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La Follettism Without La Follette

By Manuel Gomez

THE death of the senior senator from Wisconsin is a political event of moment. Newspapers up and down the land are editorializing upon it, sometimes hopefully, sometimes in despair, never with indifference. It has caused shrugging of shoulders and scratching of heads.

The question on every interested tongue is: What will become of La Follettism without La Follette?

The Individual and the Movement.

To the readers of the WORKERS MONTHLY at least, it will be at once plain that all this adoo over the individual does not in any sense imply that the individual was the movement. If Robert M. La Follette had never been born someone else would have taken his place. But La Follette was born, and in the development of events a certain political grouping became identified with his personality and he was pushed into the position of leader of a movement. The fact that its central figure was La Follette and not some other, necessarily influenced the immediate turn that the movement could take, presenting concrete possibilities for the direction of its strategy (for instance the whole senatorial phase of it), setting a certain stamp upon it organizationally, and determining many of the avenues of relationship between the movement and its financial friends, the movement and its publicity organs, the movement and its volunteer supporters among the farmers and in the trade unions.

With its central figure suddenly withdrawn, the entire grouping is shaken, thrown off its equilibrium. Before it is able to adjust itself to new conditions of leadership, inevitable transformations will occur capable, perhaps, of precipitating a change of course—a change which was foreshadowed anyway, but which under other circumstances might be held off much longer. In the case of the La Follette movement the shake-down is greatly intensified by the fact that not one, but three, factors have recently been removed from the situation: Robert M. La Follette, Warren S. Stone and Samuel Gompers. Many old relationships have been disturbed and many cords of communication have been cut. Small wonder then, that so much uncertainty has arisen as to what will become of La Follettism.

La Follettism, An Unholy Alliance.

La Follettism was the movement of the thwarted petty bourgeoisie of town and country struggling for political expression against the all-enveloping power of Big Business. As such it was a sign of the internal decay of capitalism.

But that was not all there was to La Follettism. The petty bourgeois movement was grafted onto and secured a temporary hegemony over the parallel movement of the awakening proletariat for independent action of the workers. This combination of forces, under the hesitant and insidious leadership of the petty bourgeoisie was the thing that went by the name of La Follettism.

The Petty Bourgeoisie.

The petty bourgeoisie on which La Follettism depended, has at no time been an independently decisive factor in society. "The medieval burgesses and the small peasant bourgeoisie," Marx says, "were the precursors of the modern bourgeoisie." He shows, however, that this class was never capable of achieving political victories and it was the larger industrial and commercial capitalists that ushered in the period of capitalist rule throughout Europe. A new class of petty bourgeoisie was called forth by the process of capitalist development, which in turn saw itself menaced with ruin by the growth of large-scale industry. From this class arose what Marx termed "petty bourgeois socialism."

"This school of Socialism," he pointed out in the Communist Manifesto, "dissected with great acuteness the contradictions in the conditions of modern production. It laid bare the hypocritical apologies of economists. It proved, incontrovertibly, the disastrous effects of machinery and division of labor; the concentration of capital and land in a few hands; overproduction and crises; it pointed out the inevitable ruin of the petty bourgeois and peasant, the misery of the proletariat, the anarchy of production, the crying inequalities in the distribution of wealth, the dissolution of old moral bonds, of the old family relations, of the old nationalities.

"In its positive aims, however," he continued, "this form of Socialism aspires either to restoring the old means of production and of exchange, and with them the old property relations, and the old society, or to cramping the modern means of production and of exchange, within the framework of the property relations that have been, and were bound to be, exploded by those means. In either case, it is both reactionary and utopian."

American readers will immediately associate many of

the above criticisms of capitalism with the "cheap money" movements in the United States, and nearly all of them with the early anti-trust movement. The same deficiency as regards positive aims will also be noted.

Out of the West.

What confuses many workers is to see a recurrence of petty-bourgeois individuality today, long after the petty bourgeoisie has been crushed into submission in this country and has lapsed into spineless dependence upon Wall Street. There is really no mystery about this, however. The resurgence of forces which has given us La Follettism receives a direct impulse from the revolt of the mortgaged and tenant farmers against the ever-increasing exploitation by railroads and grain elevators, by marketing firms and packing houses, by loan companies and banks—in short by monopolist finance capital. Bob La Follette was born on a farm, in the agricultural state of Wisconsin. It is common knowledge that the backbone of the La Follette movement was in agricultural territory. The poorer farmers can and must be won away from the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie and brought under the leadership of the workers. That task is still ahead.

Another thing to remember about the La Follette movement is that it came out of the West, where the concentration of capital was to a certain extent an exotic growth, coming violently, as an overflow from the East. The petty bourgeoisie of the West has still a good deal of its pristine virility. Moreover, it is allied, to a degree, with the forces of industrial capital in the West which require its support for a sectional struggle against absentee finance-capital domination. I called attention to this strange alliance some time ago in an article on "The Passing of Pittsburgh Plus." Its results have been contradictory; it has kept some sections of the Western petty bourgeoisie inside the ranks of rock-ribbed Republicanism, but it has also enticed many of the larger industrial capitalists into support of La Follettism—for instance Rudolph Spreckles, the Western sugar magnate.

