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The Farmer-Labor Party In Minnesota Politics: 1918-1948

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THE FARMER-LABOR PARTY IN
MINNESOTA POLITICS: 1918-1948

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

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This dissertation, submitted by Philip L. Darg in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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December 17

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an examination of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota politics between 1918 and 1948. This movement represented an exceptional chapter in Minnesota history, since the Farmer-Labor Party was the only sustained successful third party movement in the state. This study focuses on the origins of the movement and the reasons for its emergence, its main figures, the goals of the party, its continued electoral success from 1922 through 1936, its decline beginning in 1938, its merger with the Democratic Party of Minnesota in 1944, and finally the subsequent battle for control of this newly-merged DFL (Democratic Farmer-Labor) Party between Democrats led by Hubert H. Humphrey and the former Farmer-Laborites between 1946 and 1948. The study uses an extensive collection of primary and secondary sources relating to the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and other issues and political events within the timeframe in question.

The conclusions of the investigation include the claim that the movement emerged chiefly because there was no viable political opposition to the dominant Republican Party in Minnesota during this period, and that the Farmer-Labor Party was a long-term movement comprised of a fractious coalition of urban-labor and rural-agrarian constituents held together by a series of leaders. The party's emergence and rise to power in the early 1920s was fueled by a number of factors, however the creation and the continuing governance of the party and

its association was initiated and administered by a Twin Cities-based urban-labor leadership (and as such, the movement was not merely another chapter of agrarian protest politics). This urban-labor leadership nucleus effectively absorbed the state's Nonpartisan League by 1922, joined that movement with its own emerging third party urban-labor movement, and then transformed this new coalition into the Farmer-Labor Party. The party's demise was caused by a number of factors which coalesced in the late 1930s, including the implementation of federal farm and labor policies under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, corruption within the party, a decline in the party's leadership, and increased factional conflict based on divisions of the rural-agrarian and urban-labor sectors of the party.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This work is a study of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota in the period of 1918-1948. The movement was both significant and unusual in nature, chiefly for two reasons. The first was that it was the only sustained successful third party movement in the state, achieving considerable electoral success from 1922 to 1936. The second was that this movement represented the only successful fusion of farmer and labor elements in a political third party that attained noteworthy electoral success in this period. Although there were other farmer-labor movements present in other states, and even serious attempts to forge a national Farmer-Labor Party, it was only the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party that accomplished substantial electoral gains. Although the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party did not manage to achieve lasting success as a third party in the long term, its implementation of at least part of its agenda in the short term was significant nonetheless, and at least some of the party's general political agenda (in one form or another) would eventually become part of the national Democratic agenda of the New Deal era under the Franklin Roosevelt Administration during the 1930s.¹

The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party emerged soon after the Nonpartisan League (NPL) movement had peaked in Minnesota. The NPL had been started in 1915 in North

¹Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 522-529.

Dakota by Arthur C. Townley. The NPL used the party primary election process to nominate and elect its own candidates within the dominant Republican Party structure, and had achieved significant electoral success in North Dakota in the election of 1916. The NPL movement then spread across state lines in 1917 to Minnesota, and the League relocated its headquarters to St. Paul, Minnesota, at about the same time. Eventually, Townley's influence over the NPL would wane, and political organizers within Minnesota – chiefly Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul) urban-labor-based leaders – formed a parallel organization (the Working People's Nonpartisan League or WPNPL). This WPNPL grew in size and influence, gradually overtook the NPL within the state, and eventually merged the NPL into its own structure. This shift in leadership changed the farmer-labor movement in the state into an official political party by 1922.²

Once the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party had been formed, it managed to successfully elect a Senator to Congress in 1922, and began regularly running third-party candidates for congressional and state offices. Soon after its formation, the movement quickly became the main opposition party to the Republican Party in Minnesota – eclipsing the Democrats. In the 1930s, the party reached its peak of power within the state, capturing the governor's office under its candidate, Floyd B. Olson, and holding it under Olson's leadership until 1936, and then under Governor Hjalmar Petersen's and Governor Elmer Benson's leadership until 1938. The party began its decline after losing the governor's office in the election of 1938 to the Republican candidate, Harold Stassen. Shortly after that, the party faced swift decline and

²Arthur Naftalin, "History of the Farmer-Labor Party," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1948, 43; see also Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 69.

eventually merged with the Democratic Party of Minnesota, forming the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (or DFL) Party in 1944.³

It is difficult to explain the unusual success of this third-party movement. With the possible minor exceptions of the Populist activity in the 1890s and Jesse Ventura's election as governor in 1998, the Farmer-Labor Party was the only successful sustained third party movement in Minnesota, and the only one to capture both national seats in Congress and the governor's office. These political accomplishments raise a number of historical questions. What were the origins of this movement? What factors made the Farmer-Labor Party successful in Minnesota in the period of the 1920s-'30s? What was the nature of the movement itself, including its political agenda, its organization, its rhetoric, its leadership, and other aspects? And last, what factors may have played a role in the decline of the party, and just precisely when did the movement actually end?

This study claims that the Farmer-Labor Party emerged due to a lack of viable political opposition to the Republican Party in Minnesota, and that the movement was comprised of urban-labor and rural-agrarian voters led by multiple leaders. Furthermore, the creation and the continuing governance of the party and its association was initiated and administered by a Twin Cities-based urban-labor leadership. This leadership nucleus effectively absorbed the state's farmer protest movement, joined it to its own emerging third party urban-labor movement, and then transformed this movement into the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. The party's decline was caused by several factors which coalesced in the late 1930s, including the implementation of federal farm and labor policies under the

³William E. Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), 221-227.

New Deal, corruption, leadership troubles, and increased factional conflict based on divisions of the rural-agrarian and urban-labor sectors of the party.

Background

The American agrarian political protest movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was in fact multiple movements, parties, and organizations which waxed and waned depending on the period and region. In general, the main issues were centered on the perceived loss of status and economic power on the part of small farmers *vis-à-vis* the growing corporate railroad, banking, and agribusiness industries. These large business entities had achieved overwhelming economic power by the late 1800s, even as agricultural prices in general had declined. Some historians have asserted that this decline of the American *yeomanry* (and its perceived loss of economic and political status) during the late Gilded Age was a significant factor in fueling the agrarian political movements of this era (especially in the South, the Plains, and the Midwestern states). This trend represented a shift in the American economic and political landscape in which traditionally predominant small farmers were being eclipsed by the industrialization and urbanization of America – even as the growth of railroads, banking, and agribusiness entities both supported rural areas with railway lines and gave farmers access to national markets. However, these entities also exploited farmers by controlling the banking sector, and the pricing and terms of the shipping of agricultural products to market.⁴

⁴Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Alfred A Knopf Publishers, 1953), 23-45.

The word *yeoman* originated in England during the late Renaissance period. Emerging from their medieval past, enterprising farmers earning sufficient income eventually purchased their own land, and became landowning farmers (or *yeomen*). Later, this pattern of yeomanry was transferred to the American colonies. The American yeoman was Thomas Jefferson's ideal American: a citizen who owned and worked his own land, knew the value of hard work and property, and endorsed a government that would support his property rights and not interfere with his ability to pursue prosperity. Jefferson envisioned an American republic largely based on a yeoman class which would form the most stable and largest layer of the American social strata. In reality, American society even in its colonial days was far more diverse than Jefferson's vision of a yeoman republican utopia. Differences in class and professions had existed in America well before the revolution, and regional differences were significant as well.⁵

As the country expanded westward in the 1800s into indigenous lands, much of the Midwest and Great Plains were settled by Yankee Americans and Euro-American immigrants. Agriculture was a dominant economic enterprise of the American republic in the 19th century, especially west of the Appalachian Mountains. Until about the 1840s however, most agricultural activity was based on the subsistence family farm model, and most farm markets were relatively local in nature. Setting off at first in wagons and then later by railroad, aspiring yeoman small farmers took to the prairies and plains of the American Midwest and Great Plains in search of their own slice of the American dream. They were

⁵Douglass G. Adair, *The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicanism, the Class Struggle, and the Virtuous Farmer* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 57-164.

aided in this quest by the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, which granted land to those who would settle and stay on a piece of property for a given period of time.⁶

The advent and subsequent extensive development of the railroad in America had a dramatic effect on the agricultural landscape after the 1860s. The development of railroad systems represented a revolution in the transportation of persons and products, including agricultural goods. With the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, and the spanning of the entire continent by rail lines by 1869, the central importance of the railroad as a means of transportation became firmly established. Yeoman farmers from the East Coast down through the Southern states and into Texas, and also through the Midwest and onto the western plains, were eventually – and significantly – affected by this change. Many farmers began shifting from subsistence farming to cash crop farming. It was the railroad which enabled them to make this change, since it provided a means to efficiently transport their agricultural goods to a larger national market, and offered a potentially profitable approach for small farmers. At the same time, beginning in about the 1850s, farm mechanization underwent a significant and dramatic series of improvements and changes – a long-term trend that would continue through the early 20th century and beyond.⁷ This heavy increase in farm mechanization led to a great potential increase in productivity for farmers, but it also meant a heavy increase in capital investments. A pattern developed in the 1870s-1890s in which many farmers would invest heavily in farm mechanization and put themselves at greater financial risk – borrowing money at ever-increasing rates of interest. Even though agricultural production often soared in the latter part of the 19th century to new levels, the

⁶Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, 137-141; see also Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 341, 344.

⁷Clarence H. Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 218-250.

increase in agricultural supply usually led to lower prices overall for many crop commodities. Thus, the American farmers' increased productivity often did not yield greater prosperity in the period of the 1870s to the 1890s. In fact, it usually had the opposite effect.⁸

As early as the 1870s, American agrarian political movements began to emerge and advocate for farmers' interests. The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry (more commonly known as the Grange movement), became a significant lobby for farming interests in the 1870s. The Grange (initially led by the Minnesotan, Oliver H. Kelley) served as a political lobby force with a large membership from the East Coast and into the Midwest, the South, and Great Plains states. By the 1870s, family farmers had become suspicious of the power of the railroads, which typically possessed a monopoly for the regions that they served. Yet at the same time, railroads were absolutely vital for the transport of incoming supplies and outgoing agricultural products. Much of the Grange's activities were focused on lobbying for legislation which would curb the excesses of the railroad's economic power. Although the Grange did enjoy some successes (notably the creation of a large-scale farm interest group and some railroad regulation legislation), many of these initiatives were often fleeting or easily circumvented by business interests, and the mismanagement of the Grange itself (along with internal divisions) led to its decline by the late 1870s.⁹ Numerous other regional pro-agrarian movements and third parties rose and fell in quick succession without making significant or lasting gains for their farmer constituents.¹⁰

⁸Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise or Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 17-18; see also Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 341-344.

⁹Thomas Woods, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Origins of the Grange in Republican Ideology* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1990), xv-xxii.

¹⁰Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, 200-204.

