

A Third Party Leaves the Scene

By MAX GORDON

On the evening of Oct. 2, a group of about 200 people gathered at Manhattan Center in midtown New York for a momentous, if rather sad, occasion. They had come, as members of the state committee to vote the final dissolution of the American Labor Party.

They were by no means funereal about it, however. As far as could be gauged, the feeling among most of those devoted backers of the ALP was that it had accomplished an historic mission in its 20 years of life, and now its program had to be fought for in other, more expansive, ways.

Thus ended another great effort to organize an effective party independently of the two major parties, one which had a somewhat longer life than most. The ALP was in the tradition of the Populist movements of more than half a century ago, the Progressive Party of Wisconsin, the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, and similar movements that have arose among the people of our land, left their impact on the shape of politics in state and nation, and went out of existence.

It did not win power in its state, as did some of the others. But in the heyday of its existence, it did perform a function of outstanding third parties in our land; namely, to "bring new issues before the people" and to "force new policies upon the older parties" (to quote Prof. F. E. Haynes in his "Social Politics in the U. S.").

Because coalitions of existing parties are possible in New York, the ALP also aided in the election of some of America's greatest liberal figures of recent history—Franklin Roosevelt, Herbert Lehman, Fiorello LaGuardia. It sent to Congress the most militant progressive Washington has seen in modern times—the late Vito Marcantonio.

Why, then, did it vanish?

To put our own view in the briefest general form, it vanished because each of the two major parties in our land is essentially a coalition of contending forces, and the people have chosen—so far, at least—to wage their political conflicts within and between these parties.

This is an historic fact which, with an occasional rare exception, goes back to the very founding of the party system in our land.

This is not to say that at particular periods of our national life, third parties have not had a vast progressive influence on the country's political course. But these parties have been unable to change the essential fact that the theatre of political conflict has been, and today remains, primarily within and between the two major parties.

As long as the ALP coalesced with one of the contending forces within the major party framework—the labor movement and its allies—it had influence, vitality and substantial voting strength. Once it was separated from the struggle within the major party framework through disruption of this coalition, partly through circumstances and partly through choice, it rapidly lost its influence and support.

In this connection, the facts regarding the formation of the ALP are extremely interesting. It was during the election year of 1936. The New Deal was in full swing, with several of its major measures already enacted into law. There had been a partial recovery from the bitter crisis that followed the 1929 Wall Street crash.

Big Business was driving with all its power to regain control of the situation, to crush the rising popular movements of workers and farmers, to destroy some or all of the social gains already made and block any further ones.

The issue before the nation, then, was whether to go ahead with the New Deal under Roosevelt as Democratic standard-bearer; or to go back to Hooverism under Alf Landon as GOP standard-bearer.

At that time, there was still a substantial Socialist Party vote in the country. In 1932, Norman Thomas had polled almost 900,000 votes for the presidency, not far from the high point in Socialist ballots. In New York alone, 175,000 votes had been cast for Thomas.

Many of these socialist-minded workers were members of the clothing workers and ladies garment workers unions. The two leaders of these unions—Sydney Hillman

and David Dubinsky—were all out for FDR. They reasoned that many of their members wanted to vote for FDR, but under no circumstances under the Democratic emblem. And so, with other union leaders, including those of the emergent Left, they organized a special labor party whose immediate goal was to gather this vote for him and for Gov. Lehman, then running for reelection.

The ALP polled 275,000 votes in 1936. The S.P. vote for Thomas in New York was cut by more than half, from 177,000 to 86,000.

It is doubtful, though, whether the ALP was necessary to achieve this particular result, since nationally the S.P. suffered a disastrous decline that year without such a party. From the 894,000 votes Thomas had received in 1932, he went down to 187,000. It was by far the sharpest decline in the history of the S.P., and spelled its finish as a vote-getting power in the country. The Communist Party vote declined nationally from 103,000 in 1932 to 80,000 in 1936.

Thus, contrary to prevailing doctrinaire views, the vote for socialism did not go up during the period of the greatest depression in the nation's history. It went down as it never had before.

Did this vote decline reflect a drop in Socialist consciousness? I do not believe so.

The socialist-minded workers of the country, recognizing that the great political conflict of the time involving the working class was being waged within the major party framework, chose to join in that struggle rather than cast an abstract vote for socialism—a vote which would not help labor in its struggle.

In the 1938 elections, the C.P. in New York devised a tactic which enabled left-wing, socialist-minded workers to coalesce with the widespread movement behind the candidacy of Gov. Lehman, and still express their pro-Communist convictions. The result was—106,000 recorded votes for a Communist candidate in the state alone, higher than the national vote of 1932.

This takes us to the problem of socialism and the electoral struggle, a problem I'd like to examine in a second article.