1934 strikes, the FLP administration appears to have avoided any open conflict with Local 574, retreating in the face of its aggressive growth, sectional strikes, and merciless negotiations with the Northwest trucking companies. The state intervened against other strikes, including the Mechanics in January, Strutwear in August, and Flour City in September 1935. Latimer and his cops had been bold enough to target Vincent Dunne on the opening day of the Strutwear strike, but in general when Local 574 got involved the government yielded.

During the "red drive," a committee of employers had approached Mayor Latimer with a plan to break the Flour City strike, but the CLU threatened to "rouse the entire movement and 'tear the plant down, brick by brick'" if Flour City was reopened, paralyzing the mayor. Instead, Latimer had his Employer-Employee Board "order" the plant shuttered. The Machinists and their allies had of course already accomplished this, but Latimer had to posture for the strikers in the weeks before they won. See "Employers Attempt Strutwear Opening," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 31 (November 20, 1935): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n31-nov-20-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Smemo, 60-61.

<sup>272</sup> "Strutwear Strikers Stand Firm," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 33 (December 4, 1935): 1, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n33-dec-04-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "U.S. Agent Can't Find One Scab Truck in Mpls.," *The New Militant*, vol. I, no. 50 (December 14, 1935): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1935/dec-14-1935.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2016); "Guards Patrol Knitting Plant," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 37 (January 1, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n37-jan-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

company's owners to recognize the Hosiery Workers Union. This was at bottom a ploy to refurbish the FLP, especially Latimer, in the eyes of the workers, but Local 574, which was heavily involved in running the strike, did not expose this concession for what it was. The *Northwest Organizer* never criticized Governor Olson, preferring neutral statements or, more often, avoiding his name altogether. But once Olson and the FLP tops had helped Local 574 defeat Meyer Lewis, the paper took a more openly benevolent attitude. In December Miles Dunne publicized a rally for the Strutwear strikers featuring Olson as the main speaker, and when Olson used soldiers to shut down the plant the *NO* praised him for it.<sup>273</sup>

Both the *NO* and *NM* reported on the developing situation without calling for the Guard to be withdrawn. It would have been tactically inadvisable to launch an agitational campaign against the troops given that the Strutwear owners were the only force demanding their removal and that in this case the FLP was helping the workers to win union recognition. Both papers correctly opposed demobilization of the strike pickets, and insisted on the need for workers to rely only on their own strength. The Trotskyist press, however, did not put forward the Marxist understanding that the state was fundamentally an organ of bourgeois class rule. Despite repeated references to the 1934 strikes, their articles did not mention the original *Organizer's* fierce opposition to Olson's troops, nor the fact that this principled stand had been key to their victory.<sup>274</sup> At

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<sup>273</sup> Mickey Dunne, "Keeping Step With 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 33 (December 4, 1935): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n33-dec-04-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>274</sup> "Bill Brown Says," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 37 (January 1, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n37-jan-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Carl O'Shea, "Olson Calls Out Militia In Strutwear Hosiery Strike in Minneapolis," *The New Militant*, vol. II, no. 1 (January 4, 1936): 1, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1936/index.htm> (accessed October 13, 2014); "Local Employers Challenge Olson," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 40 (January 22, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n40-jan-22-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "The Strutwear Strike," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 41 (January 29, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n41-jan-29-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Court Aid For Strutwear," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 45 (February 26, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n45-feb-26-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016);

this point the Trotskyists' approach to the Strutwear question was warped by their support to the FLP against the Republican Party:

In Minnesota, with its politically liberal administration, which needs the support of the trade union movement, it is possible to conceive that the troops will keep the plant closed and so aid the strikers. But teaching workers to depend upon Guardsmen to win strikes, not only is folly, but is dangerous. A liberal administration may help them, but how about the reactionary Governor that may follow?<sup>275</sup>

In 1934 the Trotskyists had no illusions in the FLP state apparatus, but by early 1936 they were beginning to bend to the social-democratic illusion that the working class could take hold of the capitalist state and wield it in its own interests.

### ***Preparations for Entry***

In early 1936, the Minneapolis Trotskyists took their capitulation to farmer-laborism to another level by carrying out an entry into the FLP. As noted in Chapter 4, Trotskyists officers of Local 574 had been elected as delegates to represent the Teamsters in the FLP, and had readily participated in FLP conventions, starting as early as the spring of 1935. Now the Trotskyists sought to reinforce this small handful of comrades in another defensive effort to bolster their class-collaborationist "broad left opposition." Hostile forces in the FLP and AFL had demonstrated that they could pose a threat, but Local 574 enjoyed widespread support in the ranks of both organizations. As the Trotskyists saw it, their fight was only "with the bureaucrats who sat at the top of both movements." The best place from which to leverage union support was inside the AFL; likewise, it appeared that the best place from which to leverage farmer-laborite support

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"Before the Decision," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 50 (April 1, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n50-apr-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Strutwear Plant Reopens," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 51 (April 8, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n51-apr-08-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>275</sup> "Troops at Strutwear," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 37 (January 1, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n37-jan-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

was inside the FLP. Thus, in order to shore up Local 574's bloc with the local militant AFL leaders and the progressive wing of the FLP, the Trotskyists entered a bourgeois party.<sup>276</sup>

At the same time, the discussions and debates about entering the Minnesota FLP intersected the Trotskyists' approach to major developments with the Socialist Party and Communist Party in this period. While the primary source of pressure on the Trotskyists stemmed from their commitment to their position at the head of Local 574, the SP and CP questions must be briefly addressed.

Under the pressure of world events, in particular the Comintern's capitulation in the face of fascist reaction in Europe, the old Socialist Parties of the bankrupt and shattered Second International began to move to the left, recruiting layers of militant workers that were increasingly disillusioned with Communist Party leadership. This opened new opportunities for revolutionary regroupment, and Leon Trotsky advocated tactical entries into Socialist Parties to win over their new left wings. This tactic began in France and was then referred to internationally as the "French Turn."

Divisions in the American Socialist Party became visible in 1934 and by late 1935 the SP had polarized into increasingly hostile factions. Bolstered by the influx of relatively radical young workers, the left ("Militant") and the center ("Progressive") wings of the SP joined forces in mid-1934, consigning the hard anti-communist right wing (the "Old Guard") to a minority in the factional struggle.<sup>277</sup>

The Trotskyists were paying close attention to the SP's transformation. Differences over how to approach these developments fueled the faction fight with the Oehlerites from March to October 1935. Finally handing a decisive defeat to the Oehler group at its October plenum, the National Committee adopted a resolution that predicted spectacular new openings, making dozens of references to the "mass work" and "mass movement" that the WP could soon be leading. It projected that the WP would carry out

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<sup>276</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 80.