Capitalist Class Disintegration.

It should not be assumed, however, that La Follettism was essentially a Western phenomenon, notwithstanding that the West was its cradle and the West gave it extraordinary vigor. La Follette's big vote in New York alone should be enough to dispel any such impression. In its larger aspects the movement represents something which is not confined either to the West or to the East, or even to the United States. It is the historic fight of the petty bourgeoisie against proletarianization. "Big Business" defeated and temporarily absorbed the petty bourgeoisie as a political factor, but that did not make the capitalist class a homogeneous unit. The contradictions of bourgeois society are inexorable. Capitalism proceeds along the path of the proletarianization of the petty bourgeoisie; in the advanced stage of imperialist capitalism, the petty bourgeoisie thus becomes powerfully aware of its special interests. Pressure from within and without the capitalist class, from a hundred different sources, tends to split the solid front of the capitalists into groupings and subdivisions, incapable of effective united action. This process has reached tremendous proportions in Europe. In the United States it is in its beginnings. The 1924 resolution of the Communist International on the American Question

characterized the La Follette movement as a sign of the disintegration of capitalism.

These divisions in the camp of the enemy are of great importance for the working class, and must be taken advantage of by the Communists. At the same time it must be borne in mind that the fight of the petty bourgeoisie is not a wholehearted fight. To share in the exploitation of labor, that is the purpose of the petty bourgeoisie struggle. Petty bourgeois elements exhibit their traditional incapacity for independent action even in this. They adopt no clear line. They acknowledge the suzerainty of big capital in the very course of their struggle against it. Thus they are deliberately made use of by big capital as a decoy to attract and misdirect its more serious enemy—the working class.

La Follette's appeal to the workers was calculated to exploit the political power of the masses in the interests of the middle class. La Follettism gained the support of millions of workers, largely through the treachery of corrupted trade union leaders, but its program and policies were scarcely influenced by its working-class following. The movement was based upon the economic factors outlined above.

La Follettism Still Alive.

Does La Follette's death signify the end of La Follettism? Of course not. The economic foundations of the movement still remain.

Let us take a cross-section of American political parties and groupings today. At the extreme right we find the Republican Party and at the extreme left, the Workers (Communist) Party. In between are the Democratic Party, the so-called "Progressive" (La Follettite) grouping, the movement for a Labor Party, and the Socialist Party. The Republican Party is the party of "Big Business." In proportion as the working class moves toward independent political expression on its own behalf, the bourgeoisie traditionally sets up buffer organizations to counteract it. Such was the La Follette movement. The Democratic Party cannot play such a role, because of its connections with finance capital and because of its reactionary base in the South; it has been steadily losing strength among the workers and petty bourgeoisie of the North. We can expect to see the so-called "Third Party" movement continue to grow and develop.

While it is true that La Follettism secured a temporary hegemony over the movement for an independent party of labor, it must not be imagined that the Labor Party movement ceased to exist. In the long run the forces for working-class political expression will make faster progress than the "Third Party" forces, not only because their group is larger and more homogeneous but because it represents a more fundamental class alignment. The lines of demarcation between the two groups are of course not always clear. Each group has in it elements which really belong in the other and who form the basis of confused appeals for unity. Actually, there is no unity. La Follettism did not merge with the Labor Party movement but temporarily eclipsed it.

"Fighting Bob's" Own Role.

La Follette was a means to that end. His role in the La Follette movement was twofold: (1) to crystallize the petty bourgeois forces; (2) to confuse and seduce the workers.

There are a number of men who might slip into his shoes, but no one could do it immediately and without friction. Candidates for the seat in the Senate are plentiful;

"Fighting Bob" was scarcely in his grave before a mad scramble began among the Wisconsin Old Guard as to whether his successor should be Bob, Jr., Governor Blaine, Congressman Nelson or somebody else. Just now Bob, Jr. seems to have the edge, the idea being to take a leaf from the notebook of the Republican Party which has persistently been trying to establish the dynasty of the Roosevelt family by pushing the political fortunes of Teddy, Jr. But whether or not he goes to the Senate, it must be clear that young La-Follette cannot take the place of his father. Senator Norris is willing, but he does not quite fill the bill. Brookhart and Frazier are weak sisters. Wheeler is out of the question. Hiram Johnson, the ambitious freebooter from California, could establish neither contact nor confidence.

"But," writes the New Republic's Washington correspondent, "there is still Borah. As a matter of fact, Borah is the real hope—the one best bet. . . His friends here have a feeling, which I fully share, that the La Follette death will force him forward as the real Progressive leader, and that as such he will in the long run be more effective than any other man. The logic of things, they contend, points directly to him."