Meanwhile the patterns of increased agricultural productivity, declining crop prices, rising rates of interest, and continued tight railroad and corporate agribusiness control of the agricultural markets continued and intensified in the 1890s. With the agrarian situation becoming increasingly desperate (and further fueled by drought and economic recession), the Populist movement (or People's Party) – a third party movement – quickly gained popularity in the rural regions of the South, some Western states, and in pockets of the Midwest in the early 1890s. The party emerged from a series of grassroots farm lobby organizations that eventually coalesced into an official third party. The party defined its stands most clearly in the Omaha Platform (written by Minnesotan Ignatius Donnelly), which called for significant government intervention in the agricultural sector on behalf of farmers, and political reforms designed to curb the power of special interests in American politics. The Populist Party's power reached its climax in the election of 1892, when its presidential ticket captured over a million votes and carried four states in the Electoral College. The party's fateful (and controversial) decision to merge with the Democrats (under William Jennings Bryan) in the 1896 presidential campaign robbed the movement of much of its impetus, and it fell into decline soon afterwards.¹¹

The progressive reformers of the early 1900s who succeeded the Populists were largely different in their demographics and wider in their aims, yet retained some of the Populist goals – at least in terms of political reform. One of the Populists' main criticisms of the two-party system had been the domination of both of the main parties by monied interests, which subverted the general will of the people in choosing candidates and crafting legislation. The progressives also embraced this point of view – although they were

¹¹Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 514.

motivated by other abuses of big business in addition to agrarian concerns. From about 1900 to 1920, the progressive agenda in one form or another largely dominated reform in American politics. Its champions were numerous and influential. Such figures as Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette proudly wore the mantle. Until 1912, the “progressive movement” was a large-scale and bi-partisan political trend. It influenced both the Democrats and the Republicans, and was occurring at the local, state and national levels. The movement was more often aimed at reforms within parties and government itself rather than being a third party movement. However, in 1912, The “Bull Moose” Progressive Party was formed – largely as a vehicle for Theodore Roosevelt to once again seek the presidency. Roosevelt lost the election, but even so, progressivism took hold in the administration of President Woodrow Wilson, which embraced a series of progressive initiatives ranging from labor reform to female suffrage.¹² Unlike the Populists of the 1890s, the success of the progressives of the early 1900s was far more significant and lasting. The progressive agenda was broad and sweeping. It was aimed at reforming party politics and government itself, and extending democracy further. In terms of agrarian concerns, the Country Life movement of the early 1900s was an extension of the progressive movement. Its proponents foresaw a future of agricultural and rural renewal based on the industrialization and modernization of America’s farms and rural regions.¹³

At the same time that the long-term agrarian political protest movement was ebbing and flowing in the late 1800s and early 1900s, organized labor was experiencing its own parallel development. The Knights of Labor was one of the first major organized labor

¹²John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 140-146, 173-189, 193-197, 251-255.

¹³David Danbom, *Resisted Revolution: Urban American and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, IA; Iowa State University Press, 1979), i-ix, 74.

movements of significance in America. It was formed in 1869, and reached its peak membership in the 1880s. However, the Knights of Labor movement was labeled as being radical in the wake of the violence of the Haymarket Riot in 1886, and its membership declined severely thereafter. It should also be noted that business and government were usually unsympathetic to organized labor movements in the late Gilded Age, instead embracing laissez-faire politics, which typically championed the unrestrained power of business and saw little use for the governmental regulation of labor issues. The labor movement was thus largely challenged in its ability to make gains until the progressive era - and even then faced significant continuing resistance from business and government.

During World War I, the organized labor movement experienced setbacks but also gained additional recognition. During the war, efforts at union organization were often associated with strike activity by local governments and the public at large— which was viewed as sedition. It was common for individual labor activists in Minnesota to be jailed or run out of town in the period from 1917 to 1918. Nevertheless, certain reforms of the progressive era had aided the labor movement, and the membership of organized labor had grown after the turn of the century. The need for labor co-operation during World War I impelled the Wilson Administration to seek both accommodation with labor groups and provide some recognition for organized labor as a legitimate entity (President Wilson even appointed Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, to the Council of National Defense). This recognition was temporary, however, as anti-union sentiments and activities on the part of business and government increased again after World War I. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in late 1917 and scattered bombings throughout the United States in 1919 created the first “Red Scare” in America. A trend of stifling labor activism

lasted in America throughout much of the next decade as organized labor continued to face significant opposition from business and an unsympathetic federal government. It would not be until the years of the Great Depression and the Franklin Roosevelt Administration of the 1930s that organized labor would see its greatest gains. These would be guaranteed in a series of federal laws and regulations such as the Wagner Act (1935) and other legislation and agencies which would guarantee the right to collective bargaining and herald the rise of organized union labor in America until the early 1980s.¹⁴

Thus, the formation of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party occurred in the context of several long-term coalescing trends, each of which had a significant national scope. The first was the agrarian political protest movements, which peaked in the 1890s in the form of Populism, but would remain as a political platform within the mind of many farmers and agrarian leaders, and would re-appear as a major force in North Dakota starting in 1915.¹⁵ The second was the organized labor movement, which – despite numerous setbacks and a long tradition of resistance by federal, state and local governments and business interests – was beginning to grow in numbers and influence after the turn of the century, and this trend would even include more support for the Socialist Party. The third was the legacy of the progressive movement which – although its main focus was not on agrarian issues – nevertheless provided a means for significant political reform through its advocacy of an enhanced democratic process, specifically the party primary election and the direct election of national Senators. Other factors included trends such as economic shifts after World War I and the advent of new technologies (such as automobiles, telephones and radio broadcasting).

¹⁴David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-8.

¹⁵Robert Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 27-41.

These factors would make the possibility of a successful farmer-labor movement in Minnesota a reality by the early 1920s.

Review of Literature

There are three major American historiographical trends in the 20th century that relate to the Populist and progressive movements. Although the rise of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party occurred after these preceding movements, the perspectives within these historiographical trends (especially those relating to the Populists) are related to the focus of this study given the strong farmer protest element of the Minnesota farmer-labor movement. The three major schools of historical interpretation about the Populists and the progressives are the Progressive School, the Consensus School, and the New Left or Neo-Progressive School. The Progressive School emerged first in the early part of the century, and emphasized the importance of class struggle and conflict centered on economic issues. They portrayed the Populists as being ardent reformers pursuing a justified crusade against an entrenched wealthy elite. The Consensus School emerged a bit later, in about the middle of the century. The Consensus scholars noted the presence of economic conflict, but downplayed its importance, preferring instead to emphasize the concept of enduring universal American values such as property, individualism, and free enterprise. In the case of Richard Hofstadter, the Populists were further portrayed in a negative light [see below]. Later, New Left or Neo-Progressive scholars in the 1960s and '70s aggressively refuted such Consensus School claims, and emphasized the importance (and virtue) of class struggle. Since the 1980s, more subtle, varied and nuanced approaches to historical interpretation of these movements have emerged which defy simple categorization. Some of the most recent

works examining the Populist movement written since then have emphasized a number of different factors, including sociology and religion, technology, and the Populist movement's kinship with the nascent labor movement. It has also been claimed (rather convincingly) that "populism" in a general sense as a rhetorical-political strategy continues on in American politics in the present, and also has a longer history than the Populist movement itself.¹⁶

There are numerous historical works that address the many questions and issues which lead up to and cover the era of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party in the period between 1918 and 1948. The agrarian political protest movement has a long history in Minnesota and elsewhere. Indeed, one of the earliest major figures of the agrarian movement, Oliver H. Kelley, was from Minnesota. As mentioned earlier, Kelley was one of the founding members of the Grange movement, an early farm advocacy group with a national membership that engaged in social networking and political lobbying on behalf of farm interests starting in the 1870s. Some historians have characterized the Grange movement as being the first major pro-agrarian political lobby in the United States.¹⁷

D. Sven Nordin's *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867-1900* (1974) presented a revisionist interpretation of the Grange Movement, however. Nordin's contention was that the movement itself was mainly a social organization dedicated mostly to agricultural education and networking. Nordin claimed that the organization's political ambitions and influence were quite limited. Nordin's point is important, because if his assertion is true, it becomes more difficult to make the argument that agrarian discontent was significant and had coalesced as a political force as early as the 1870s. Nordin's thesis falls

¹⁶Robert C. McMath Jr., Peter H. Argersinger, Connie L. Lester, Michael F. Magliari, Walter Nugent and David B. Danbom, "Roundtable on Populism: Robert C. McMath Jr., Peter H. Argersinger, Connie L. Lester, Michael F. Magliari, and Walter Nugent" *Agricultural History*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (Winter, 2008), 7, 11, 23-24.

¹⁷Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, 198-200.

into the Consensus School of thought, minimizing the historical aspect of the Grange as being an agent of political agitation and conflict.¹⁸

Nordin's thesis was disputed significantly by Thomas Woods in his book, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Origins of the Grange in Republican Ideology* (1990). According to Woods, Kelley's efforts in the early 1870s were indeed a form of dedicated agrarian political activism, and represented a widespread grassroots movement which sought to improve economic conditions for farmers through collective political action. Woods contended that differences of opinion within the Grange leadership – in which Kelley advocated for more radical political action – was a chief source of the decline of the Grange and its influence.¹⁹ If Woods' characterization of Kelley's views and leadership in the period of the early 1870s is accurate, one could effectively argue that the history of the political farm protest movement against monied interests in Minnesota extends all the way back to that era. Woods' thesis clearly falls into the Progressive School, emphasizing class conflict, and extending this conflict back to the 1870s.

Other historians have made claims about farmers moving into the prairies and plains in the 1860s-1880s, emphasizing the effect of the Homestead Act and the opening of vast tracts of free land to farmers and settlers, and the later effect of the growth of the railroads. Allan G. Bogue's *From Prairie to Corn Belt, Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (1963) makes a strong case that such prairie farm settlement was not monetarily free nor without significant financial risk. Although Bogue's focus is chiefly on Illinois and Iowa, the patterns of prairie farm settlement in this era can be extrapolated to

¹⁸D. Sven Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867-1900* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1974), 168-182.

¹⁹Woods, *Knights of the Plow*, xv-xxii.

adjoining regions such as Minnesota as well.²⁰ The main point that can be applied in this case is that reflections of an earlier “golden era” by farmers in the late 19th century pressed by rising corporate interests were illusory – a thesis further commented on by Richard Hofstadter. Even so, changes in the late 1800s in the American economy saw the rise of big business and a widening gap between farmers and laborers and the managerial class, and these trends caused significant tensions. This is firmly evidenced by Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982). Trachtenberg portrays an America in which corporations grew much stronger towards the end of the Gilded Age while the average farmer and laborer tended to face reduced status and lessened individual economic power.²¹

The Populist Party of the 1890s was an important part of the political continuum which can be collectively referred to as the agrarian movement. At the peak of its power in the early 1890s, the Populists characterized themselves as a spontaneous third party movement dedicated to the betterment of farmers – mostly in the South and Midwest – who were responding politically to years of exploitation by business interests. John D. Hicks’ *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (1931) largely echoed the views of the Populist leaders themselves. Hicks characterized the Populist Party as being a political reaction to years of economic exploitation of the small farmer class in America – a theme which fit in well with the recent onset of the Great Depression.²² Hicks’ work is a classic example of the Progressive School of historical interpretation, which

²⁰Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt, Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1963), 47-66.

²¹Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3-10.

²²John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1931), 54-95.

emphasized conflict among the classes due to economic disparity – and was a popular historiographical trend until the 1950s.

Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* (1953) was a major groundbreaking work which examined reform movements stretching from Populism through the progressive era and ending with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s. Hofstadter diverged sharply from other historians' views on the Populists. He characterized the agrarian movement as being a backwards-looking conservative movement designed to maintain the perceived traditional status of small farmers, who viewed their recent economic decline as an unacceptable deviation from the ideal of Jeffersonian agrarian democracy. Hofstadter emphasized that this reaction was hostile to the recent changes of industrialization, the growth of railroads and national markets, and was not based so much on economic concerns, but rather on the perception of small farmers that their position as vaunted yeomen was being usurped by the new economic order. Hofstadter claimed that the Populists were backwards in both their politics and their concepts of free enterprise, and as such the Populist movement represented a reaction to a perceived loss of status – and not necessarily a reaction to perceived economic exploitation. He also acknowledged the New Deal reforms of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s as being the decisive factor which alleviated agrarian discontent. Hofstadter's book – written in the 1950s – was an important work in the Consensus School historiographical movement, and a direct refutation of Hicks' and the views of other earlier Progressive historians.²³

Robert H. Wiebe's influential and heralded work, *The Search for Order, 1887-1920* (1967) represented a comprehensive reliance on social theory to explain many of the

²³Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 23-45.

fundamental changes in American society from the end of Reconstruction to the end of World War I. Wiebe's work stand squarely in the Progressive School, arguing that the wider progressive movement was an overarching modern ideology that sought reform and order in a society of recent and significant sociological change. Wiebe posited a great shift in the social order between about 1880 and 1920 which was precipitated by major changes in the American economy. These economic changes related to the growth of industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of national markets and large corporations (or "modernization") and the decline of small town businesses, farmers, and artisans. Thus, the traditional small town culture – typically shaped by personal interactions – faced an insurmountable threat from the growth of larger and more interdependent economic and social trends. Wiebe contends that this economic shift led to a crisis within the existing small town culture (or "island communities") which eventually reacted to modernization through a series of movements to protest the perceived unfairness of these changes. The result was the eventual emergence of a new middle class – associated with the new economic shifts – whose perceptions were often rooted in a more traditional ethos ("the illusion of authority") – yet whose economic rise often emerged from the recent shifts of the late 1800s. For Wiebe, the emergence of this "bureaucratic" urban middle class (manifested most clearly in the progressive movement of the early 1900s) and their ability to communicate to larger groups (through mass media) became the new social order, and largely replaced traditional small town culture as a driving force in social movements and politics.²⁴

Wiebe further contended that this trend was present for farmers as well, who – with roots stretching back to the Farmers' Alliance and the Populists in the 1880s and 1890s –

²⁴Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), xiii.

sought to succeed by creating larger movements to counteract the effects of growing industrialization and corporatism. Such movements were thus a reaction to large scale economic changes that had occurred during the Gilded Age. The goal of these disempowered classes was to maintain their concept of economic fairness and democracy through mass communication and organization. This trend extended to other sectors as well, most notably labor, and Wiebe contended that the Knights of Labor movement was very similar to the farmers' movements in its themes of anti-corporatism and anti-plutocracy – even though neither movement would succeed in the short term. Eventually, it would be the emergence of the new urban “bureaucratic” middle class who would demand reforms on a grand scale, and bring about the acceptance of interventionist government. This new bureaucratic social trend – manifested in the progressivism of the era – created and nurtured large social associations to further social and political aims, and eventually supported trends ranging from political reforms and volunteerism to interventionist government by 1920. Indeed, a clear shift from laissez-faire government towards more interventionism is a hallmark of this era, and Wiebe contended that the successful societal organization and mobilization for the rigors of World War I prove that not only was this new order present, but that it worked successfully to address the issues of the day. Although the focus of Wiebe's work ends just as the farmer-labor movement is beginning in Minnesota, it offers a fairly comprehensive social history theory explanation for the movement's origin (and its later success). The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party followed many of the trends outlined by Wiebe, including the creation and nurturing of the Farmer-Labor Association – a large social organization (with a mass media component) designed to support and further the party's political aims.²⁵

²⁵Wiebe, 71-75.

Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (1976) represented a swing back towards a New Left, neo-Progressive School interpretation which refuted Hofstadter's views and – like Hicks – emphasized economic issues such as falling crop prices and the crop lien system as being at the forefront of the rise of the Populist Party. Writing in the wake of the 1960s protest movements, Goodwyn further emphasized the effectiveness of the farmers' ability to organize themselves on the local level, and how these local self-led organizations transformed (and reinforced) farmers' political consciousness, leading to the creation of Populism as a major force. Goodwyn's thesis thus also provides an explanation for grass-roots political organization and its potential sudden rise, and reflects – at least in part – the protest movements of the 1960s.²⁶

Charles Postel's more recent *The Populist Vision* (2007) further refuted Hofstadter's view of the Populists as being backwards-looking rural reactionaries. Postel emphasized the more sophisticated aspects of the Populist movement such as their embrace of science and their commitment to the concept of progress, and made the case that at least some of the Populist figures were indeed open to embracing the modern industrial economy – but were unwilling to cede the economic status of small farmers in the pursuit of this modernization, and wanted control over this transformative process.²⁷

Even though the Populist Party faced swift decline after the 1896 election, populism as a political rhetorical tool did not vanish. Michael Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (1998) took a wider view of “populism” as being a long-term trend in American political history – and one not tied to any specific era or even to the political left.

²⁶Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 28, 118, 282, 299, 433.

²⁷Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45-68, 173-204, 269-290; see also Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 514.

Kazin asserted that “producer” protest against powerful forces is a long-term rhetorical trend in American history which has its origins at least as far back as the Jacksonian Era, and which continues into the modern era with populist sentiments being expressed against “elites” who unfairly exploit major segments of the American population. Thus, a certain degree of political “populism” was a rhetorical thread that continued to flourish, and would be a major part of the appeal of both the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, and later the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota (and continues today as a thread in both left and right wing anti-establishment political rhetoric). Kazin’s wider analysis of American protest politics thus provided a broader perspective and context.²⁸

The progressives of the early 1900s were chiefly focused on issues other than agrarian discontent. Nevertheless, the reforms of the progressives represented a significant change in the American political landscape, and would enable a new kind of grassroots political activism and demand a higher level of accountability from politicians to the general voting public. There has been considerable discussion of the progressives, their aims, and their effectiveness among historians. Until the 1950s, the progressive reforms were often characterized as being sweeping, bi-partisan, tangible, virtuous, and largely successful (led by such giants as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson). Later interpretations and analyses added layers of complexity to this early assessment. Arthur Link’s *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era* (1954) portrayed progressivism as eventually becoming a major aspect of the Wilson Administration – although Link indicated that Wilson himself was initially not a progressive leader and was usually not the main architect of these reforms.

²⁸Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 1-8, 27-48, 287-290.

Instead, he was influenced by such administration figures as Louis Brandeis. Link also asserted that progressivism as a force lingered throughout the 1920s.²⁹

Gabriel Kolko's *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (1963) offered a radically different interpretation of the progressive era and its reforms. Kolko asserted that progressivism was essentially a conservative movement aimed at curbing the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism while keeping its basic structure intact. Kolko claimed that many of the progressive reforms were in fact authored or approved by major figures of business and government as a means to restrain certain big business excesses and forestall more radical proposals by socialists and other groups further to the political left.³⁰ Kolko thus essentially labeled the progressive era as being insufficiently reformist – a perspective of the Neo-Progressive School. Although Kolko's intention was to highlight the actual non-progressive nature of this era, his work (which in some ways minimized the contentious nature of the period) could also be considered an important Consensus School interpretation of the progressive era – although Kolko himself (a proclaimed socialist) was critical of progressivism from a leftist perspective and frequently sought to distance his work from libertarian conservatives who attempted to use it to justify their point of view. Kolko himself later declared that socialism was “essentially dead” in his more recent work *After Socialism: Reconstructing Critical Social Thought* (2006) – although he remained critical of capitalism as well.³¹

In John Whiteclay Chambers' *The Tyranny of Change* (1980), the author asserted that the 1890s to 1917 represented a time of great change, and that progressivism was the first

²⁹Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*. (New York: Harper, 1954), 54-80.

³⁰Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 3-9.

³¹Gabriel Kolko, *After Socialism: Reconstructing Critical Social Thought* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1-3.

major social and political response to the dominance of big business and mass industrialism. He called the progressives “new interventionists” – meaning that they wanted active government intervention to curb abuses of corporate excess and other wrongs, and that sometimes these sentiments even extended overseas (in the form of military intervention). This interventionism could also be extended to volunteer (i.e., non-governmental) organizations, but the prevailing attitude was one of social intervention in order to make society better overall.³²

Michael McGerr’s *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (2003) emphasized that the progressive movement stemmed from a sense of middle class moral outrage against perceived injustices by big business and sentiments against the *nouveau riche* possessing unearned wealth on one hand, and suspicions about the large number of immigrant laborers on the other hand. McGerr also argued that this outrage could take many forms, including even racism and segregation. Thus, progressivism may have had many legitimate reforms as part of its agenda. However, it emerged largely as a middle class reaction to both the power of a growing business elite as well as increasing numbers of non-Anglo proletarian immigrant laborers, and the perceived loss of status by the Anglo middle class. McGerr’s work thus emphasizes class as an element of agency (a trait of Progressive School thinking), yet does not view the movement as a whole as being just an ideology of socio-economic reform – thus offering a more nuanced interpretation than a conventional Consensus School perspective.³³

³²Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 1-24, 133-139, 150-154.

³³Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), xiii-xvi, 315-320.

One aspect of the progressive era specifically dedicated to agrarian and rural settings was the Country Life movement, which sought to modernize rural towns and farms while maintaining family farm prosperity and rural virtues. Modern historians analyzing the effect of the Country Life movement largely agree in their conclusions regarding this ill-fated offshoot of progressivism, which was projected by progressive theorists onto some rural regions of America between about 1900 and 1920. William Bowers' *The Country Life Movement in the United States* (1974) painted a picture of young, enthusiastic, mostly urban-based reformers idealizing rural America and seeking to reinvigorate it through increased productivity based on a strong community and selective industrialization. The movement largely failed, however, since the growing urban-dominated industrialization of American agriculture could not be resisted, yet this transformation was largely out of the control of small farmers, nor was it firmly tied to the revitalization of the rural settings.³⁴

David Danbom's *Resisted Revolution: Urban American and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (1979) further made the case that the Country Life movement was led largely by arrogant urban outsiders who pushed an ideal that was unfamiliar to rural residents, embraced a more industrial approach to farming which did not mesh well with rural culture, and was largely an approach which sought to suit urban – not rural needs.³⁵ Deborah Fitzgerald's *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (2004) added an additional chapter to the post-Country Life movement period, and noted that

³⁴William Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America: 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974), 84-85, 133-134.

³⁵Danbom, *Resisted Revolution*, i-ix, 74.

farming trends towards greater mechanization and agricultural “industrialization” eventually led to the rise of modern corporate farming.³⁶

Gilbert Fite’s *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (1954) provides considerable perspective to the national agrarian political debate of the 1920s and 1930s. Fite emphasized Peek’s importance as a central figure committed to federal government intervention in crop markets as a means to stabilize American agriculture and ensure prosperity for American farmers. Fite provided the reader not only with a profile of one of the main national figures leading the way to federal intervention in agricultural issues, but also outlined the unique nature of agrarian concerns as a political issue in this period. Fite further demonstrated that American farmers in this period were not likely to abandon their family farms as capitalist enterprises, but were frustrated by urban forces and largely united in their distrust of agribusiness entities which continued to put them at a disadvantage.³⁷

However, even with their economic difficulties in the 1920s and ‘30s, American farmers were generally unwilling to embrace unbridled political radicalism. Lowell Dyson’s *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (1980) is an account of the Communist Party’s attempts to recruit farmers in America in the 1920s and ‘30s. The history is largely one of failure by the Communist Party and its agents, and Dyson pointed out that many members of the party itself did not view the agrarian sector as being a prime ground for recruiting, and that their attentions were often focused more exclusively towards urbanized industrial labor instead. Like Fite, Dyson’s work made the point that American farmers in the 1920s-‘30s represented small-time free enterprise capitalism, a factor which made them

³⁶Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1-9, 184-190.

