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# The Federated Farmer-Labor Party.

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Every decade or so there occurs some labor event so striking and inspiring in character that it stands out as a landmark in the history of the working class. Such was the great national convention held in Chicago, July 3-4-5 [1923], to create a labor party. Marked by a tremendous outburst of militancy and enthusiasm, it was a vibrant, thrilling, overwhelming demand by the rank and file of agricultural and industrial labor for the formation of a powerful political party of the toilers. Nobody who attended its sessions will ever forget them.

This revolutionary convention, called under the auspices of the Farmer-Labor Party, gave birth to a new organization, the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. It was the inevitable culmination of a long train of circumstances. For many years past the workers, betrayed and misled by the trade union bureaucracy, had been gradually awakening to the fact that the old Gompersian political policy of "rewarding" their friends and "punishing" their enemies was fatal to their interests. It had disfranchised the working class and had turned the entire governmental machinery, lock, stock, and barrel, over to the exploiting class. More and more the rank and file began to demand the formation of a workers' political party. Local labor parties sprang up here and there, east and west. John Fitzpatrick, President of the Chicago Federation of Labor, placed him-

self at the head of this rank and file revolt in 1919 by forming the Labor Party, which a year later became the Farmer-Labor Party. A wave of hope spread throughout the labor movement. At last, it was thought, the workers were about to set themselves free



from the political thralldom fastened upon them by the Gompers clique and would organize a party of their own. But the hope soon died. Through lack of militancy the Farmer-Labor Party failed to crystallize the labor party sentiment. It simmered along and frittered away its great opportunity.

## The Progressive Conference.

Then the movement for a labor party took a new turn. William H. Johnson, President of the International Association of Machinists, came forward as the great champion of the idea. During late 1921 and early 1922 one big international union after another declared in favor of independent working class political

action. Again hope revived, and many looked towards Johnston as the Moses who would lead the workers out of the political wilderness. It almost seemed as though, under his leadership, even the higher union officials had begun to realize the necessity for a labor party and were willing to brave the opposition of the old autocrat, Gompers, in order to achieve it. The movement came to a head in February 1922, when the first Conference for Progressive Political Action was held in Chicago. There was present an imposing show of proletarian strength, including the sixteen railroad organizations, the United Mine Workers of America, the International Typographical Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, several smaller internationals, two dozen State Federations of Labor, scores of central labor councils, the Non-Partisan League and a great number of other farmer organizations, the Farmer-Labor Party, the Socialist Party, etc., etc. A conservative figure for those represented would be 2,500,000, and the whole lot were following the lead of Johnston.

### **The Johnston Betrayal.**

It was a golden opportunity to form the labor party. Just a little leadership and courage on the part of Johnston and the thing would have been done. But he lacked both. Although he hated Gompers bitterly and had the forces wherewith to overthrow him and his reactionary political policy, he did not dare to undertake the job. The Chicago conference did nothing practical. After adopting a sickly parody on the Declaration of Independence, it adjourned to meet again in Cleveland in December of the same year. Everybody with a bit of sand in him was disgusted. But still a ray of hope lingered. Those who did not know the weak Johnston felt that perhaps he wanted further time to build up more troops for the final assault on the Gompers stronghold. Then came the Cleveland fiasco, which ended by Johnston and his lieutenants timidly endorsing the threadbare Gompers policy. Thus that promising movement blew up. It was the old story of the fabled general who, with a lot of horses and men, marched them up the hill and marched them down again.

At this critical juncture the Farmer-Labor Party again came strongly to the fore. Denouncing the Conference for Progressive Political Action as a scab outfit,

its leaders pulled their party out of that sickly body. Almost immediately everyone who believed sincerely in the formation of a labor party turned his attention again to the Farmer-Labor Party. Meanwhile the Workers Party and the Trade Union Educational League had been carrying on a militant and widespread campaign in the unions for independent working class political action. Great numbers of local unions, city centrals, state federations of labor, and international unions were won over to the cause. Particularly effective in developing this sentiment was the great national labor party referendum sent out by the Trade Union Educational League to 35,000 local unions. In fact, it was very largely because of the success of this referendum that the officials of the Farmer-Labor Party moved to crystallize the rapidly spreading movement for a labor party. They issued their call for a "monster political convention" to which all "labor, farm, and political groups," both local and national, were invited to send delegates "for the purpose of devising means for knitting together the many organizations in this country in such a manner as will enable the workers to really function politically."