<sup>277</sup> Ross, 355, 358.

at least some type of fraction work in the SP: "The task of our forces inside the SP will be to push the movement forward toward programmatic clarity, and toward such an irreconcilable struggle against the reformists and centrists, as will prepare it, ideologically, psychologically and organizationally, for the inevitable break with the SP and fusion with the WP."<sup>278</sup>

The proposal for the Minnesota FLP entry was dealt with as a corollary to the national SP question. In the process of winning the Workers Party to the SP entry, Cannon and the Minneapolis branch leaders applied effectively the same methodology to both a small social-democratic working-class party and a populist bourgeois party holding regional state power. While at least one comrade, Francis Heisler (F. X. Ferry) of the Chicago branch, objected to the FLP entry as part of his fight against the SP entry, there was no effort to separate the two issues. As the October plenum resolution stated:

The general policy, the methods and the goal of our work in other political organizations under certain conditions, do not merely apply to the present socialist party. They can apply with equal validity to local Labor or Farmer-Labor parties where the relationship of forces and the possibilities combine to offer advantages from such a tactic. A case in point is the present situation in the Farmer-Labor party of Minnesota, which, it is entirely possible, may reach a state of development of its internal conflicts that may well necessitate the energetic attention of our comrades in crystallizing a Left wing group within the FLP which would force the struggle against the reformist bureaucrats to the breaking point.<sup>279</sup>

Vincent Dunne and Carl Skoglund were present at this NC plenum, and likely helped draft this section of the resolution. The resolution makes no mention of the fact that the Minneapolis branch was already in a political bloc with a wing of the Farmer-Labor Party. Coupling the FLP entry to the SP entry simply gave the WP an opportunity to bring its organizational relationship with the FLP more in line with its political relationship.

The reference to a "breaking point" in the Minnesota FLP is also disingenuous. The following month, when the Meyer Lewis crisis created the opening to split the party

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<sup>278</sup> "Building the American Section of the Fourth International" (Resolution adopted by Third Plenum of the WP National Committee), n.d., Cannon Papers, box 43, 6.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

along class lines, the WP eschewed the pursuit of any “breaking point” in favor of their continuous opportunist maneuvers. When the FLP heads worked to patch up the rifts in the spring of 1936, the Trotskyists only aided them.

### ***The Communist Party Breaks Out***

While the SP question furnished the Trotskyists with a convenient tactical packaging for their FLP entry, developments with the Communist Party played a more direct role in the pressure on the Minneapolis branch to take this course. As the popular-frontist CP gained influence nationally, the anomalous balance of forces in Minnesota between the Trotskyists and Stalinists started to tip, enabling the latter to finally pose a real threat to the former’s leading role in Local 574.

The Stalinists consolidated control of most of the national Farmer-Labor Party movement by early 1936. In Minnesota, where they had no significant base in the labor movement, they gained influence by cutting a deal with those at the top. In September 1935, CP supporters inside the FLP were still denouncing Latimer and Olson as part of the Trotskyists’ “broad left opposition,” but on October 18 CP head Earl Browder held a secret meeting with Governor Olson. Despite Olson’s previous animosity to the CP, he agreed to quietly allow its supporters into the FLP *en masse*. The CP in turn put its forces behind the Governor, enabling him to shore up his own position in the FLP.<sup>280</sup>

As Smemo points out, despite their new influence “the CP was in no position to stake out an independent political course.” Their new “ideological fealty to reformism meant that the Communists generally deferred to FLP policy. Furthermore, since the Communists relied almost exclusively on sympathetic Farmer-Laborites for support and protection, they could not easily defy their patrons.” At the same time, swinging politically closer to the average liberal and trade unionist allowed the Minnesota CP to

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<sup>280</sup> CP supporters joined the FLP through every route outside of trade-union affiliation: “Some managed to join ward and township clubs. Others got in by way of cultural organizations, language societies, sickness and death benefit associations... Numerous phony setups of the kind were created for that express purpose.” See Ross, 374; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 92; Smemo, 70-71; Haynes, 15.

recruit rapidly, and by January 1936 the state branch had grown to almost 1,000 members.<sup>281</sup>

After their abortive attack on the Trotskyists at the outset of the Meyer Lewis campaign the Stalinists went quiet, but tensions continued behind the scenes. In January 1936 the CP and WP came together for a second debate on that question of questions: “Should a Revolutionary Workers’ Party help build the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota and throughout the country?” At their debate the previous June, the CP had answered “No” while the WP defended the “Yes” position, but now they switched sides. CP District Organizer Nat Ross defended a consistent line in favor of building both the national and local FLP, but Vincent Dunne, upholding the Trotskyists’ general position against Farmer-Laborism on the national scale, ran into trouble as he tried to square this with his party’s home-grown opportunism toward the Minnesota FLP.<sup>282</sup>

Cannon and Vincent Dunne dealt with this contradiction in an exchange of letters leading up to the debate, agreeing that the solution was to explicitly treat the Minnesota FLP as an exception to the rule. The only known documentation of the proposal to enter the Farmer-Labor Party is in these letters. After reviewing Dunne’s notes for his presentation at the debate, Cannon responded:

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<sup>281</sup> Smemo, 73; Haynes, 16.

<sup>282</sup> Tensions with the Stalinists led to a clash in the unemployed movement, where the CP was relatively strong. It appears that WP supporters helped defeat a Stalinist resolution calling for a national Farmer-Labor Party at a Minnesota state WPA worker organizing conference in January. Three weeks later, Local 574 hosted another WPA conference, founding a new unemployed organization called the Workers Alliance; the Stalinists attended, resulting in “division and dissension that, at times, threatened to throw the convention into a disorganized mass.” See “State WPA Move Started,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 39 (January 15, 1936): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n39-jan-15-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Launch Workers Alliance,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 43 (February 12, 1936): 1, 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n43-feb-12-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “The New WPA Alliance,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 43 (February 12, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n43-feb-12-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “V. R. Dunne to Debate Ross Friday Evening,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 41 (January 29, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n41-jan-29-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Should Revolutionary Workers Help Build The Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota and Throughout The Country?” (debate flyer), February 7, 1936, Records of the SWP.

The question is formulated as though you were opposed to building the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota as well as on a national scale. It seems to me that we can take a position against organizing a reformist party where none exists. But where a labor party exists with its roots in the trade unions, we have to join it. This tactic cannot be carried out effectively if we call for its breaking up. The workers [are] to learn that necessity in the course of their experience over a long period of time. Our struggle within an established labor party ought to be concentrated on the questions of policy and action, rather than on the question of the party itself. I wish you would give these thoughts some consideration. We have to be careful that we are not put in a pocket on the question of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minn. For my part, I am convinced that we should be inside. This will hold doubly when we become part of the S.P. In your debate you should try to switch the thing around to the national scene, and make exceptions for localities where bona fide labor parties actually exist.<sup>283</sup>

Cannon elaborated on this proposal in his attempt to win over Comrade Heisler, who argued that entering the SP would raise the danger of the Trotskyist movement next capitulating to “the purely bourgeois liberal Farmer-Labor Party.” Cannon wrote:

I [am] personally of the opinion that our comrades in Minnesota should find a way to work inside the Farmer-Labor Party whether they join the SP or not. The entire trade union movement is in the FLP; in the industrial centers of the state it is in fact the base of the party. We cannot leap over such a movement. It is not quite clear whether we shall work inside the FLP as an affiliated party or through the affiliation of unions under our influence. But in any case, we must at least experiment with a period of systematic work inside the organization. To be sure, it is not the task of revolutionists to create such an organization as the FLP, but where such a body comes into existence and acquires a firm basis of trade union support, it is necessary to experiment and test out the possibility of fruitful revolutionary work within it. Will our comrades degenerate in such an environment? I do not think so.<sup>284</sup>

Responding to Cannon’s letter, Vincent Dunne confirmed that the Minneapolis branch was already doing work in the FLP and planned to expand it:

I can of course only agree with you about the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party as being a distinct question from the national F-L Party. The formulation of the question was necessary to get the debate, although it was not the best wording. Our past activity, to say nothing of our statements in the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party situation, is so clear and convincing and in itself an indictment of the C.P. position in the past and at present, that I will have no difficulty at all in

<sup>283</sup> James P. Cannon to Vincent Dunne, January 28, 1936, Records of the SWP.