³⁷Gilbert Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 220-221.

unlikely recruits for a wider leftist ideological cause. In some ways, this conclusion complicates the analysis of farmer sympathies for the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota (with its apparent agrarian socialistic platform), but may also provide clues as to motivations for farmers to support the Farmer-Labor Party, as well as highlight potential divisions between the rural-agrarian and urban-labor sectors of the party.³⁸

Peter Argersinger's *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism* (1995) provided insight on agrarian third party movements in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Argersinger emphasized the lack of the responsiveness of the two major parties to farm issues in this period, and noted how agrarian movements ebbed and flowed according to time and region. One of his main conclusions was that these agrarian party movements – when they managed to succeed electorally – often faced difficult circumstances once in Congress, enduring such frustrations as being passed over for committee appointments, seeing their bills die in committee, and even being refused recognition to speak. These conditions hindered their ability to implement change beneficial to their constituents. The author also noted that such third party movements had a tendency to move towards “fusion” electoral approaches (i.e., merging with a major party), but that such tactics usually did not maintain the third party's interests very well, and often meant the end of the movement. Argersinger's observations are valuable for understanding some of the patterns of the farmer-labor movement in Minnesota, especially in its later years when it sought fusion with the state's Democrats as a means of political survival.³⁹

³⁸Lowell Dyson, *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 199-202.

³⁹Peter Argersinger, *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 1-36.

Catherine McNicol Stock's *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996) took a more longitudinal view of rural dissatisfaction. The author traced a long history of the discontent of rural "producerist" populations against powerful monied interests. McNicol Stock claimed that this was a pattern which permeated American history all the way back to the early years of the republic, and can even be seen in such early episodes of protest as Shays' Rebellion. McNicol Stock's thesis thus provides an additional psychological and cultural context for the embrace of a left-of-center third party movement among a group of rural farmers in the early twentieth century, and bears some semblance to Goodwyn's thesis as well.⁴⁰

Hal S. Barron's *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (1997) took a more specific look at rural reaction to the shift towards growing corporate agribusiness and national markets. Barron asserted that the rural agricultural producers were active agents in resisting this growing corporate power, and took steps to create cooperatives and other ventures designed to pool the power of individual farmers. Yet at the same time, the independence and interests of individual farmers remained, and made it difficult for the farm sector to provide a united front against the excesses of corporate agribusiness.⁴¹ Steven Keillor's *Cooperative Commonwealth: Co-ops in Rural Minnesota, 1859-1939* (2000) provided a more regionally focused study, which – like Barron – asserted that rural farmers had significant agency in resisting the growing power of corporate agribusiness and achieved some success in pooling their economic resources.

Keillor noted a long-running attempt by Minnesota farmers to create co-ops and run mutually

⁴⁰Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1-32, 149-162.

⁴¹Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xi-xiv, 7-18, 243-246.

beneficial enterprises such as union stores. These efforts were often successful only in the short term and in limited cases, however. Keillor claimed that ethnic and social bonds were a major factor in creating successful enterprises in this regard. Thus, Keillor's viewpoint provides an additional factor for the historian to consider (i.e., ethnic ties) when examining the rise of a political movement in Minnesota in that period.⁴²

Sources covering the Nonpartisan League (NPL) in North Dakota in the period of the late 1910s and early 1920s are also relevant to this study. Herbert Earle Gaston's *The Nonpartisan League* (1920) was an early chronicle of the movement published just after the movement's peak of power. Although this work was published while the NPL's course was still in flux and its text is undocumented, it contains a number of important descriptive details of the movement. More significantly, Robert Morlan's *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (1955) painted a complex and flattering picture of Townley and the NPL in North Dakota in the period of 1915 to 1922. Morlan effectively chronicled the grievances of the American prairie farm sector, and demonstrated the need for the rise of the NPL. The author's main assertion was that the NPL succeeded where other agrarian movements failed because it chose to remain within the dominant party structure – in this case, choosing to remain a separate entity which sought to infiltrate and influence the Republican Party (instead of forming its own independent third party). Morlan also commented however, on the success of the subsequent Farmer-Labor Party movement in Minnesota, which he attributed to the successful fusion of farmer and labor elements. This may seem somewhat contradictory – since Morlan attributes the NPL's success to its non-

⁴²Steven Keillor, *Cooperative Commonwealth: Co-ops in Rural Minnesota, 1859-1939* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), 3-10, 100-146, 308-338.

third party status, while claiming that the success of the movement in Minnesota was based on its third party strategy. Nevertheless, Morlan's work remains the definitive account of the North Dakota NPL movement and offers the historical reader many insights.⁴³

Elwyn Robinson's *History of North Dakota* (1966) presented an extensive analysis of the history of the League within the state. The author drew a somewhat equivocal conclusion. Robinson stated that the League and its members had legitimate grievances, and that the NPL may have initially represented an avenue for expressing discontent. However, Robinson was skeptical of the League's leadership overall, and seemed to view the NPL years in power as an episode of political demagoguery – a movement which was built on legitimate grievances, but went too far both in its political aims (which he termed “socialistic”) and in its disregard for civic probity (suggesting that corruption – whether exaggerated by the NPL's opponents or not – was a major factor in its downfall in the state).⁴⁴ More recently, Michael J. Lansing's *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (2015) presents a fresh perspective on the NPL, claiming that the movement was not just merely a local reaction to farm issues of the early 20th century, but was instead a model of successful citizen-led political activism, which has enduring implications for grassroots anti-corporate movements today.⁴⁵

The Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota in the 1920s and '30s was not just an agrarian movement, however. Labor was the other main sector of the party's base, and many have asserted that it was the successful fusion of farmers and laborers into a broad coalition which gave the party its electoral success in this period. Like the agrarian movements stretching

⁴³Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 3-46, 191.

⁴⁴Elwyn Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 352-370.

⁴⁵Michael J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), passim.

from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, the organized labor movement had a similar arc leading from general disenfranchisement in the late 1800s to greater empowerment by the 1930s. Early efforts at organized labor in America in the late 1800s were sporadic, often unsuccessful, marred by violence and controversy, and resisted by both business and government. Reforms in the progressive era allowed the labor movement greater influence. Organized labor also received a boost from legislation passed under President Wilson in 1916 (the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act and the Adamson Act) as well as a degree of federal recognition under Wilson's administration during World War I. Even so, the labor movement ebbed in the 1920s. Ironically, it was in the 1930s – at the height of high unemployment and the Great Depression – that organized labor would enjoy its greatest gains both in terms of numbers and in political achievements.

David Montgomery's *Workers' Control in America* (1980) described a broad and diverse proletariat of the early 20th century that was often divided between cultural and immigrant groups, but united in their dissatisfaction of working conditions. The author contended however, that the shared experience of labor itself created a bond which superseded existing cultural and ethnic divisions and led to the ability of the working class to (eventually) organize effectively. Montgomery also claimed that it was the direct intervention of the federal government in the 1930s which allowed for the emergence of more powerful organized labor through federal reforms supporting workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain, and through laws which regulated labor relations.⁴⁶ Montgomery's later work *The Fall of the House of Labor* (1989) made the assertion that the labor movement in

⁴⁶David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-8, 18-31, 153-180.

America was energized by the government regulation of industry and labor during World War I, which temporarily favored the labor sector and provided a model by which the labor movement could effectively organize across specific work environments.⁴⁷

Although organized labor would face great efforts in the 1920s by the industrialist class to reduce or eliminate unionism (either through repression or through corporatism designed to allay worker dissatisfaction), the 1930s would see a tilt in favor of organized labor. Melvin Dubofsky's *The State and Labor in Modern America* (1994) echoed many of Montgomery's observations. Dubofsky claimed that federal intervention in labor relations (specifically, the New Deal pro-labor legislation) enabled the organized labor movement to flourish, which in turn brought prosperity to the working class and made unionism an enduring trend in America. Dubofsky also traced the growing influence of the labor movement from the earlier period of the progressives and the Wilson Administration – both of which he claimed contributed in the long-term to the growth of the movement, and were part of a long continuum which eventually favored labor's position.⁴⁸

In addition to the historical sources which examine wider or national trends, there is also a body of historical literature which specifically addresses the history of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota as well. It has often been stated that "History is written by the victors." However, in the case of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota from 1918 to 1948, it seems that much of its history was written by both the movement's victors and its defeated figures or sympathizers. Much of the historiography which covers the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota was written mainly in the period just after its peak of power and demise (between

⁴⁷David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, 1-8, 370-410.

⁴⁸Melvin Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), xi-xviii, 61-82, 107-168.

about 1940 and the early 1970s). Most of these works were written either by persons who were part of the farmer-labor movement or the newly merged DFL Party, and/or were openly supportive of one of the movement's major figures (and thus seemed to be making a case for their views). The list of historical works specifically dedicated to the Farmer-Labor Party within Minnesota is relatively short, but nonetheless includes a number of influential, comprehensive and sometimes contradictory viewpoints. However, many of these works or passages emphasize the movement's origins as being the culmination of a long-term agrarian protest movement brought about chiefly by economic conditions resulting in a farmer and labor alliance against more powerful business interests.

This trend can be seen in such early works as Arthur Naftalin's Ph.D. Dissertation "A History of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota." (1948). Naftalin was a close supporter of Hubert H. Humphrey, and the timing of Naftalin's work coincided with a period of conflict within the DFL Party when the rural-agrarian wing of the party was re-aligning itself towards Democratic leadership under Humphrey. Naftalin's complimentary assessment of rural-agrarian protest may have reinforced this new alignment, or at least expressed the Humphrey wing's desire for an alliance within the party against the old Farmer-Laborite urban-labor faction. Naftalin's dissertation identified the Minnesota farmer-labor movement as the culmination of a long-term legacy of farm protest politics which could be traced back to the 1860s, beginning with Oliver H. Kelley and the Grange movement, but never reaching any significant success until the NPL-inspired approach was used in Minnesota starting in the early 1920s. Naftalin portrayed a party which succeeded in the 1920s-'30s chiefly because of its ability to effectively address economic issues which were being ignored by the other two major parties, and by uniting the disparate farmer-labor constituencies into a significant

coalition. Naftalin also viewed the party as emerging from within a changing economy which put Midwestern farmers at the mercy of economic interests beyond their control – from the railroads to local stores. According to Naftalin, the party was eventually done in by several factors: communist infiltration in 1935-36, the death of the charismatic leader Floyd B. Olson in 1936, the New Deal agrarian reforms of the Roosevelt Democrats on the national level, and the problematic leadership of Governor Elmer Benson – who lacked Olson’s charisma, adopted a militant political stance, and experienced serious political opposition both from the Republicans and from within his own party as well.⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that Naftalin’s dissertation was being written at the University of Minnesota just as the conflict within the newly-created DFL Party between Humphrey’s Democrats and Benson’s former Farmer-Laborites was reaching its climax. It is possible that Naftalin was seeking to claim the mantle of agrarian politics for the new DFL Party, and minimize the leadership influence of the old Farmer-Labor Party’s urban-labor wing. Naftalin’s history can be classified as being in the Progressive School of interpretation, and emphasizing the Farmer-Labor Party as being an outgrowth of long-term agrarian discontent.