### **The Farmer-Labor Party Revives.**

This was an inspiring gesture. Hope for a labor party, long deferred, revived again. Apparently the Farmer-Labor Party, freeing itself from the lassitude that had crippled it from its birth, had finally come to realize that the labor party issue, like amalgamation, was purely a rank and file question and had determined to make a bold fight for it among the broad masses in the unions. Many circumstances had conspired to make this conclusion seem plausible. Years ago the Farmer-Labor Party had broken with the Gompers clique of officials, and after the Cleveland conference it parted company with the remainder of the higher officialdom, the Johnston group. This should have convinced it that there was nothing to be looked for from the bureaucracy of the trade unions and that the only thing left for it was to make a militant appeal to the great rank and file. Its logical role was to lead a vigorous labor party struggle in all the organizations and to put across the program of independent working class political action in spite of the opposition of the entire official family. It was a splendid opportunity and a solemn

responsibility, demanding foresight, initiative, and daring. But events proved that the national leadership of the Farmer-Labor Party failed completely to understand the situation or to live up to its requirements.

### **The Farmer-Labor Party Weakens.**

The militant and revolutionary elements in the labor movement took seriously the Farmer-Labor Party's gesture of revolt. They thought that body was in earnest and prepared to accept the consequences of its acts when it boldly denounced the Cleveland Conference for not forming a labor party and then called together a great rank and file convention to create such a party. So these militants worked vigorously and effectively to make the convention a success. On the other hand, the Farmer-Labor Party leaders, with few exceptions, never entered into the spirit of the convention. They did practically nothing to build it up. Many even sabotaged it outright. Their trouble was that ideologically they belonged in the left wing of the Johnston Conference for Progressive Political Action. Although the whole higher officialdom of our labor movement had declared against forming a labor party, the Farmer-Labor Party leaders could not quite give up the hope that this officialdom, in some way or other, would finally organize the party. They did not want to sever connections with that leadership. They were afraid of losing caste in the labor movement if they placed themselves at the head of a real rank and file movement. Consequently their course was one of vacillation and uncertainty. As the convention date approached, their discontent and alarm increased. The thing was taking on entirely too much of a rank and file and revolutionary character to suit them. Soon it became evident that few or none of the big international unions and state federations would participate. But the worst blow came when the Socialist Party, true to its role of toady to the trade union bureaucracy, refused to sit into the convention. This robbed the convention of almost its last shred of "respectability," and made the situation practically impossible for the Farmer-Labor Party leaders. It forced upon them the alternative of either going along with a fighting rank and file movement, tinctured with "red," to establish the labor party in the face of a united opposition by the trade union bureaucracy, a course naturally repug-

nant to them, or of practically repeating the Cleveland fiasco by doing nothing to form the proposed federated party.

It was under such circumstances that the memorable convention came together in the big Carmen's Auditorium. The number of delegates has been variously estimated from 600 to 800. They represented at least 600,000 workers, members of all sorts of agricultural and industrial organizations. High international officials of the unions were conspicuous by their absence, most of the labor representation coming from local unions and central labor councils. From the beginning it was manifest that the delegation, disillusioned by the Cleveland failure, was determined that a real start should be made towards the foundation of a genuine federated labor party, to which all working class political and industrial groups might affiliate.