<sup>284</sup> FX Ferry (Heisler) to Comrade Cannon, February 12, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 3; James P. Cannon to Comrade Heisler, January 30, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 44, 8.

making our position clear. This leads us also into a position where we are able to press the C.P. for a debate for not only the trade union questions, but also the principle questions between us. We are, as a matter of fact, as I have mentioned several times, doing some work inside the Farmer-Labor Party, and will unquestionably find it necessary to increase and supplement this activity -- particularly from the trade union side.<sup>285</sup>

In his *Teamster* series, Farrell Dobbs justifies his party's entry into the FLP primarily by pointing to the Stalinists entering first. He does not address the first stage, in which the CP occupied the same "left wing" of the FLP as the Trotskyists, stating only that it lurched "from an ultraleft critic of the FLP into a component of its right wing."<sup>286</sup> He claims that the FLP had originally been a reformist workers party, and that only with the arrival of the popular-frontist Stalinists was it transformed into a capitalist party:

During its early years the FLP had functioned as an independent political setup, opposing both the Democrats and the Republicans within Minnesota on the basis of a reformist program. The movement was then under nominal control of organized labor, and it enjoyed the support of almost every trade union in the state. Beginning in 1936, however, the reformist organization underwent a change.<sup>287</sup>

Inside the FLP the CP supposedly initiated a bloc with the "opportunists of the right wing" to turn "the Minnesota formation into a tool of Roosevelt's national political machine, especially on the issue of preparation for U.S. entry into the war. Within the state this trend was accompanied by cynical election deals with local Democratic politicians and by moves to strip organized labor of any voice in shaping party positions." In reality, the FLP had been a stand-in for the capitalist Democratic Party from the beginning, replete with its own New Deal populism. Governor Olson had been supporting and collaborating with Franklin D. Roosevelt since the 1932 elections, and the entire history of American farmer-labor populism suggests that the Minnesota FLP would have supported Roosevelt again in 1936 regardless of the CP's impact. At no stage did the working class ever have any "voice in shaping party positions." While the words and

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<sup>285</sup> Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, February 3, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 3, 2.

<sup>286</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 92.

<sup>287</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 276-277.

deeds of the Trotskyists in 1934 stand in sharp contrast to Dobbs' later revisionism, their politics in early 1936 had degenerated to the point that they begin to align closely to the depiction of events in the *Teamster* series. The above correspondence between Cannon and Dunne indicates that the Trotskyists at the time saw their entry into the FLP as a correct maneuver to rescue a reformist workers party from Stalinist treachery.<sup>288</sup>

The Communist Party was a real threat and tensions began to escalate soon after the debate in Minneapolis. It appears that at this time, the CP started to play a bigger role in the efforts to patch up the FLP than the Trotskyists ever could. As Governor Olson worked to rehabilitate Mayor Latimer, the Stalinists served the governor by reversing their line on Latimer and coming to his defense. Bill Brown bitterly called them out in his column in late February:

MOST PITIFUL POLITICAL FIGURES—S. K. DAVIS, NAT ROSS. Can you remember way back one year ago when the Communist Party said hang all the Farmer-Labor and A. F. of L. leaders as the betrayers of labor. Now when the real betrayer, Tom Latimer, comes along, the Stalinists are his staunchest defenders. Do you remember what 574 said, 'Defeat Johannes and his murder band'? The Communist leaders said, 'Defeat the machinegun aldermen.' Keep swinging, Nat and Sam, on your trapeze.<sup>289</sup>

<sup>288</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 276-277; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 63.

In dealing with the Stalinists, the Trotskyists' dual line on the national and Minnesota FLP questions led to more spectacular contradictions in their propaganda. For example, when the CP suddenly started spouting nationalist chauvinism in early 1936, the *New Militant* linked the Stalinists' campaign for "a two-class party" with their new "full-blown program of social patriotism": "To propose to build a party covering different classes, the Farmer-Labor party, necessitates finding categories which include both class—such terms as 'the people,' 'the nation,' 'the country,' 'American traditions,' etc. The ideology of such a two-class party, therefore, is inevitably nationalist and chauvinist, and takes over the nationalist interpretation of the history of the American revolution and the Civil War." This was a brilliant indictment of class-collaborationism, but the Trotskyists could not apply this framework in Minnesota. They generally stayed silent about the nationalist chauvinism of the FLP and the AFL bureaucracy; the *NO* published, for example, a Minneapolis CLU resolution that dripped with patriotism, without comment. See: "Father of His Country Now Sires 'People's Front,'" *The New Militant*, vol. II, no. 9 (February 29, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1936/feb-29-1936.pdf> (accessed November 22, 2016); "Central Labor Union Passes Resolution," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 39 (January 15, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n39-jan-15-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>289</sup> Brown first noted the CP's move to bloc with the Latimer-Lewis-TJC cabal on February 12, reporting that "The leaders of the Communist Party have recently given instructions to their membership to: 'Drag into the open their (the leaders of 574) real Trade Union policy, to drive the Trade Union functionaries and membership further away from them.'" See: "Bill Brown Says," *The Northwest*

If the Minneapolis Stalinists were now strong enough to defend Latimer from the ongoing efforts to expel him from the FLP, the Trotskyists faced a disheartening new balance of forces. The CP could potentially play a decisive role in the campaign to destroy Local 574, and the Trotskyists were anxious to avoid being outflanked.

### ***The SP Entry***

The Communist Party also threatened the Trotskyists' plans for entry into the Socialist Party. The Stalinists had already entered the SP, and Vincent Dunne reported to the WP center that their forces in the Minnesota SP had been instructed "to blow the Trotskyites out of the leadership of mass movements." The Stalinists were attempting to merge the entire SP branch into the CP, but Dunne was able to quickly line up the SP ranks against the maneuver.<sup>290</sup>

The unique political terrain of the old Northwest put the Minneapolis WP branch on the leading edge of the SP entry. Historically sidelined by the popularity of the Farmer-Labor Party, the Minnesota SP was a tiny outfit. Up until 1934 a majority of its members also belonged to the FLP, but when the factional struggle broke out the "Militants" seized control and fought to expel the farmer-laborite elements, demanding strict loyalty to the SP alone. Overshadowed by the Trotskyists' rise to prominence with the Teamster strikes, the SP state organization was largely moribund by 1935. It only began to function again with the influx of militant workers, growing to approximately one hundred members by February 1936 – most of whom were sympathetic to Local 574 and its leadership.<sup>291</sup>

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*Organizer*, vol. I, no. 45 (February 26, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n45-feb-26-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Bill Brown Says," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 43 (February 12, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n43-feb-12-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>290</sup> Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, January 27, 1936, Records of the SWP; Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, February 3, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1.

<sup>291</sup> Gieske, 193; Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, January 27, 1936, Records of the SWP.