Biographical works which identified and praised singular figures in the farmer-labor movement were common in the period of the 1940s to the early 1970s. These works include Martin Ross’s *Shipstead of Minnesota* (1940), George Mayer’s *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (1951), and James B. Shields’ *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson* (1971). Ross’s *Shipstead of Minnesota* is an undocumented work detailing the life of Henrik Shipstead, one of the Farmer-Labor Party’s major figures and long-time Senator. Ross’s work lionized Shipstead, and emphasized the idea that Shipstead had remained steady

⁴⁹Naftalin, “History of the Farmer-Labor Party,” 1-4, 342-345.

in his beliefs as the Farmer-Labor Party itself shifted to the left by the late 1930s. The work is often used for research on Shipstead even today, and is largely a hagiography of Shipstead and his political stands throughout his career up until 1940. Most of these works tend to fall into the Progressive School, since they emphasize the sustained and supposedly heroic stances of committed leaders driven by a reaction to existing economic injustices.⁵⁰

George H. Mayer's *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* was written a mere fifteen years after Olson's death, and was largely based on newspaper accounts and interviews with the subject's contemporaries. Mayer portrayed Olson as a figure whose youth was shaped by a variety of hard work experiences which molded him into a man with concerns for persons at the lowest levels of society. For Mayer, the success of the farmer-labor movement was chiefly attributable to Olson, who was a major figure as governor for much of the 1930s. Mayer saw the party as a vehicle to further Olson's ambitions and showcase his significant political talent. Mayer also characterized Olson as an astute politician first, and ideologue second. This political skill and calculation was critical to Olson's success, enabling him to balance a relatively radical base while appealing to mainstream voters. This is not to say that Mayer characterized Olson as being insincere. Olson truly believed in reform but was cautious in pursuing it, and was careful not to sacrifice his career for causes that had little chance of success. Thus, Mayer viewed Olson as being the catalyst of the movement's peak success, and the party itself as almost secondary to the personality of Olson's leadership. Mayer's work is perhaps the best example of a source which asserts that the Farmer-Labor Party's success was due mainly to the leadership of a charismatic figure (in this case, Floyd

⁵⁰Martin Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota* (Chicago: Packard and Company, 1940).

B. Olson).⁵¹ Mayer's work influenced later historians (such as Theodore Blegen and William Lass) who also identified Floyd B. Olson as being the central figure of the movement, and suggested that much of the party's success was due to Olson's skills and personality.

Likewise, this trend of praise for a singular leading figure can also be seen in James M. Shields' *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson*. Shields – a close ally of Benson in the late 1940s – presents a flattering picture of Elmer Benson as being a stubborn, incorruptible man of the people whose short temper and political inflexibility was warranted in the face of a significant and devious political opposition. Shields further portrayed Hubert Humphrey as an insincere politician whose concern for the common person was less admirable than Benson's solid commitment to reform. There are also several useful biographies of Hubert H. Humphrey (often credited as being the central figure in the Democratic Party to bring about the merger with the Farmer-Labor Party in 1944), the most compelling being Humphrey's own autobiography *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (1976). Humphrey himself characterized the Farmer-Labor Party as a movement split between earnest rural-agrarian reformers and an intractable, leftist urban-labor leadership faction too closely associated with communism for his tastes.⁵²

Thus, much of the initial historiography of the movement was written by agents or supporters of historical events and not by detached persons with considerable scholarly objectivity. One early exception to this trend would be Leslie Gene Rude's Ph.D. Dissertation "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement" (1962), which tended towards a methodical historical and rhetorical analysis. Rude himself (then a

⁵¹George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1951), 55-56; 119-124.

⁵²Hubert H. Humphrey (Norman Sherman, editor), *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976).

graduate student at the University of Illinois) apparently had no direct connection to the farmer-labor movement itself.⁵³

More recent biographies of Farmer-Labor Party figures reflect a more scholarly trend. Bruce L. Larson's *Lindbergh of Minnesota: A Political Biography* (1971) was a well-researched and comprehensive work documenting the life of the Farmer-Labor Party's early standard bearer and controversial 1918 gubernatorial candidate. The work is especially valuable in tracing Lindbergh's later political career with the advent of the Minnesota farmer-labor movement.⁵⁴ Steven J. Keillor's *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (1987) carefully documented the life of Hjalmar Petersen, the Farmer-Labor governor who succeeded Floyd B. Olson in 1936, and whose struggles to lead the party away from the influence of the other main party leader at that time (Elmer Benson) contributed to the party's factionalism in the late 1930s. Keillor's work represented a relatively objective, comprehensive and scholarly approach to one of the Farmer-Labor Party's key figures and refrained from lionizing the work's main figure.⁵⁵

These early biographies often portrayed their central figure as being a main ideologue or leader of the Farmer-Labor (or DFL) movement, and a main reason for the party's success. This is especially the case for the Ross, Mayer and Shields works – whose depictions of their respective Farmer-Labor figures leave little doubt that the authors fully support the idea that their subject was the party's "great leader." Larson's and Keillor's biographies avoid taking such an approach, and are well-researched scholarly works with a balanced analysis.

⁵³James M. Shields, *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson* (Minneapolis, MN: T. S. Denison & Company, 1971).

⁵⁴Bruce L. Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota: A Political Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971).

⁵⁵Steven J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987).

A shift in the historiography of the Minnesota farmer-labor movement occurred beginning in the late 1970s. Millard L. Gieske's extensive historical narrative *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (1979) represented a break from the earlier trend in that Gieske treated his subject matter with considerable objectivity and focused on the movement as a whole. Gieske also demonstrated a careful scholarly method in his political history, and seemed to have little personal agenda in writing his work. Gieske's work remains the most significant scholarly monograph on the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. The author portrayed a wide-ranging movement consisting of both extremists and liberal-moderates who often used radical rhetoric to attract votes, yet which often ran candidates that practiced political moderation and compromise. Gieske asserted that the party was a fragile coalition held together only by skillful and able figures such as Henrik Shipstead and Floyd B. Olson. The author also claimed that it was the economic dislocation of the Great Depression which gave the party new life starting with the 1930 election, highlighted by Floyd B. Olson's successful Farmer-Labor gubernatorial campaign. Eventually, the party would be undone by its factionalism, including the growing conflict caused by accusations of communist infiltration in the party. Gieske claimed that Olson's death in 1936 was not the sole reason for the party's demise, and that Elmer Benson was both more skilled and moderate as a politician than earlier historians had claimed. Gieske thus took a more measured approach to characterizing the movement and its leaders, and avoided a common school of thought advanced by some other historians (such as Mayer and Blegen) who had characterized the movement's success being due largely to the leadership of Floyd B. Olson and/or its demise being due largely to Benson's militant and incompetent leadership. It should be noted that Gieske's work is a political history of the movement

however, and as such focuses mainly on elections and does not delve extensively into party figure personalities, national political activity associated with the Farmer-Labor Party, or Minnesota's changing economic and social conditions in the 1920s and '30s. Even so, Gieske's work is also one of the first to chronicle some of the activity of the urban-labor WPNPL in the early 1920s.⁵⁶

Richard Valelly's *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (1989) provided a fragmented but fairly comprehensive analysis of much of the party's activity in the 1920s and '30s. Unlike Gieske's work – with its largely political focus – Valelly's work also examined similar movements in other states and regions (namely, Wisconsin and Saskatchewan). Valelly also traced connections between the Minnesota farmer-labor movement and some trends within the national economy and political shifts in the 1920s and '30s. Valelly ultimately concluded that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies and the subsequent shift in federal policy towards intervention on behalf of farmers and laborers essentially doomed state-level “radical” groups such as the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. The focus of Valelly's work ended before the demise of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1944 however, and therefore offered little insight on Farmer-Labor activities in the 1940s. Also, Valelly's work is not exclusively focused on the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, and as a result lacks a cohesive singular historical narrative approach. Like Gieske, Valelly also noted the activity of the WPNPL in the early 1920s as well.⁵⁷

The later focus of John Hayne's *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (1984) is also similar in its extensively scholarly approach (but more overt in its bias

⁵⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, vii-viii; 154-201, 263-268.

⁵⁷Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 135-138.

against the party's radical wing). Like Gieske, Haynes examined the Farmer-Labor Party as a whole. However, Haynes extended his focus well beyond the merger of 1944. Haynes' work is – by far – the most instructive and detailed account of the 1944 DFL Party merger and the subsequent struggle within the newly-formed DFL between the faction led by Hubert Humphrey and Elmer Benson's former Farmer-Laborites. Haynes' work was meticulously researched and documented, and provided details on this period of the early DFL found in no other comprehensive source. Haynes also went to great lengths to outline communist connections between some of the former Farmer-Laborites within the newly formed DFL. This approach supported his main contention that the merger between the two parties was a “dubious alliance” – meaning that the Democrats' merger with the Farmer-Labor Party in 1944 did not truly represent a merging of politically compatible entities. Haynes examined the merger and post-merger period in detail – although he often veered away from the history of the end of the Farmer-Labor Party, the merger, and the early years of the DFL in order to trace connections between former Farmer-Laborites and communists. It should also be noted that Haynes' work offers scant description of the party's activities during its peak of power, and little explanation for the party's rise. Even so, Haynes' work is one of the best descriptions of the post-merger DFL Party struggle of the late 1940s, and it fits into the Consensus School with its depiction of Farmer-Laborites as being radical and dubious political partners.⁵⁸

The farmer-labor movement has also been addressed in a number of general works on Minnesota history. From the 1960s to the end of the 20th century, two works stand out as

⁵⁸John Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: the Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

being notable sources. The first is Theodore C. Blegen's *Minnesota: A History of the State* (1963). Blegen's work is one of the most thorough and heavily researched comprehensive surveys on Minnesota history. Although Blegen notes the formation of the farmer-labor movement in the 1918 election and its successes in national senatorial elections in the early 1920s, he offers little description of the party in its early period. Instead – like Mayer – his focus is almost solely on the rise of the party within the state after the election of Floyd B. Olson to the governor's office in 1930. Blegen credited the onset of the Great Depression as being the decisive factor in the election of Olson. It was these economic trends – along with Olson's newfound rhetorical approach, which Blegen termed “nonpartisan” – that enabled Olson to be elected and the party to achieve significant influence at the state level. Blegen thus seemed to view the movement chiefly as the rise of a charismatic individual (Olson) who portrayed himself as a reasonable alternative during a time of great economic dislocation, and whose campaign approach and politics were a precursor to the New Deal of Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Blegen's characterizations of the Farmer-Labor Party's success emphasized Olson's charisma and the significant dislocation of the Great Depression as leading voters to the third party movement. As such, he minimized the concept of long-term class struggle, and his approach seems to fall more in the Consensus School.⁵⁹

In his comprehensive work, *Minnesota: A History* (1977, second edition 1998) William E. Lass made the case that Minnesota has a long-running tradition of what he termed “protest politics.” Like other historians, Lass traced the agrarian political protest movement back to Oliver Kelley and the Grange movement of the 1870s, through Ignatius Donnelly and the Populist Party, and tied a thread directly to the progressive era, highlighting such figures

⁵⁹Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 522-529.

as Governors John Johnson and Samuel Van Sant. Lass also asserted that Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party was initially a direct outgrowth of the NPL movement in North Dakota, and credited Arthur C. Townley as being the catalyst in creating the movement in Minnesota as well. Lass further contended that the dynamics of World War I, combined with isolationist sentiments among such chief figures as Charles Lindbergh, Sr., led to the rise of the movement in Minnesota by the early 1920s. Lass also acknowledged the success of the movement in incorporating labor elements into what had initially been an agrarian movement, and also identified the figures of Henrik Shipstead and Floyd B. Olson as being significant charismatic figures whose leadership and rhetoric aided the party in its electoral victories. Lass further characterized the movement's success chiefly as stemming from economic dissatisfaction among farmers in the state due to the significant drop in crop prices in the 1920s. He attributed the party's demise to several factors, including factionalism within the party itself, but more importantly to the shift of the Democratic Party towards a New Deal coalition which favored farm interests, and which had largely absorbed the Farmer-Labor platform by the mid-1930s. Like Blegen, the central focus of Lass's coverage is the surprise election of Henrik Shipstead and Magnus Johnson in 1922 and 1923, and the governorship of Floyd B. Olson. However, unlike Blegen, Lass emphasized a long-term series of agrarian protest movements that culminated in the farmer-labor movement (adhering more to the Progressive School view). He also noted specifically how control of the early DFL Party was an unresolved issue until Humphrey's triumph in 1948.⁶⁰

Both of these works often give the impression that the Farmer-Labor Party was merely the culmination of a series of agrarian protest movements in Minnesota and nearby

⁶⁰Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, 221-226, 229-231.

states. They also further imply that the party was simply the outgrowth of the state's NPL movement. For example, in Blegen's influential work, he mentions the activity of the NPL starting in the 1918 gubernatorial election, and largely implies that this farmer-labor coalition simply continued on to become a major party by 1922.⁶¹ Likewise, Lass describes in detail the origins and growth of the NPL under Townley within the state, and then continues to credit "the League" (and not the Farmer-Labor Party) with scoring an upset electoral victory in the 1922 election.⁶² Both of these passages imply that the NPL in Minnesota simply renamed itself. However, this dissertation will show that such characterizations are inaccurate, since the creation and continuing governance of the Farmer-Labor Party was led and organized in the early 1920s by the state's urban-labor leadership who formed their own third party organization which represented a separate initiative from the Townley-led NPL.