### **The First Day.**

In this situation the cue was for the Farmer-Labor Party leaders, despite the rank and file character of the Convention, to place themselves boldly at the head of the movement by forming immediately the all-inclusive federated party, and by launching a militant campaign to win affiliations for it. Although the big unions were not represented, the delegation was heavy enough to guarantee the success of such a drive. Had they done this at least 95% of the delegates would have acclaimed and followed their leadership enthusiastically. But they failed to rise to the occasion. The Cook County (Illinois) group, entirely dominated by John Fitzpatrick, simply could not reconcile themselves to a rank and file struggle to establish the labor party, and particularly not as that struggle would have to be fought out shoulder to shoulder with the revolutionary Workers Party. They had no constructive policy, but quibbled, hemmed and hawed about, hesitant and undecided. The only thing they were sure of was that under the circumstances they could not go along profitably in a combination including the Workers Party, although they themselves had invited that organization to the Convention. The result of their idea would be to detach the one group which, as experience has shown, was willing to fight for a federated party.

Manoeuvres to oust the Workers Party began on

the first day of the Convention. Departing from the original call sent out (which provided simply that all organizations were to sit into a general convention of the FLP), the national leaders of the FLP proposed that first their organization would hold its convention, after which the invited unaffiliated organizations would be asked to attend, not a general convention as originally proposed, but merely a conference. The first difficulty arose over the seating of the delegates to the FLP Convention, July 3rd. Fearing that an attempt would be made to discriminate against them and to isolate them at that stage, the WP on July 2nd wrote a letter to the FLP National Committee, proposing that no delegates be seated at the FLP Convention except those coming from regularly affiliated, per-capita-paying organizations. This the FLP National Committee definitely agreed to do. But to the great surprise of the WP, on July 3rd the FLP proposed that all delegates, unaffiliated as well as affiliated, be seated, with the exception of those coming from national organizations. The effect of this was to practically isolate the WP, so the latter appealed to the Convention against such discrimination and asked that they be seated also. This was done by an almost unanimous vote. The FLP national leaders lost tremendously in prestige by this incident.

After the seating of the WP, the day having come to an end, the convention adjourned to reconvene the following day, July 4th, as the general conference. Some have said that by insisting upon seats in the FLP Convention the WP illegally invaded that body and hampered its action. But such an argument is nonsense. The WP simply insisted that it, as an invited organization, be granted the same rights as the great mass of other unaffiliated bodies that the FLP, in violation of its agreement with the WP, was about to seat. In any event, little serious business of the FLP was disturbed because, as it was officially stated, all that Party's Convention had proposed to do was to adopt a brief set of rules for the general conference.

### **The Second Day.**

Immediately the conference opened on July 4th, the situation heated up. Delegate Zeuch, of the Wisconsin Non-Partisan League, submitted a proposition for the formation of a permanent conference for inde-

pendent working class political action. Thereupon Delegate [Joseph] Manley, of Local 40, Structural Ironworkers of New York, moved as an amendment a resolution endorsing the formation of a Federated Farmer-Labor Party, and providing for an Organization Committee, composed of representatives of the principal groups present, which should submit to the assembled delegates a practical plan of procedure. For some inscrutable reason the chairman ruled this amendment out of order, whereupon it was resubmitted and made to stick by C.E. Ruthenberg, delegate of the WP.

This was the time when the national officers of the FLP, as conveners of the assembly, should have presented their plan of action. But not a line did they submit. They contented themselves with filibustering against the Ruthenberg amendment. They did not openly declare that they were against forming a federated party. They asked that the conference, or more properly the Convention, take no stand on the proposition, but refer the whole matter to the Organization Committee. This evasion made still greater inroads on their prestige. The great bulk of the delegates, in the course of the long debate, became convinced that the FLP leaders did not want a federated party. Finally the Ruthenberg amendment was adopted with a roar. Except for a handful of delegates rallying around the Cook County group of the FLP, the Convention went on record unanimously in favor of forming the Federated Farmer-Labor Party immediately.

That night the Organization Committee met. Out of 29 members on the Committee, 26 declared for the party as proposed. So they went ahead and mapped out a program and constitution. The dissident FLP delegates on the Committee submitted no plan. They merely declared that their organizations would not accept the federated party as outlined.