In their preparations for entry, the Trotskyists used this to their full advantage. After a series of discussions with local SP leaders, they started holding joint meetings in February, advertising them in the *Northwest Organizer* and hosting them at WP headquarters. At Cannon's suggestion, they had the "very friendly" SP state organizer Carl Pemble write letters to Norman Thomas and the SP national office, lobbying them on behalf of the Trotskyists. Vincent Dunne wrote Cannon with much good news in these months, reporting on the unanimous support for the entry in the Minneapolis branch and the rapid progress with the SP working-class ranks, who were "quite anxious that we become part of the S.P." As they expected, once in they immediately controlled the state organization, turning the Minnesota SP into a "Trotskyist section of the national party." By July it had grown to four hundred members. Minnesota would serve as one of the Trotskyists' primary political strongholds during the 1936-37 entry period.<sup>292</sup>

### ***The FLP Entry***

While the preparations and procedures of the SP entry are well documented, the Trotskyists' entry into the FLP is frustratingly murky. During the early months of 1936 Local 574 faced a difficult fight for its right to participate in the March statewide FLP convention. The WP local may have been reinforcing 574's representation in the FLP by sending its members in through some of the same channels that the Stalinists were using,

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<sup>292</sup> While it was the Militant faction that negotiated with the Trotskyists, the latter made efforts to pressure Norman Thomas and the leadership of the SP to secure the best possible terms for their entry. See: "Socialist Party Will Hold Open Meetings," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 45 (February 26, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n45-feb-26-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Mickey Dunne, "Keeping Step With 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 45 (February 26, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n45-feb-26-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, February 3, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1, 2; Ross, 369; James P. Cannon to Vincent Dunne, February 10, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1, 2; Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, February 3, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1, 2; Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, January 22, 1936, Records of the SWP; Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, January 27, 1936, Records of the SWP; Vincent Dunne to James P. Cannon, February 13, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 3, 1, 2; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 80-81; C.H., "Party Tasks in Minnesota," *The Militant Socialist*, vol. I, no. 1 (July 1936), Records of the SWP, 6.

but the only known evidence comes from April, when Local 574 had its Mankato section affiliate to the Blue Earth County FLP central committee and elect two delegates to represent them.<sup>293</sup>

In any case, the March 1936 FLP convention provides a sufficient illustration of the role that the Trotskyists would play in the FLP from 1936 to 1941. As Smemo writes:

Having beaten Tobin and survived Green's Red drive, [Local 574] did not abandon Farmer-Labor politics. Rather, the increased political profile of militant labor reinforced the Trotskyists' vision of increasing the power of trade unions over the FLP. At the same time, the turmoil within the Minnesota labor movement led the FLP to begin a critical reevaluation of its political relationship with organized labor. Fearful of future fragmentation in the labor movement, not to mention the estrangement of rural and middle-class voters from the Farmer-Labor banner, the FLP's leadership attempted to limit the political intervention of organized labor.<sup>294</sup>

Indeed, the destabilizing impacts of the surging industrial workers movement, and Roosevelt's effort to contain them, were the overriding influences on the Minnesota FLP from this point forward.

In the lead-up to the state convention, each wing of the FLP prepared to purge the other from the party. The Thirteenth Ward – Mayor Latimer's home base – passed a resolution calling on the party to expel Local 574 and two of its union allies. The 574 delegates intervened at a March 8 Hennepin County FLP convention that preceded the state convention, putting forward a resolution to expel the Mayor. On the urban terrain of the party, they succeeded in passing one resolution requiring all elected officials to submit to the discipline of the party or face public expulsion, while another increased trade-union representation at the state convention from one to two delegates per union. Their motion to expel Latimer was watered down so that it referred the matter back to the Thirteenth Ward, which would only continue to protect the Mayor. Bill Brown's

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<sup>293</sup> "Mankato Local Joins Blue Earth F. L. P.," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 1 (April 22, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n01-apr-22-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Mickey Dunne, "Keeping Step With 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 1 (April 22, 1936): 8, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n01-apr-22-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>294</sup> Smemo, 68.

impression was that “the vast majority of the delegates were for [Latimer’s] expulsion” for his “gross violation of every principle of Farmer-Laborism,” but that the party’s “old guard” managed to save the Mayor through parliamentary maneuvers.<sup>295</sup>

On March 14 the fight broke out at a State Central Committee meeting when delegates from the St. Paul Trade and Labor Assembly and the Duluth Federated Trades Assembly fought to have Local 574 barred from the coming convention. Alderman Ed Hudson defended 574’s rights and the matter was effectively tabled. Local 574 then issued a statement protesting that the efforts to exclude them were a “mockery of democracy.” FLP support in these weeks also came from Representative Sam Bellman, who attended a 574 mass meeting, reassuring the 3,000 gathered workers that between 99 and 100 per cent of the FLP membership was solidly behind them; from State Central Committee member O. S. N. Requit, who wrote a letter to the *NO* supporting 574’s right to participate; and from the Minnesota *Leader*, which ran an editorial that exposed the anti-communist “red-scare” behind the efforts to purge 574 as “the same old bogey-man that is always raised by the intrenched [sic] interests.” The *NO* responded to this editorial with its own:

we consider it impossible in this politically enlightened state, that Farmer-Laborites will allow themselves to be stampeded by this threat of the reaction. The issue is clear cut. Any right thinking person knows that the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party is not an institution relying solely upon the American Federation of Labor for its political advancement. Rather, it is or should be a political organization composed of delegates from labor and fraternal organizations who subscribe to the principles and platform of Farmer-Laborism.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 79; “Mayor Denounced By F.L.P.” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 47 (March 11, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n47-mar-11-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Bill Brown Says,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 47 (March 11, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n47-mar-11-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>296</sup> “FLP State Body Moves Against 574,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 48 (March 18, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n48-mar-18-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Local 574 Issues Statement To State Central Committee,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 48 (March 18, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n48-mar-18-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “Union Rally Packs Halls Friday Night,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 49 (March 25, 1936): 1,

When the state convention finally convened on March 28, Bill Brown and Grant Dunne were seated with little fanfare. The Trotskyists considered this a victory, but the convention dealt their “left wing” version of farmer-laborism nothing but defeats. Their resolution to expel Latimer was voted down, as was their effort to have the FLP endorse the WPA workers’ organizing drive and to include in the party platform a proposal to restart idle factories with labor from the unemployed population. The FLP’s standard planks for “public ownership of industry and natural resources” were deleted, resulting in an altogether more conservative platform for the 1936 elections. The Stalinists, who by this time boasted forty delegates backed by another one hundred popular-front liberals, were also stymied in their effort to put the convention on the record for a national Farmer-Labor Party. With the FLP “old guard” in control, the convention overwhelmingly voted to nominate Olson as candidate for U.S. senator and Elmer Benson as the candidate to inherit the governorship. As Smemo concludes, the convention decisions “certainly frustrated the FLP’s left wing, but it also demonstrated the extent of the Trotskyists’ and Stalinists’ commitment to accepting the compromises inherent to parliamentary politics. Both groups left the convention prepared to fully support the FLP platform and candidates.”<sup>297</sup>

The *Northwest Organizer* had abstained from endorsing any FLP politicians before the convention, even dispelling rumors that 574 was backing “certain” candidates,

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<https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n49-mar-25-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “574 Union Fan Scores Farmer-Labor Party in Strong Letter,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 49 (March 25, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n49-mar-25-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “The FLP ‘Red Scare,’” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 49 (March 25, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n49-mar-25-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>297</sup> Gieske, 218; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 79; “Olson, Benson Endorsed,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 50 (April 1, 1936): 1, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n50-apr-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 79; Smemo, 80-81; “Olson, Benson Endorsed,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 50 (April 1, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n50-apr-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 80.