More recent works of general Minnesota history such as Norman K. Risjord's *A Popular History of Minnesota* (2005), Steven J. Keillor's *Shaping Minnesota's Identity: 150 Years of State History* (2008), and Annette Atkins' *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (2008) also briefly cover the Farmer-Labor Party and give the movement sufficient credit for being Minnesota's only real successful third party movement. Like Theodore C. Blegen's earlier analysis, these general histories often imply that the 1944 merger signaled a simple end to the farmer-labor movement, which – as this study will demonstrate – is not really the case, given the struggles for control of the DFL Party between 1946 and 1948. Even when this struggle is mentioned in general histories (such as in Lass's *Minnesota: A History*), it is often described as Humphrey's battle to "purge" communists or

⁶¹Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 476-478.

⁶²Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, 220-222.

radicals from within the early DFL. Such descriptions imply that these leftist former Farmer-Laborites were a dangerous minority within the party and/or uninvited guests to the DFL merger – which again, was not really the case.

Risjord examined the emergence of the farmer-labor movement from its origins in Townley's NPL in 1917. Risjord marked 1922 as the year of the emergence of the movement as a formal third party, but traced little of the party's history throughout the 1920s. Much of Risjord's focus is on Floyd B. Olson as governor in the 1930s, and the subsequent decline of the party under the leadership of Benson starting in 1936. The merger of the Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties in 1944 is almost exclusively attributed to the efforts of Hubert Humphrey.⁶³ Keillor covered the history of the Farmer-Labor Party in a fairly detailed manner for a general book of this length, and also managed to aptly describe many of the political undercurrents which enabled the party to rise. Keillor claimed that the Farmer-Labor Party's demise was uncertain – and that reforms sought by Hjalmar Petersen in his 1938 campaign may have been enough to rejuvenate the party.⁶⁴ Atkins' coverage of the farmer-labor movement in her work is minimal. She mentioned both Shipstead and Olson, but only discussed Olson (for just a single paragraph). More interestingly, she highlighted Hubert Humphrey's ambition and his actions in consolidating the DFL Party under his control by 1948.⁶⁵ In short, all of these more recent general histories seem to rely largely on the historiographical pattern established earlier by Blegen and Lass, which overlook the role of

⁶³Norman Risjord, *A Popular History of Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 320-367, 368-409.

⁶⁴Steven J. Keillor, *Shaping Minnesota's Identity* (Lakeville, MN: Pogo Press, 2008), 180-181.

⁶⁵Annette Atkins, *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 177-178, 220-229.

the WPNPL's urban-labor leadership in forming the party, and in endorsing the view that the 1944 merger was essentially the end of farmer-labor political activity.

Another related recent work is Rhoda R. Gilman's *Stand Up! The Story of Minnesota's Protest Tradition* (2012) which focused specifically on protest activity – political or otherwise – in Minnesota from the late 1800s up until the early 21st Century. Gilman included a chapter on “The Rise of the Farmer-Labor Party,” however, much of the material in the chapter focused on ancillary – though related – topics such as the Farmer's Holiday Association and the Great Depression in Minnesota. As a result, the descriptions of the party's history in this work are limited in detail. Gilman's work also suggests that the Farmer-Labor Party was the last of a series of Minnesota farmer protest movements which culminated in the 1930s (although she does note that the party was a result of the fusion of the NPL and the WPNPL). The rise of Hubert Humphrey in the 1940s and the 1944 DFL merger is mentioned only briefly in another chapter.⁶⁶

There are a number of scholarly articles relating to the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota in this period. Most of these scholarly articles were published in *Minnesota History*. These articles covered a wide variety of detailed subject matter, all of which related to the larger investigation of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota history. Although they are too numerous to list individually, some notable examples include pieces which profiled some of the more obscure Farmer-Labor figures such as John T. Bernard in Barbara Stuhler's “The One Man Who Voted ‘Nay’: The Story of John T. Bernard's Quarrel with American Foreign

⁶⁶Rhoda Gilman, *Stand Up! The Story of Minnesota's Protest Tradition* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 72-82, 97.

Policy, 1937-1939” (1972).⁶⁷ A similar examination is presented in Frederick L. Johnson’s “From Leavenworth to Congress: The Improbable Journey of Francis H. Shoemaker” (1989).⁶⁸ Also of interest were those pieces which focused on relevant topics such as anti-German sentiments in Minnesota in 1917-1919 as examined in La Vern J. Rippley’s “Conflict in the Classroom: Anti-Germanism in Minnesota Schools, 1917-19” (1981).⁶⁹

Other relevant secondary sources include examinations of movements, events or figures closely related to the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. These include two works authored by Carl H. Chrislock. The first is *The Progressive Era in Minnesota: 1899-1918* (1971) which provided a state-level overview of progressive politics in Minnesota.⁷⁰ The second is *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I* (1991) which examined the Republican-led committee that ensured loyalty in Minnesota in 1917-1918, and whose heavy-handed tactics repressed the fledgling NPL movement and may have given rise to opposition politics that were the seeds of the Farmer-Labor Party.⁷¹ Another example of a source in this category is G. Theodore Mitau’s *Politics in Minnesota* (1960), which traced major political trends and shifts in the state’s history in the 20th century through the 1950s.⁷²

These existing sources on the history of the Minnesota farmer-labor movement typically emphasized several concepts. The first is that the movement was chiefly the

⁶⁷Barbara Stuhler, “The One Man Who Voted ‘Nay’: The Story of John T. Bernard's Quarrel with American Foreign Policy, 1937-1939,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Fall, 1972), 82-92.

⁶⁸Frederick L. Johnson, “From Leavenworth to Congress: The Improbable Journey of Francis H. Shoemaker,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (Spring, 1989), 166-177.

⁶⁹La Vern J. Rippley, “Conflict in the Classroom: Anti-Germanism in Minnesota Schools, 1917-19,” *Minnesota History*, Spring 1981, 171-183.

⁷⁰Carl H. Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota: 1899-1918* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1971).

⁷¹Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991).

⁷²G. Theodore Mitau, *Politics in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960).

culmination of a long-term agrarian protest trend which was seen both in Minnesota and many other predominantly agricultural states in the region from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. A main contention of this viewpoint is that the movement was essentially a farmer-led political entity, and chiefly the outgrowth of the NPL movement under Townley. The second concept is that the movement was largely successful due to the leadership of a key figure whose political charisma made third party politics appealing to Minnesota voters in this period. Accounts differ on which of these figures was the most influential. However, Floyd B. Olson, Elmer Benson, or Henrik Shipstead are oft-mentioned choices. A main contention of this point of view is that individual leadership – and not necessarily an overarching ideology or a critical mass of support for an alternative political approach – explains the movement’s success. A third concept that is often portrayed is that – after the Farmer-Labor Party’s decline in the late 1930s and its merger with the Democrats in 1944 – the movement swiftly ended, and its political aims were quickly and successfully absorbed by the newly created DFL Party.

This study is limited to the scope of the Farmer-Labor Party within Minnesota in the period of 1918 to 1948, with a specific emphasis on the party’s campaigns, its political figures, its organizational structure, and the party’s agenda during this period. This study also focuses on the Farmer-Labor Party as a uniquely successful third party movement and seeks to explain the reasons for its rise and eventual demise. Although there were farmer-labor movements present in other states during the 1920s-‘30s, the focus of this study is on the Farmer-Labor political party movement that developed specifically within the State of Minnesota in the period in question. This study is also limited in its scope to the connection between national issues and the activities of the party and its figures, and includes an

emphasis on Senators and Representatives of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party elected to Congress. The study also traces some of the connections between the national Democrats of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration and the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota during the 1930s and 1940s as well. This study is a chronology of the party as a political movement, an analysis of the central figures of the party and its electoral activity in the period from 1918 to 1942, an examination of its merger with the Democrats in 1944 and the subsequent battle for control of this merged DFL Party, and an interpretative summary of the movement as a whole with an examination of its unique success and longevity as a third party movement.

It is the contention of this study that the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota between 1918 and 1948 went through several phases of development and represented a broad and long-term political movement with multiple causes both in its rise to power and in its decline. The party served the role of acting as a major party in the 1920s and '30s, and effectively functioned as the second major party in a *de facto* state two-party system. This study refutes the standard neo-Progressive School interpretation that the movement was brought about simply by economic inequities alone, but instead emerged on account of multiple converging causes, some of which were economic in nature, but some which also related to social, political, ideological and organizational factors. It is also the contention of this study that the state party movement was not merely the last phase of the “agrarian protest” tradition or the direct outgrowth of the NPL movement, but was instead a state-level organizational initiative led by a political leadership group anchored in the Twin Cities’ urban-labor base. This leadership group built on Townley’s initial success to create a new grassroots level political entity which eventually became the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. These efforts were led chiefly by the urban-labor side of the farmer-labor coalition (largely, former Minnesota labor

and socialist leaders), whose success at fusing the farmer and labor elements led to achieving a critical mass of electoral support in the 1920s and '30s. Furthermore, this study contends that the movement was effectively led – not by a single ambitious or charismatic individual – but instead by a number of competing leading figures over time (each of whom reflected varying aspects of the party's ideology, as well as reflecting the competing divisions within the party). Each of these figures also echoed the angry rhetoric of discontent which became a common rallying point for their constituents. This successive series of competing leaders initially broadened the movement and made its ideology a unifying factor, and helped to keep the party's rural-agrarian members aligned with its urban-labor wing for a period of time. However, in the long run, this multiple leadership model with its competing political viewpoints created factionalism based on the characteristically uncompromising nature of Farmer-Labor rhetoric. Thus, the movement was neither simply a vehicle for a single charismatic leader (such as Floyd B. Olson) nor was it a fringe third party movement – but was instead a successful third party movement with a number of notable leading figures and a well-developed ideology. The party succeeded as a political entity as long as it was able to maintain its broad farmer-labor coalition, and as long as the major issues it championed remained unaddressed by the other parties. Last, it is the contention of this study that farmer-labor political activity did not disappear after the merger with the Democrats in 1944, but was instead transferred to the DFL Party, where former Farmer-Labor figures sought (and temporarily obtained) control of the DFL Party until finally being defeated by liberal Democrats under the leadership of Hubert H. Humphrey in 1948. This study explains and describes a comprehensive history of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party based on these concepts.

The primary source material used in the research for this dissertation is largely archival material housed in a number of collections, including state and local historical societies, libraries, and other collections. These materials include the archival papers of a number of central figures in the movement (including Charles Lindbergh, Sr., Henrik Shipstead, Floyd B. Olson, Hjalmar Petersen, Elmer A. Benson, and Hubert H. Humphrey, and others). Other primary sources used include government documents, Farmer-Labor Party (and Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party) materials (including campaign speech texts and other party-generated content), local and national newspapers, and other publications. The scope of the primary materials is necessarily limited, and because the period of study in question is now about 70-100 years old, oral history sources are largely limited to transcript texts or audio recordings conducted earlier.