### **The Third Day.**

On July 5th, the last day of the Convention, the Organization Committee reported in favor of launching the Federated Farmer-Labor Party at once. This received a tremendous ovation from the Convention. There was no detailed minority report. Robert M. Buck, an FLP member of the Committee, who said he was speaking on behalf of the FLP, stated in effect that his organization could not and would not abide

by the report of the Organization Committee if it were adopted. He submitted no alternative plan. Delegate Buck's report provoked a storm of opposition. FLP delegates all over the hall declared that he did not voice their sentiments; they were read for the federated party. Kennedy of Washington, McDonald of Illinois, Haering and Feldhaus of Ohio, and other pioneers of the FLP in Kentucky, California, Minnesota, and other states, so expressed themselves. It soon became evident that the resistance to the federated party comprised chiefly the Cook County FLP delegation, with a baker's dozen from outlying points.

After this the Convention rolled on, with speaker after speaker intoning the necessity for a federated party. Especially insistent were the farmers that the party be launched. The day wore on and a delegate, anxious to finish with the work, moved the previous question. But the majority group, hoping that some agreement might yet be arrived at that would bring Fitzpatrick and his followers into harmony with the Convention, voted to continue debate. It was a most remarkable situation. Here was the Convention deep into the afternoon of its last day, almost at the point of adjournment in fact. Yet the FLP officials, the very ones responsible for the gathering, had not presented it the least semblance of a plan, either orally or in writing, regarding what they wanted it to do. Up to this point not a speech had they made nor a document of any kind had they submitted outlining a program of any kind. Finally, Delegate Ruthenberg mounted the platform and stated, as he had done times without number before to the FLP leaders, that in coming to the Convention the WP had in mind only one thing, to fight for the formation of a federated party. As a basis of that organization, he said, they would be glad to accept the FLP. He demanded that Fitzpatrick and conferrers should take charge of the movement, asking only a small minority representation for the WP on the National Executive Committee. He chided the FLP leaders for having submitted nothing concrete for the Convention to act upon.

This speech brought home to the FLP leaders the impossible position they were in. They asked time to caucus, and the Convention adjourned to give them the necessary opportunity. At 8:30 o'clock that night they brought in their answer to Ruthenberg's proposal. It was the first document they had submitted to the

Convention. With its reading came the great revelation. No wonder the FLP leaders had hesitated so long in presenting their program. It was the plan of the most chauvinistic element in the FLP. It proposed to affiliate all the groups present to the existing FLP on an autonomy basis, with the exception of the revolutionary elements (in this case chiefly the WP), which were to be excluded. Consider the contradiction in this. At the Cleveland Conference for Progressive Political Action [Dec. 11-12, 1922] the FLP delegation voted to seat the WP delegates; then they invited them to attend the FLP Convention; and when the WP accepted the invitation in good faith, the FLP proposed to unseat them upon exactly the same legalistic grounds as those urged against them by Johnston in Cleveland. Let us quote here one paragraph of the FLP proposal:

We feel, however, that it would be suicide for us and the various organizations seeking together with us the unification on the political field of all the forces with the same object in view for which we are striving, to undertake to bring into such affiliation any organization which advocates other than lawful means to bring about political changes or is affiliated with or which accepts the leadership of either national or international political organizations whose propaganda and doctrines advocate the overthrow of the government of the United States by other than legal and constitutional methods, such as the Third International.

The Convention made short work of this belated program by laying it on the table. Then it adopted the Organization Committee's report almost unanimously. After than the National Executive Committee was elected and the Convention adjourned. The Federated Farmer-Labor Party was born.

### **The Fight Ahead.**

The advent of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party marks an epoch in American labor history. A mass party, led by militants, embodying the vital idea of a united political organization of workers and farmers, and operating in the midst of the present industrial and agricultural discontent, it is full of dynamic possibilities. Capitalistic interests realize this full well, and have already launched into a vicious journalistic attack upon it. In this work of destruction they are ably aided by reactionary labor sheets of every shade. Lies about the convention are being broadcasted wholesale.