but all evidence indicates that the Local 574 delegates supported the party leadership's preferred slate. The *NO*'s front page after the convention headlined "OLSON, BENSON ENDORSED." It protested that the slate "includes but one member of labor" but it is not clear who that was supposed to be, as the paper listed out the candidates without commenting on, much less criticizing, any of them. Bill Brown's column gushed, "We agree with Governor Olson when he says all for one and one for all, and we mean it," and Miles Dunne's stated, "The Farmer-Labor convention in St. Paul was a good demonstration of the widespread friendship and good will that our union has established... The picture of William Brown and the Governor, which appeared in Sunday's Journal, was taken, we understand, at the moment when Brown was pledging Olson the negro vote."<sup>298</sup>

### ***Coming Out Swinging at the May SP Convention***

The final milestone in the Trotskyists' 1936 entries was the Socialist Party's May convention in Cleveland, and the fight they waged there sheds more light on their perspective toward the Minnesota FLP at this time. At this convention, Norman Thomas secured his party's nomination for president, and the Old Guard staged one final walkout before it left the party in the hands of Thomas and the Militants. The Trotskyists had

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<sup>298</sup> This is a bizarre statement given how few black people resided in the Northwest in the 1930s. The *Northwest Organizer*, along with the rest of the region's labor movement, appears to have paid no attention whatsoever to the plight of black workers in this period. See "To Whom It May Concern," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 39 (January 15, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n39-jan-15-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Olson, Benson Endorsed," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 50 (April 1, 1936): 1, 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n50-apr-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); "Bill Brown Says," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 50 (April 1, 1936): 2, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n50-apr-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Mickey Dunne, "Keeping Step With 574," *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. I, no. 50 (April 1, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n50-apr-01-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016).

The *New Militant* reported on the convention but did not address Local 574's participation. See "Prospects for a Farmer-Labor Party in the 1936 Elections," *The New Militant*, vol. II, no. 14 (April 11, 1936): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1936/apr-11-1936.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2014).

already dissolved most of the ranks of the WP into the SP, and while their leadership didn't join until after the May convention, James Burnham and Max Shachtman were present as reporters for the tendency. However, the delegation from the new and improved Minnesota SP branch arrived with 700 copies of their resolution on the "Farmer Labor Party Question," firing the Trotskyists' opening shot in the "labor party" debate that would soon be raging in the SP.<sup>299</sup>

In 1935 the CP had started to support the labor party and farmer-labor party movements in pursuit of its own popular-front alliances, which formally were opposed to both major capitalist parties. In 1936 key sections of the American trade-union bureaucracy came out in defense of the Democratic Party's New Deal against a conservative backlash, backing Franklin D. Roosevelt's bid for reelection. The CP swung with the prevailing winds and used the "labor party" slogan as a stalking horse for the Democratic Party, a scheme to draw votes for Roosevelt from voters who had always refused to support capitalist parties on principle. In the name of the "labor party," the CP collaborated with New Deal Democrats and various bourgeois third-party forces at the state level (including the Minnesota FLP) to channel working-class support to Roosevelt. This slogan became the dividing line in the labor movement between those who fought for class independence and those who would accept class collaboration and subordination to the Democratic Party, and in this context the Trotskyists generally exposed and opposed it.<sup>300</sup>

While the Old Guard had struck off on its own to build the pro-Roosevelt American Labor Party in New York, the factions left behind in the SP largely upheld their own variants of "labor party" class-collaborationism. Norman Thomas, leading the

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<sup>299</sup> Ross, 371; James Burnham to comrades, June 12, 1936, Glotzer Papers, box 10, folder 4; James Burnham to James P. Cannon, n.d. [during May 1936 SP Convention], Cannon Papers, box 4, 1; James Burnham and Max Shachtman, "Day to Day Report Of S.P. Convention At Cleveland, Ohio," *The New Militant*, vol. II, no. 21 (May 30, 1936): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1936/may-30-1936.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2014).

<sup>300</sup> Ross, 359-360; Smemo, 77; James Burnham, "Will Roosevelt Be Re-elected?" *The New Internationalist*, vol. III, no. 2 (April 1936), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1936/04/reelected.htm> (accessed November 21, 2014).

core of the SP, wanted his party to advocate, build, and participate in labor and farmer-labor parties that would supposedly remain independent of the Roosevelt Popular Front. The new right wing included the Stalinists who had also entered the SP. Centered in Wisconsin, it worked to liquidate that SP branch into the Farmer Labor Progressive Federation of Governor Philip La Follette (heir to his father's populist movement of the 1920s), which would have channeled more SP votes from Thomas to Roosevelt. The left wing – the centrist Clarity caucus, descended from the Militant faction – formally opposed Roosevelt and all class-collaborationist methods of supporting him. This was the Trotskyists' target audience, and they would have to be won over on the labor party question for the revolutionary regroupment to be successful.<sup>301</sup>

As Cannon predicted, the labor party question would “arise more acutely than ever in the SP and become the touchstone of left wing policy.” The Trotskyists, having dropped the labor party slogan for their own reasons in 1931, fought a relentless and principled struggle against the Rooseveltian “labor party” all along the line – except when it applied the Minnesota FLP. The resolution brought to Cleveland by the Minnesota SP is representative of the Trotskyist line throughout this many-sided debate.<sup>302</sup>

It condemned the national movement for a farmer-labor party, reiterating the CLA's 1931 position that such a party would inevitably be reformist, and attacked the various groups calling for an FLP: “All these groups seek to build their national Farmer-Labor party on the basis of class-collaboration, political trading and compromise; they seek to place in leadership of such a party not workers but liberal elements, and in many cases opportunistic bourgeois politicians who see in such a party a vehicle to better their own political fortunes.” It continued:

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<sup>301</sup> Ross, 372-73; Minutes of SP National Executive Committee, November 20-22, 1936, Records of the SWP; John G. Wright to Cannon, February 25, 1937 [enclosure of Porter's pamphlet], Cannon Papers, box 4; Shannon, 251.

<sup>302</sup> James P. Cannon to comrades, August 20, 1936, Cannon Papers, box 4, 2.

We socialists have had a long and bitter experience with an actual Farmer-Labor party... The Minnesota Farmer-Labor party was built in the 1920's by just the sort of devoted militant workers who are assembled in this convention. The radical and revolutionary workers built the Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota. We made thousands of good Farmer-Labor converts—**and broke our own party in the process.**

Depicting the Minnesota FLP as a labor party now in the process of degeneration, it stated that “The state Farmer-Labor machine has continued to make unprincipled blocs with corrupt bourgeois politicians against the will and interests of the rank and file. It has stifled democracy within the party. It has at all times supported the most corrupt and reactionary section of the trade union movement against progressive trade unionists.” It was soft on Olson and hard on Latimer, raising the strikebreaking attacks by the mayor only.

Obscuring the fact that the Trotskyists had been supporting the FLP in Minnesota elections (and giving no hint that they would continue to do so for years to come, including while they controlled the Minnesota SP), it stated unequivocally that “the Socialist Party cannot be the instrument that initiates or builds the Farmer-Labor party”:

we say categorically that it is the immediate duty of the Socialist Party of America to build its own revolutionary Marxist political party, the only party that can truly represent the American workers and farmers, and cope with modern industrial conditions. Our experience in Minnesota proves that for Socialists to assist in building a Farmer-Labor party only weakens the Socialist Party and misleads and confuses the workers who are seeking the way out of their misery and oppression.