No historical movement or trend begins in a vacuum. In the case of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, at least some of its origins can be traced to the economic conditions of farmers in the northern prairie regions in the early 1900s. These conditions in turn gave rise to the Nonpartisan League movement in North Dakota starting in 1915. It is there where we begin our history.

CHAPTER II

THE PRAIRIE FIRE SPREADS: 1915-1918

Farm issues continued to be at the forefront of politics in many agricultural states during the 1910s, including Minnesota and the Dakotas. Although several concerted attempts at agricultural reform had been attempted at both the state and national levels since the 1890s, farmers still suffered from many of the same circumstances that had ignited the rise of the Populists some time earlier. These issues related to prevailing economic trends, existing laws which favored laissez-faire capitalism (including a lack of significant regulatory entities), and the continued *de facto* monopoly of many railroads and agribusiness entities in the various regions that they served. The high cost of farm mechanization, a relatively high tax burden for land ownership and improvement, high rates of interest for farmers, and a fluctuating national market for crop prices (often stagnant or even deflationary) also continued to play a negative role in American agrarian prosperity.

The Progressive Roots of the Nonpartisan League Movement

The progressive reforms of the early 1900s would have an effect on agrarian politics starting in the 1910s. Most significant of these was the development of the party direct primary system, which allowed ordinary citizens the opportunity to vote directly for candidates for party nominations. These primary systems were implemented in many states in this period (including North Dakota and Minnesota). Thus, by the early 1910s, for the first

time in American history, movements or candidates with wide popular support now had the opportunity to infiltrate the major parties and nominate candidates sympathetic to their views – regardless of the preferences of party bosses or the party machine system.¹

Progressive sentiments were significant in many north-central agricultural states, including Wisconsin (with its governor – and later Senator – Robert La Follette often serving as a national leader of progressive reforms). Progressivism also took root in Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. In addition to the passage of primary laws in these states, in 1913, the Seventeenth Amendment was ratified by a majority of states and became federal law. This amendment provided for the direct election of Senators by the people via a popular vote (with the exception of women, who had still not been granted universal suffrage). Until that time, the Constitution had specified that Senators were to be elected or appointed by members of state legislatures. Although some states had been moving towards the direct Senate election model earlier, the Seventeenth Amendment made the practice universal. Together, these two reforms would fuel both the Nonpartisan League (NPL) movement in North Dakota starting in 1915, and later the farmer-labor movement in Minnesota.²

Other progressive reforms specifically intended for the rural setting were far less successful in transforming the agrarian sector, most notably the Country Life movement. The Country Life movement reached its peak of activity in the years before World War I. As noted earlier in Chapter One, this movement was an offshoot of the wider progressive movement and sought to revitalize rural and small town regions through effective education

¹Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 216.

²Carl H. Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota: 1899-1918* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1971), 17, 49; see also Alan Ware, *The American Direct Primary: Party Institutionalization and Transformation in the North* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 117-123.

and small-scale modernization and industrialization. Its main aim was to create a new level of prosperity in rural regions through innovations in farming, while leaving the small town and family farm social structure in place. Liberty Hyde Bailey's *The Country-Life Movement in the United States* (1911) became a primer for the movement. Bailey contended that the growth of urban centers had led to decline in rural areas, and that – unless action was taken – America's agricultural regions would suffer irreversible decline. The movement was largely a failure and made few significant inroads – although the trend of the increasing mechanization of agriculture (and its continued integration into national markets) continued.³

Other changes from the early 1900s to 1915 helped to lay the groundwork for a new agrarian political movement. The Equity Cooperative Exchange was created in 1902. This was a national effort to create holding or storage facilities as a means to either stabilize or increase crop prices. It later merged with several small private grain marketing companies, and by 1912 it was doing business in North Dakota. The Equity group set a precedent for some of the Nonpartisan League's aims in North Dakota when it successfully got a referendum on the ballot in 1912 (and again in 1914) that sought to establish the right of the state to erect grain storage facilities (not dissimilar to earlier efforts by Populists of the Texas Cooperative). Neither of these referenda attempts was successful. However, it did put the issue forward for consideration for much of North Dakota's farming population, and set a precedent for the idea of state intervention in the realm of agricultural business. The

³Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911), passim; see also McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 106-107 and David Danbom, *Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1979), 138.

organization also attracted wide attention: the 1915 Equity convention was attended by Robert La Follette of Wisconsin and Representative Charles A. Lindbergh of Minnesota.⁴

The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota

There seems to be little question that the success of the Nonpartisan League (NPL) movement starting in 1915 in North Dakota was due chiefly to one man's vision and efforts. That man was Arthur C. Townley, who not only conceived of the movement, but also served as its chief organizer, president, and prominent orator during its formative and most influential years. Townley began these efforts in 1915 at the age of 35, but not before he had compiled a varied professional background. Townley had been raised in Brown's Valley, Minnesota – near the point at which the borders of Minnesota, South Dakota and North Dakota converge. He graduated from high school further east, in the town of Alexandria, Minnesota. Townley had taught high school for a couple of years around the turn of the century before partnering with his brother to develop farming land further to the west. Together, they developed plots in western North Dakota and then Colorado, raising wheat and then flax. By early 1912, Townley had returned to North Dakota and had taken over the entire business himself. Between 1907 and 1912 he was so successful at flax production that he became known as the “flax king of North Dakota.” However, Townley's success was not to last. In the harvest of 1912, he faced a catastrophic loss due to an early frost and a sharp drop in flax prices. His recent ambitious expansion of flax production in that season left him

⁴Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 1-10.

vulnerable with highly overextended credit. By the end of the year, he had gone bankrupt from over \$80,000 in debt.⁵

Although Townley's career as a cash crop farmer was over, his career as a political speaker and organizer was just beginning. He was apparently familiar with some of the elements of socialism, and this factor – in combination with his own recent financial collapse – was enough to attract him to an affiliation with the Socialist Party of North Dakota. In 1914, he became the main organizer for a branch (or “department”) within the state's party to canvass farmers across the state. The Socialist Party in North Dakota had recently enjoyed some minor electoral successes in several local elections, and it hoped to broaden its base by appealing directly to farmers – who at that time comprised roughly 70% of the state's population. Townley's mission was to encourage farmers to support the agricultural planks of the party. Townley was supplied with a Ford Model T and some political literature, and was given the task to canvass the state. His department's main goal was to align farmer votes towards the socialist platform without attempting to directly recruit them as members of the party (which apparently many farmers considered too radical an association).⁶

Townley enjoyed swift and significant success in his new venture. Much of this was due to his energetic and persuasive speaking style and his own experiences as a farmer (which no doubt shored up his credibility with other farmers). Townley began his campaign in a humble fashion – at first riding a bicycle – and even walking and hitchhiking – before he was finally granted the use of an automobile.⁷ Eventually, four other organizers were added

⁵Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 22-23.

⁶Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 24.

⁷Walter Quigley, "Out Where the West Begins," typed manuscript, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN, 7.

to Townley's branch. Almost all of the main elements of Townley's later NPL campaign approach in 1915-16 were developed during his time working for the Socialist Party. This included canvassing the state via automobile, making personal appearances and giving speeches on farm policies, distributing political literature, and asking farmers to make a small contribution in exchange for membership in a state-wide group. Townley himself became a Socialist candidate for the state Senate in the 1914 elections, but was not elected. Even though Townley's efforts bore immediate fruit, the party did not approve of these trends. Despite Townley's success in recruiting farmers (or perhaps because of it – fearing that the party might be overwhelmed by an outside faction), the Socialist Party leaders in North Dakota decided to discontinue Townley's department in January 1915.⁸

However, by this time, Townley had perfected his canvassing approach and saw its potential for organizing farmers into a political force. The party's rejection of his efforts led him to conclude that – despite its platform – the Socialist Party was just as conservative in its own way as the other major parties (and was therefore of little use to the average farmer). He decided instead to build his own agrarian political organization. In January 1915, he met with A. W. Bowen (the former Socialist candidate for governor) in Minot, North Dakota. Townley explained his idea of using his canvassing approach as a means to organize farmers to create a farm lobby group that would infiltrate the Republican Party in North Dakota through the open primaries. Bowen agreed to serve as Townley's lieutenant. Building on a network of persons sympathetic to his aims, Townley also approached Fred B. Wood – a farmer and Equity figure from Deering, North Dakota – in February 1915. However, it was Wood's son

⁸James Weinstein, *The Long Detour: The History and Future of the American Left* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Publishing, 2003), 65; see also Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 24-25.

Howard who expressed the most enthusiasm for Townley's plan. Townley and Howard Wood sat down at a kitchen table in the Wood farmhouse one February evening and outlined the overall mission, structure and platform of new organization – the Nonpartisan League. The younger Wood was so excited about the plan, that he and Townley began their mission the next day – traveling by bobsled to several local farmer neighbors and pitching the concept of the League to them. Townley met with immediate success – almost every farmer that he met in the first few days of his campaign signed on. It was the beginning of the Nonpartisan League's rise to power in North Dakota.⁹

Townley continued these efforts and the League started to enjoy a rapid growth in membership. His successful approach was based on several factors. He and his organizers would canvass the state in person, often using automobile transportation. Many of his early organizers were either former members of his branch within the Socialist Party, or others from the party who saw the movement's potential and acceded to Townley's leadership. These NPL organizers would speak to small groups of farmers, outline the platform and aims of the NPL, and ask the farmers only for their political support and membership in the League. Townley and his organizers charged yearly membership dues (\$6 a year), and promised to provide members with a league publication in the near future. Post-dated checks (payable after the harvest) were also accepted – and provided a means of extending credit to farmers eager to join but who were short on cash. This money provided the League with its base funding, but Townley also believed that farmers were more likely to “stick” with the League and its agenda if they had a vested interest in it (the phrase “We'll Stick” became a

⁹Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 25, 367. There seems little reason to doubt this quaint account of the NPL's humble origins. This story was presented by Morlan after fact-checking the circumstances of this initial meeting with both Townley and Howard Wood in interviews and correspondence conducted in 1948.

popular league slogan). The NPL pitch was mainly confined to agricultural economic matters, and specifically focused on proposed political solutions to the problems that much of the farming population was facing. Among these main planks were: state ownership of most agricultural goods storage facilities (elevators, cold storage plants, packing houses, and even flour mills); state inspection of grain dockage (a major issue for farmers who felt that these measures were usually performed unfairly by the agribusiness entities); exemption of farm improvements from increased taxation (to encourage farm productivity without paying extra taxes); state hail insurance based on acreage; and rural credit banks to be operated at cost for the benefit of farmers.¹⁰



Figure 1. Arthur Charles Townley in about 1920. Townley made his persuasive appeals directly to farmers – both in person through speaking appearances (which were by all accounts, dynamic) and through the NPL’s main organ *The Nonpartisan Leader*, which was published starting in 1915. *Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch and reprinted from Robert L. Morlan’s Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922.*

Townley’s success was instant, and the League’s membership – a “political prairie fire” – grew quickly throughout 1915. At first, Townley and his associates attempted to keep their recruiting efforts quiet, in an attempt to limit potential opposition. However, it was not long before the League’s activities attained notice in the state. Small town newspapers soon questioned the League and its methods, often suggesting that it was a ruse designed to bilk farmers out of their hard-earned money. They pointed to the NPL’s non-existent publication

¹⁰Herbert Earle Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 60. Note that the overwhelming majority of the flour mills which served North Dakota wheat farmers were located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Thus, “state ownership” in this case presented the league with an issue that crossed state borders (and was at least one reason for the NPL’s expansion into Minnesota and elsewhere after 1915).

as evidence. In response, in August 1915 the NPL began publishing the *Nonpartisan Leader* (four months ahead of its intended start) and distributing it to members by mail. In the League's first year, many members even proudly called themselves "six dollar suckers" as a retort to newspaper reports that they had been swindled by the NPL. By September, the League had 18,000 members, and the *Leader* quickly became the most widely distributed periodical in North Dakota. By the end of the year, the League had over 26,000 members.¹¹

The Nonpartisan Leader became the NPL's main method of mass communication to its member audience from 1915 to 1921. It was typically published on a weekly basis, and contained news relating to agrarian politics with a heavy bias favoring NPL positions. It also contained political cartoons, an editorial section, and a generous amount of advertising. The illustrations in *The Nonpartisan Leader* were very consistent in their depiction of farmers and the villains who bedeviled them. The archetypal farmer character was often portrayed as a lean, humbly-dressed, white-bearded man with a stern and determined countenance (a sort of agrarian "Uncle Sam" figure) alternately enduring or fending off the exploitations of such scoundrels as "Middle Men," "Profiteers," "Old Guard," or "Big Biz" – characters often portrayed as portly men in fancy clothing.¹²

¹¹Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 27, 35; see also Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League*, 64-65.