Effect of La Follette's Death.

Borah, however, is not La Follette. His past history and present connections offer many serious disadvantages. If the "Third Party" movement should now push forward Borah as its leader—a not improbable eventuality—a number of readjustments will be necessary. Borah—or someone else—might serve to crystallize the petty-bourgeois forces almost as well as La Follette did, but La Follette's other functions of confusing and seducing the workers can not be taken over so simply. Swapping horses while crossing a stream is always ticklish business, and especially when the new team is not immediately at hand and furthermore is unused to the harness.

The effect of La Follette's death must be to spread temporary demoralization in the camp of La Follettism and to hasten the separation of the Labor Party forces.

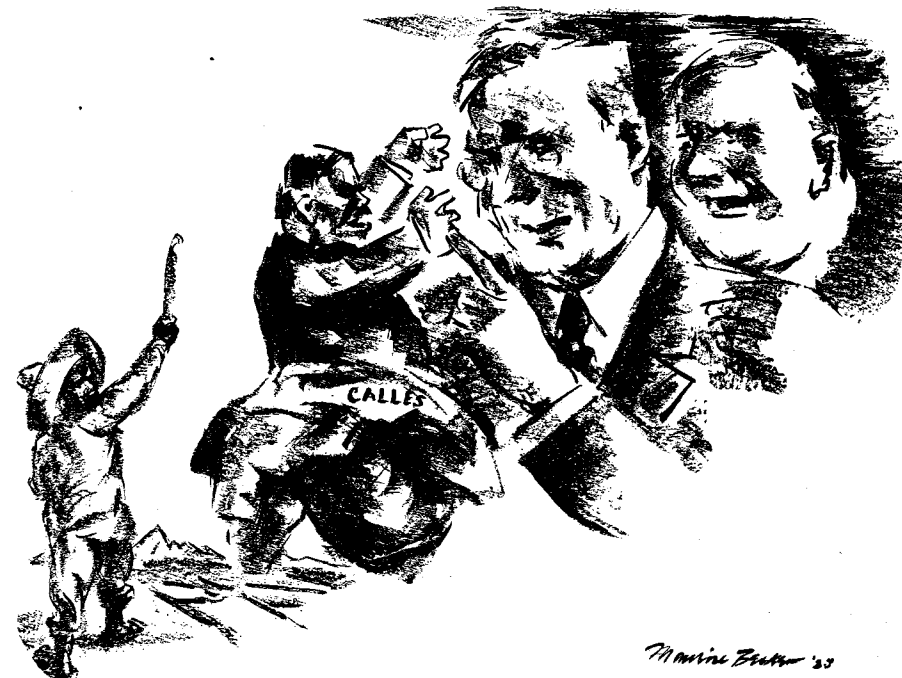
Stone and Johnston; the Passing of Gompers.

The death of Warren S. Stone, of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and the loss of prestige of Johnston of the Machinists, must also operate as powerful influences in this direction. Stone and Johnston have been the two most important links between the trade unions and La Follette. Both rose to public importance in politics on the crest of the movement for an independent party of the workers and both were instrumental in the capitulation of their movement to La Follettism. Johnston is still head of the Conference for Progressive Political Action, it is true, but the setback that he received from the rank and file of the Machinists' Union in the recent grand lodge elections, will tend to weaken his hand there.

More important still is the disappearance from the scene of Gompers. The passing of Gompers marks the break-up of a whole leading grouping in the A. F. of L. bureaucracy and releases many dammed up forces making for working class progress. This is not immediately visible on the surface, but it is beyond doubt. The rule of the small aristocratic unions is at an end. And in the larger unions, where the unskilled workers are becoming a more and more important factor, the movement for independent political action has gained considerable foothold. William Green may be a black reactionary—as he most certainly is—and John L. Lewis may be a pal of Cal Coolidge's, but the United Mine Workers of America which is the source of their power is overwhelmingly in favor of a Labor Party. The A. F. of L. obviously cannot continue to be the barrier to independent working class political action that it was under Gompers. The need of the American workers to enter politics as a class cannot remain permanently unsatisfied.

Towards a Labor Party.

Communists should be prepared to take advantage of the situation created by the deaths of La Follette, Stone and Gompers. We must not only throw the weight of our influence into the campaign for rousing the political consciousness of the trade unionists inside and outside of the La Follette movement, but we must also put forward concrete propositions tending to give organizational substance to the Labor Party movement as against La Follettism. We must, however, always bear in mind the general co-relation of forces and the position and role of our own Workers Party. We cannot proceed as though all the strings were gathered in our hands, as though we were the Labor Party. The Communist International has only recently emphasized the fact that the Labor Party must be deeply rooted in the trade unions. If we remember this, we can play a noteworthy part in leading the American workers into taking the first steps toward conscious political activity on a class basis.



WALL STREET'S NEW PUPPET IN MEXICO

Maurice Becker