It also masked the Trotskyists' FLP entry under a vague caveat that they would repeat many times over the next five years: “However, should a national Farmer-Labor or labor party arise in America, the revolutionary Socialists must find the path to work with such a party in order to show its supporters the only road that will lead to the satisfaction of their needs, to their emancipation...” The Minnesota SP put forward a shortened version of this statement before the Cleveland convention for a vote. Although it was

defeated amid cries of “sectarianism” and “isolation,” the Trotskyists were not discouraged.<sup>303</sup>

Throughout this period the Trotskyists applied their principled opposition to bourgeois populist and two-class parties by tenaciously standing against support to the American Labor Party in New York and the Farmer Labor Progressive Federation in Wisconsin. They correctly identified support to Roosevelt as a decisive criterion for evaluating such parties, and because these two parties’ “chief task in 1936 was to gather votes for Roosevelt,” granting them support “in actuality represents the perspective of the liquidation of independent working class politics.” The Minnesota FLP endorsed Roosevelt as well, but the Trotskyists there had already liquidated themselves too deeply into that party to take notice. It was left to the Trotskyists’ opponents in the SP faction fights to expose their hypocrisy. In one letter advocating that the SP support all three of these bourgeois parties, the Thomas leadership complained that “It would be an absurd inconsistency for the same party to deny us this right which instructed its Minneapolis local to support a Farmer-Labor ticket.”<sup>304</sup>

### ***The 1936 Elections***

Governor Olson died of cancer in August 1936, taking the last hope for FLP unity and stability with him to the grave. Olson was “practically canonized as the patron saint of the FLP,” and the *Northwest Organizer* grieved along with the rest of the movement, honoring their class enemy as “an unswerving champion of the under-privileged and

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<sup>303</sup> (Emphasis in original). “Statement of Minnesota S.P. on Farmer Labor Party Question,” *The New Militant*, vol. II, no. 21 (May 30, 1936): 1, 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1936/may-30-1936.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2014); Carl Pemble, “The Cleveland Convention,” *The Militant Socialist*, vol. I, no. 1 (July 1936), Records of the SWP, 2, 3.

<sup>304</sup> There is no evidence, however, that this was a widespread response to the Trotskyists in the labor party debate. See “A Manifesto to the Members of the Socialist Party,” *Socialist Appeal*, vol. I, no. 1 (August 14, 1937): 4, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/socialist-appeal-1937/aug-14-1937.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2014); Ross, 370; Majority of Municipal Campaign Committee (N. Thomas, Harry Laidler, Murray Gross, Murray Baron, Jack Altman) to SP membership, n.d. [hand-written “circa July 13, 1937”], Records of the SWP, 3.

exploited.” Elmer Benson inherited the alliance with the Stalinists, becoming the new local center of the popular front. In the lead-up to the fall 1936 elections, the party’s factions remained temporarily united, and the Trotskyists did their part to keep it that way. Nationally the Trotskyists supported Socialist Party candidate Norman Thomas for president, but the Minnesota FLP had lined up for Roosevelt’s reelection. If this was a dilemma for the Minneapolis branch, they avoided it by simply staying silent on the presidential campaigns in the *Northwest Organizer*. The branch focused on running Vincent Dunne for secretary of state, and where the Socialist Party had no candidates, they supported the FLP campaign. Benson won in a landslide – but so did Roosevelt, and the former could not stop his party from disintegrating or its remnants from being devoured by the party of the latter.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Smemo, 82-83; “Whole State Mourns as Floyd B. Olson Passes,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 19 (August 26, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v2n19-aug-26-1936-nw-org.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2014); Palmer, 236 note 11; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 57, 81-82; “The Worker Voter,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 22 (September 17, 1936): 4, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n22-sep-18-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); “FLP Mass Rally In Union Hall On October 29,” *The Northwest Organizer*, vol. II, no. 27 (October 22, 1936): 3, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/northwestorganizer/v1n27-oct-23-1935-nw-org.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2016); Ross, 377; Valelly, 135-138, 170; Gieske, 221.

## Conclusion

The Trotskyists' miniature popular front with Julius Emme and company turned out to be a dead end. Their special opportunist program toward the Minnesota FLP contradicted, but did not fundamentally undermine, the program for proletarian political independence that they upheld more broadly. On balance, one must still credit the American Trotskyists for their principled stand against the Stalinist popular front. Classics like James Burnham's *War and the Workers* and *The People's Front: A New Betrayal* endure as untarnished links in the chain of political continuity between the Russian Revolution and Trotskyism today.

This poses several questions. If the Trotskyists had achieved greater and more sustained success in the Northwest, could their opportunist course have been affirmed, becoming the model for their general perspective toward farmer-labor and otherwise populist bourgeois parties? Could this have ultimately derailed the continuity of Trotskyism in the United States? On the other hand, what might have happened had the

Trotskyists held fast to their principles, maintained their independence from the likes of Emme, and continued to oppose the Minnesota FLP? This kind of conjecture may be futile in the writing of academic history, but for a conclusive political assessment of American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, it is necessary to make a foray into this speculative territory.

The damage done to American Trotskyism was limited first and foremost because the exceptional political terrain and correlation of forces in the Northwest gave the tendency an opening that objectively did not exist anywhere else in the country. The strength of farmer-labor populism in Minnesota, the strategic power of the regional transport industry, the balance of forces between the Trotskyists and Stalinists dating back to the 1928 expulsions, and the good fortune of meeting Local 574 President Bill Brown at the right moment all made it possible for the Trotskyists to initiate the formation of an industrial union and to lead that union through its first critical tests. Most strikes are defeated. But the continuing depression drove the workers into desperate struggle, and the Trotskyists provided a militant leadership who fought to raise the political consciousness of the union base. With the populist governor paralyzed between his loyalty to capital and an enraged voter base, these particular strikes had a real chance.

After the victory in August the Trotskyists stood at the head of a powerful new industrial union that was affiliated to a two-class party. They were surrounded by labor leaders who were loyal to that two-class party, and within a matter of months they had the opportunity to ally with elements of that two-class party. The situation was utterly unique. If farmer-laborism had been stronger in the U.S., with parties in power in other cities and states, and if the Trotskyists had won the leadership of unions in other places, coming under similar pressures as they dealt with other farmer-laborites in power, they conceivably might have expanded their policies of critical support and class-collaborationist political blocs beyond Minnesota. It is possible that they could have even generalized this into a wholesale programmatic capitulation. But farmer-laborism

had never been such a force and was already deep in decline by the mid 1930s. The true test of the Trotskyists on the question, as it happened, took place in Minnesota.