For one thing there is the myth about the Communists packing and capturing the Convention. The fact is the WP elements were very much in a minority. Their strength was not in their numbers but in their program. They wanted a federated party and they fought consistently for it. The Convention, also wanting a federated party, followed their lead from first to last, as it recognized they were the outstanding group with a constructive plan. The whole affair was striking proof of the vital fact that American workers will follow revolutionary leaders, even as their forbears did in 1886, once these leaders participate in the mass organizations and supply them with practical proposals.

Another lie being widely spread relates to the supposed Farmer-Labor Party bolt. The fact is that the most militant elements in the FLP, carrying with them the bulk of the organization, have declared for the new party. But the most absurd story of all is to the effect that the farmers would have none of the federated party. In reality, however, they were among its strongest advocates. The Chairman and the two Vice-Chairmen of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party are all farmers. Of the executive officers, only Joseph Manley, the Secretary-Treasurer, is an industrial worker. A sufficient refutation of the yarn about there being no one but Communists in the new party is had by simply reading the names of its National Executive Committee, and the organizations they represent. And these include only a small portion of the wide diversity of farm and industrial bodies in attendance at the Convention.

The following were elected to the National Executive Committee:

S. Alenna, Cooperative organizations;  
 E. Backus, Non-Partisan League of California;  
 Anna M. Brady, Non-Partisan League of South Dakota;  
 William Bouck, Western Progressive Farmers' League;  
 Mary B. Brite, Farmer-Labor Party of Ohio;  
 Alexander Boyd, Fairmont (WV) Central Labor Union;  
 Anthony Capraro, local unions and joint boards,  
 Amalgamated Clothing Workers;

James Campbell, Buffalo Trades and Labor Council;  
 I.L. Davidson, local unions, International Ladies Garment Workers;  
 William Z. Foster, local unions, Brotherhood of Railway Carmen;  
 H.L. Franklin, West Virginia State Federation of Labor;  
 David A. Gorman, Labor Party of Los Angeles;  
 W.H. Green, Progressive Party of Nebraska;  
 C.E. Hoebel, Wisconsin Women's Progressive Association;  
 C.A. Hathaway, local unions, International Association of Machinists;  
 M. Jenkins, Independent Workmen's Circle;  
 John C. Kennedy, Farmer-Labor Party of Washington;  
 M.J. Loeb, miscellaneous trades;  
 Ludwig Lore, Workmen's Sick and Death Benefit Society;  
 Noah London, Workmen's Circle;  
 Joseph Manley, Workers Party of America;  
 F.W. McKee, local unions, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers;  
 James McCullen, local unions, United Mine Workers;  
 Thomas Meyerscough, local unions, United Mine Workers;  
 C.E. Ruthenberg, Workers Party of America;  
 J.W. Rassmiller, local unions, Order of Railway Conductors;  
 Richard Swift, Farmer-Labor Party of Illinois;  
 I.G. Scott, Socialist Party of Minnesota;  
 Franklin Shoemaker, Farmer-Labor Publishing Co.;  
 C.J. Stevens, Farmer-Labor Party of Kentucky;  
 George M. Tries, Detroit Federation of Labor;  
 O.H. Wangerin, Minnesota Shop Crafts Legislative Committee;  
 Harold M. Ware, United Farmers' Educational League;  
 W.E. Zeuch, Non-Partisan League of Wisconsin.

The Federated Farmer-Labor Party is a militant organization. Fight is its middle name. Its membership is tired of pussyfooting with the labor party idea. It is out to make a vigorous campaign to establish a real political organization of the workers. One of its first moves will be the big Unity Convention, to be held in Chicago in mid-winter. This will be one of the greatest political gatherings in the history of America. It will make independent working class political action an issue as never before. The Federated Farmer-Labor Party will break the chains with which the Gompers bureaucracy keeps the workers of this country bound to the political chariots of their industrial masters.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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