Further, the special program on the FLP was confined by the rise of the Communist Party's popular front. The Trotskyists had attempted to pursue their goals by way of this same type of alliance, and without competition it is possible that they would have enjoyed greater or longer-lasting success through the Northwest Labor Unity Conference, the *Northwest Organizer*, the "broad left opposition," and so on. But the CP was a real obstacle, and these methods were the purview of the Stalinists. The CP's triumph in solidifying control over the bulk of the national farmer-labor party movement in early 1936 strengthened its hand in Minnesota, and its consistent support of both the local and national FLP movement was widely popular with progressive and social-democratically-minded workers. Isolated in the Minnesota arena of farmer-laborism, the Trotskyists were handicapped by their contradictory lines on the local and national FLP questions. Later in 1936 the CP's support of labor and farmer-labor parties was consistent with its support to Roosevelt, but again the Trotskyists tried to have it both ways. The Stalinists, having swung violently from the ultraleft sectarianism of the Third Period to the social-democratic reformism of the popular front, outclassed the Trotskyists, embracing a far deeper and more fervent opportunism and easily outflanking them on the right. The Minneapolis Trotskyists were soon relegated to the sidelines of the regional labor and farmer-labor movements.

The final factor that limited the impact of the Trotskyists' parallel program on the FLP was the absence of a decisive internal political struggle over the question. The Minnesota policy was never positively affirmed against an opposition demanding a return to Trotsky's principled program toward two-class parties, though debates broke out on several occasions that could have broached the issue. In May 1939, James Burnham denounced the Minneapolis branch's support to a farmer-laborite for mayor as "in conflict with the party's position in favor of genuinely independent working class political action." Cannon himself was assigned to investigate the issue during a visit to

the branch; the comrades leading the branch wrote letters defending their position; and one month later Burnham withdrew his objection. This occurred in the midst of the faction fight with Shachtman-Burnham-Abern over defense of the Soviet Union, and Cannon viewed the episode as an example of Burnham's consistent petty-bourgeois irresponsibility and bureaucratism. As with Carl Cowl's objections in 1932 and the unknown Abernite's in 1935, the special policy in Minnesota was re-affirmed against Burnham in 1939, but it was done superficially. In all three cases the opposition was primarily motivated by another issue entirely and was using the FLP question as factional ammunition. In no case did the opposition demand a return to the positions of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the Communist International, Trotsky and the Left Opposition, or the early Communist League of America. If comrades had ever dusted off these foundational programmatic positions, the tendency would have been forced to either pull itself back from its Minnesota adaptation, or openly reject basic tenets of Marxism and Leninism, which would have certainly precipitated a sharp fight with Leon Trotsky.<sup>306</sup>

On the other hand, what might have happened if the Trotskyists had rejected the opportunist road? If they had not allied with Emme to produce a farmer-labor paper, perhaps they would have lost the leadership of the Teamsters soon after Tobin revoked their charter, but it is conceivable that they could have found enough support in the workers movement to hold on for some time. If they had forsworn the AFL and struck out as an independent union, perhaps they could have more effectively spearheaded the rising industrial union movement. They might have leveraged this into a leading role in the CIO at its birth. If they had reversed course after Latimer's attacks in 1935, repudiating their support to the FLP and the class-collaborationist line of the *Northwest Organizer*, perhaps they could have pursued a *labor-centered* bloc that out of necessity would have launched an uncompromising battle against the murderous FLP regime. Or, if they had regained their programmatic bearings during the Meyer Lewis crisis in early

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<sup>306</sup> Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, 67-70.

November, they could have purposefully split the FLP along class lines, destroying this machine of their class enemy. If they had done so, the Minneapolis Trotskyists just might have contributed to the founding of the authentic workers party this country so desperately needed.

### *Aftermath*

The logical end point for this narrative is the 1941 Minneapolis Sedition Trial, as it was the political liquidation of the Trotskyist leadership of the city's Teamster union that brought an end to their compromised relationship to the Farmer-Labor Party. Between the 1936 entries into the SP and FLP and the domestic repression that accompanied the second interimperialist world war, the Trotskyists put themselves through a continuous series of contortions in the Northwest. This thesis cannot properly explore these years which saw countless AFL, CIO and FLP meetings, conferences and conventions, kaleidoscopic transformations of the various class-collaborationist blocs in Minneapolis, and complex and controversial line changes, all set against the background of a global outbreak of war and revolution.

In the summer of 1941 the Minneapolis Trotskyists were torn from the labor movement by the combined forces of Teamsters President Daniel Tobin, the capitalist state headed by Roosevelt, and a clot of anti-communists in the Teamsters local. With the U.S. preparing to enter World War II, Tobin pledged allegiance to Roosevelt's war program and set his sights on the Trotskyists, who had taken a principled stand against the imperialist powers. Tobin launched a fresh "red-drive" and sent a small army of thugs to terrorize the Minneapolis Teamster leadership. In late June, Roosevelt's FBI raided the SWP's Twin Cities headquarters. The following month 29 party leaders were arrested, including 15 who were members of the Teamsters. After the famous Minneapolis Sedition Trial, 18 defendants, including James P. Cannon, Vincent Dunne, Farrell Dobbs, and Grace Carlson were found guilty of advocating the overthrow of the

U.S. government, a violation of the Smith Act, and sentenced to 12 to 16 months each. In the course of the trial, Grant Dunne had a nervous breakdown and committed suicide. Kelly Postal, the Teamster local's secretary-treasurer, was acquitted of conspiracy charges but was given five years for "embezzlement" because he had refused to turn over dues and records to Tobin. Carl Skoglund was locked up for long periods on deportation charges.<sup>307</sup>

In the face of this onslaught, the Trotskyists' progressive allies evaporated. Cannon captured the changing dynamics in the labor movement as the bourgeoisie and its lieutenants in the unions geared up for another predatory war:

All these collaborators of the day; all these trade union militants who look so good in normal, peaceful times, who are good enough for a local strike but have no general concepts—how quickly these people can be transformed under the pressure of the social crisis. Only those will be able to stand up in the coming period who are fortified by great general ideas—not otherwise. You will have some bad disappointments if you believe for one moment that a man who has not yet broken from his allegiance to capitalism in general, will be able to stand up under the pressure of war.<sup>308</sup>

The Minneapolis Central Labor Union, under pressure from the Teamsters, had passed fine resolutions against the impending war, but when Tobin and Roosevelt attacked, the CLU capitulated. Dobbs writes, "We had many sympathizers with the AFL movement, but very few of them who held leadership posts could be expected to stick their necks out once the serious infighting started." He is blind to the fact that he and his comrades, by capitulating to the FLP beginning in 1935, had critically undercut their ability to build a working-class base for independent class struggle against the rulers and their parties. Instead, by adapting to the Farmer-Labor loyalties of their "many sympathizers," they had reinforced working-class illusions in a political party that, at every decisive juncture, carried out the bourgeoisie's attacks on the exploited and oppressed masses. These years of opportunist conciliation left the Minneapolis

<sup>307</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 277; Ross, 418; Preis, 207-8; James and James, 6-10; Haverty-Stacke, 1-7.

<sup>308</sup> James P. Cannon, "Military Policy of the Proletariat" (speech), September 28, 1940, *Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1940-43*, 79.

Trotskyists more vulnerable than they might have been when the final witchhunt arrived. By the end of 1941, their power in the union was shattered and the purge was complete.<sup>309</sup>

Thus the Trotskyists' six years of critical support to the FLP, their blocs with Farmer-Labor politicians and the "progressive" wing of the trade-union bureaucracy, and their entry into and struggle for organizational control of this capitalist party ended in ignominious defeat. In the absence of widespread militant working-class struggle in 1941 – the only factor that could have thrown back the rising wave of patriotic militarism in the lead-up to the war – the destruction of the Trotskyist-led Teamsters was inevitable.<sup>310</sup>

### ***The 1948 Wallace Campaign***

The Trotskyists' special policy for the Northwest was now a dead letter, but the opportunist adaptation to bourgeois populism had left an imprint on the SWP. In 1948 debate broke out when some party leaders argued for extending critical support to another capitalist third party, Henry Wallace's Progressive Party. In this instance the Trotskyists had no position of influence in the workers movement that could have been protected through an exchange of influence, and in the absence of such a pressure, the SWP leadership applied the vital methodology that they had abandoned in Minnesota. Against the illusion that they were dealing with another "labor party," Cannon argued at an NC plenum that "The class character of the party is determined first by its program; secondly by its actual policy in practice; and thirdly by its composition and control." By these criteria he found the Progressive Party to be bourgeois on all counts and categorically opposed supporting it. Cannon used the 1924 episode of "LaFollette's party" to bolster

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<sup>309</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 277; "Trotskyism and the Minneapolis Teamsters: They Refused to Bow," *Workers Vanguard*, no. 174 (September 23, 1977), 7.

<sup>310</sup> Under these objective conditions, in 1944 the Popular Front CP and its allies were able to liquidate the tattered remnants of the Minnesota FLP into the Democratic Party – the Minnesota affiliate of which is called to this day the "Democratic Farmer-Labor Party." See Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 278.

his case, but did not mention the farmer-labor movement that had ensnared the communists at the time. Moreover, in these discussions he avoided the topic of the Minnesota FLP, the direct continuation of the movement around La Follette.

In the debate Cannon warned that deep frustration with the trade-union bureaucracy's repeated obstruction of labor party developments could potentially derail the SWP:

The danger is that we may get impatient; that our fear of isolation may color our judgment in concrete situations, and impel us to seek shortcuts to a labor party, or some wretched substitute for it, over the head of the official trade union movement; that we should run after any bourgeois demagogue who exploits the radical sentiment of the workers which is denied expression in legitimate forms for the moment by the official policy of the bureaucracy. That is the danger.<sup>311</sup>

Cannon's party had succumbed to this basic danger in Minnesota, but astoundingly there is no evidence that their years of supporting the FLP were addressed at all in the 1948 dispute. It was still treated as an exception, not subject to the basic methodology that generally governed the Trotskyists' work in this period.

### ***Leon Trotsky's Final Judgment***

For the conclusive evaluation of the American Trotskyists and the Minnesota FLP, one must look to Leon Trotsky's last intervention into the political trajectory of the SWP. Even though Trotsky was told very little of his comrades' actual activities in Minneapolis, he knew enough to denounce their course and make an accurate prediction about where it would lead them.

In a round of discussions with the SWP leadership in Mexico in June 1940, Trotsky confronted the Americans over their ongoing political blocs against the CP with the pro-Roosevelt "progressives" of the trade-union bureaucracy, in particular as it was

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<sup>311</sup> James P. Cannon, "Election Policy in 1948," *SWP Internal Bulletin*, vol. X, no. 2 (April 1948): 13-16, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/idb/swp-1946-59/v10n02-1948-ib.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2014); James P. Cannon, "Summary Speech on Election Policy," *SWP Internal Bulletin*, vol. X, no. 2 (April 1948): 20-21, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/idb/swp-1946-59/v10n02-1948-ib.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2014).

expressed in the *Northwest Organizer*, which he condemned as a “photograph of our adaptation to the Rooseveltians.” The ensuing debate centered on how best to combat the Stalinists, with Trotsky arguing that they give the CP critical support and the SWP leaders insisting that this would be destructive to their trade-union work.<sup>312</sup>

Farrell Dobbs was present for these discussions, but the concretes of the Americans’ ongoing support to capitalist politicians of the Minnesota FLP were not discussed, and there is no evidence that Trotsky knew the full extent of his comrades’ opportunist activities in the Northwest. However, several intertwined issues were addressed: the danger of generalizing temporary united fronts around specific trade-union issues into ongoing political blocs with “progressives,” the question of who is the horse and who is the rider in such a bloc, and the fundamental difference between operating with a trade-unionist program and a Bolshevik program.

On the bloc with “progressive” bureaucrats, Trotsky observed:

These bureaucrats are Rooseveltians, militarists. We tried to penetrate the trade unions with their help. This was a correct maneuver, I believe... It would be fatal to pay too much attention to the impression that we can make on the pacifists and on our ‘progressive’ bureaucrat friends. In this case we become the squeezed lemon of the bureaucrats. They use us against the Stalinists but as the war nears call us unpatriotic and expel us.

The following day, when Cannon and Dobbs made defensive arguments about the valuable “footholds” they had gained by compromising with a wing of the trade union bureaucracy, Trotsky unleashed a devastating tirade:

I believe we have the critical point very clear. We are in a bloc with so-called progressives – not only fakers but honest rank and file. Yes, they are honest and progressive but from time to time they vote for Roosevelt – once in four years. This is decisive. You propose a trade union policy, not a Bolshevik policy. Bolshevik policies begin outside the trade unions. The worker is an honest trade unionist but far from Bolshevik politics. You are afraid to become compromised in the eyes of the Rooseveltian trade unionists. They on the other hand are not worried in the slightest about being compromised by voting for Roosevelt against you. We are afraid of being compromised. If you are afraid, you lose your independence and become half-Rooseveltian. In peacetimes this is not

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<sup>312</sup> Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 42-43; Palmer, 237.

catastrophic. In wartimes it will compromise us. They can smash us. Our policy is too much for pro-Rooseveltian trade unionists. I notice that in the *Northwest Organizer* this is true. We discussed it before, but not a word was changed; not a single word. The danger – a terrible danger – is adaptation to the pro-Rooseveltian trade unionists. You don't give any answer to the elections, not even the beginning of an answer. But we must have a policy.<sup>313</sup>

Just two months later Trotsky was assassinated by a Stalinist agent. Left on his desk was an incomplete article that, although not specifically addressed to the American terrain or his discussions with the SWP, takes on a disturbing significance given the SWP's course in the Northwest. Trotsky was in the process of developing the position that:

There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power... In other words, the trade unions in the present epoch cannot simply be the organs of democracy as they were in the epoch of free capitalism and they cannot any longer remain politically neutral, that is, limit themselves to serving the daily needs of the working class. They cannot any longer be anarchistic, i.e. ignore the decisive influence of the state on the life of peoples and classes. They can no longer be reformist, because the objective conditions leave no room for any serious and lasting reforms. The trade unions of our time can either serve as secondary instruments of imperialist capitalism for the subordination and disciplining of workers and for obstructing the revolution, or, on the contrary, the trade unions can become the instruments of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat.<sup>314</sup>

The American Trotskyists' capitulation to the Minnesota FLP, performed to safeguard their leadership of the Minneapolis Teamsters in a non-revolutionary situation, must be scrutinized in the harsh light of Leon Trotsky's final interventions. He was the last living leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution – other than the butcher Stalin – and there was no one else on earth capable of penetrating to the heart of the matter as Trotsky could.

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<sup>313</sup> "Discussions with Trotsky, June 12-15, 1940," *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1939-40*, ed. Naomi Allen and George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 266-267, 271-273.

<sup>314</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay," *The Fourth International*, vol. II, no. 2 (February 1941), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/xx/tu.htm> (accessed November 21, 2014).

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