¹²There are many examples of this in the *The Nonpartisan Leader* in issues dating from 1917 and 1918, including: April 19, 1917; December 24, 1917, January 24, 1918, and June 10, 1918.

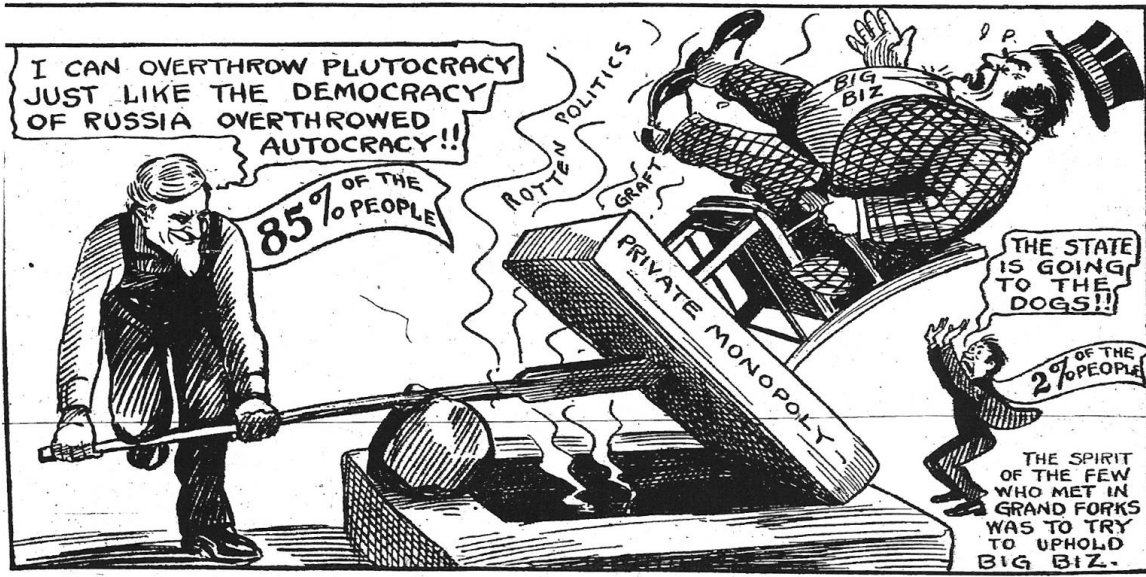


Figure 2. A political cartoon reprinted from *The Nonpartisan Leader* (April 19, 1917). The illustration depicts an honest farmer (representing “85% of the people”) overthrowing “Private Monopoly” – a privileged position upon which the portly “Big Biz” rests. Illustrations like this were frequently presented in *The Nonpartisan Leader* as a means to both emphasize the exploitation of farmers and their ability to fight perceived economic injustice through collective action under the auspices of the NPL. Note also that the farmer is making a favorable reference to the recent “February Revolution” in Russia which overthrew the czar and instituted a democratic provisional government there.

The Nonpartisan League thus began as a grassroots organizational effort with a very specific focus on agrarian political issues. The term “nonpartisan” referred to the fact that the League would accept members who professed any party affiliation (or none at all). Also, the League itself specifically had no intention to form its own party, but would instead constitute a lobby that would support candidates for office of either (actually any) party who endorsed its platform and who were in turn endorsed by the League’s leadership. This political support would come in the form of member votes in primary elections and party caucuses. An

excerpt from *The Nonpartisan Leader* dated January 6, 1916, provides a fuller explanation of the NPL's concept of its "nonpartisan" activity:

The mission of the League is to unite the farmers of this state – regardless of past party affiliations – into an organization that will stand apart from every political party, every political machine and free from every political boss and put men in office that will legislate in the interests of the members of that organization.¹³

The NPL would eventually attain great success in its efforts to determine major party nominations through its members' votes in the primaries. In 1916, the NPL was able to influence the primary campaigns substantially and NPL candidates won almost all of the major party nominations.¹⁴ Then in the 1916 general election, NPL candidates won most of their races and took control of the North Dakota Governor's office, most of the other state executive offices, and the state House of Representatives.¹⁵ In 1917, an NPL-backed candidate, John Baer, was elected to Congress in an off-year election.¹⁶ Starting in early 1917, the NPL would start to enact much of its program in North Dakota. At about the same time, the League started its expansion across state lines, and Minnesota was one of the first states chosen for this purpose.¹⁷

The Political Career of Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr.

Well before the political prairie fire of the NPL began to spread into Minnesota, other figures within the state had successfully challenged the existing "Old Guard" party system.

¹³"It Has All Come To Pass," *The Nonpartisan Leader*, January 6, 1916, 7.

¹⁴"Nonpartisan League Wins Entire State Ticket of Candidates Nominated" *The Daily People's Press*, July 1, 1916.

¹⁵"North Dakota Sways From One To Other" *The Mantorville Express*, November 10, 1916, 3.

¹⁶Baer was the illustrator for *The Nonpartisan Leader*, and was one of the most well-known names in North Dakota at the time because of his art work in that publication – see Robert G. Boatright, *Congressional Primary Elections* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 51.

¹⁷Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 126.

One the most prominent of these was Charles August Lindbergh, Sr. (father of the famous trans-Atlantic aviator). Lindbergh was the son of Swedish immigrants who had homesteaded the Minnesota prairie near Melrose (about 35 miles east of Alexandria). Lindbergh graduated with a degree in law from the University of Michigan and later established himself as a farmer and prominent lawyer near Little Falls, Minnesota, by the late 1800s. After a prosperous early career (and a second marriage which included the birth of his son, Charles, Jr. in 1902), Lindbergh decided to run for Congress in Minnesota's Sixth District in 1906. He successfully challenged the Republican incumbent by exploiting an existing split within the party. Lindbergh won the primary race in September of 1906, and – given the fact that the Republican Party candidates almost always won elections in this district – his victory in the general election in November was assured. In early 1907, Lindbergh headed to Washington, D.C., to take his seat in the House of Representatives. He would hold the seat until early 1917.¹⁸

Once in Congress, Lindbergh showed a consistent and passionate outlook which tended to favor regular farmers' and laborers' interests. He often disdained the influence of banks, corporations, and the "monied interest." In his early years in Congress, Lindbergh attached himself to President Theodore Roosevelt's wing of the Republican Party, which entailed support for government intervention in "trustbusting" and generally progressive stances on many issues. Lindbergh was also part of a Midwestern contingent in the House known as the "insurgents" who opposed the Republican Speaker of the House (Joseph Cannon) and later many of the policies of President Taft (who succeeded Roosevelt in 1909).

¹⁸Bruce L. Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota: A Political Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), 42-54.

Like many of his Midwestern colleagues, Lindbergh often spoke out in favor of agrarian interests and criticized the power of the trusts. His frequent targets included the railroads and the large banks, whom he often depicted as benefitting unfairly from their position of power (although he took pains to acknowledge that every business had the right to earn a profit, and often championed the free enterprise of small business). In 1910, he was publicly profiled by several prominent newspapers as a leading Republican “insurgent” and he described himself with this label because he refused to follow the congressional Republican leadership of Speaker Cannon and Senator Nelson Aldrich. He also became an outspoken advocate of the party’s progressive wing and sought to become a leader of reform within the Republican Party – even to the point of disdaining the idea of forming a third party as an alternative. At a public forum in Duluth in October 1910, Lindbergh stated: “It is better to take an organized party, like the Republican party, [sic] and rehabilitate it to make it up-to-date, than to form a new party.”¹⁹ At about the same time, he began his foray into the publishing industry as a means of distributing his own political literature, with the specific intent to distribute a periodical focusing on “the problems of labor interest, the relation of government to daily life and farming interests.”²⁰ Although it would be some time before he would actually publish this periodical, Lindbergh’s literary ambitions in this regard were in place well before the rise of the NPL movement in North Dakota.

During 1911-1912, the Republican insurgents looked to the coming presidential election as a means to reinstate a more progressive executive in the White House. Lindbergh initially supported Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette for the Republican nomination.

¹⁹“Gray Challenges Eberhart,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 27, 1910, 6; see also Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 76-88.

²⁰“Mr. Lindbergh Becomes Editor,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 14, 1910, 17.

However, Theodore Roosevelt's entry into the Republican presidential primary caused factionalism among the party's progressives. Roosevelt immediately eclipsed La Follette as the progressive candidate in the race against Taft. In the end, Taft managed to retain the party's nomination by barring many of Roosevelt's delegates from voting at the convention, including some from Minnesota. Lindbergh had expressed his support for a Roosevelt campaign in earlier discussions with the former president. However, Lindbergh was unwilling to leave his own party in order to support an independent Roosevelt campaign. Although he was dissatisfied with the convention's results, Lindbergh remained within the Republican Party. Roosevelt however, did not, responding with his "Bull Moose" Progressive third party campaign in the 1912 general election. Roosevelt's campaign effectively split the national Republican vote and put the Democratic presidential candidate, Woodrow Wilson, in the White House instead.²¹

During his time as a congressional Representative, Lindbergh's published rhetorical themes often reflected Jeffersonian ideals and aspects of both Populism and the contemporary progressive reformist trends. Lindbergh was an acerbic critic of the corrupting power of trusts both within the economy and in politics. He often decried the inequity of wealth in the country and the prevailing trends which favored corporate interests at the expense of the "producers" (often farmers) and the common American consumer. He regularly called for federal government intervention on several economic fronts to distribute wealth more equally, and he was sympathetic to many of the ideas represented by the NPL. Although he was not the only Republican "insurgent" nor was he the most radical politician

²¹Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era: 1910-1917* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1954), 14-24; see also Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 141-144.

in Congress, he was a high profile congressional Representative from a Midwestern rural district with very outspoken (even extreme) views, and he achieved a degree of national recognition (or notoriety) based on the nature of his rhetoric.²²

Overall, Lindbergh's stances were outspoken, relatively extreme, and – at least by modern standards – straddled a mixture of both conservative and leftist/populist principles. He often supported organized labor in its causes, and noted that humanity was in danger of becoming “industrial slaves” – though he himself had little official connection to organized labor. He openly embraced the concept of socialism, but declared that humanity was not evolved enough to make it work. In the meantime, he believed that government intervention was needed to prevent corporate abuse and halt the inequitable distribution of wealth. He portrayed himself as the champion of the common man – farmer, laborer and townsman, yet often subscribed to reactionary nativist views – which included overt anti-Catholic sentiments – in which he saw a vast conspiracy in the Catholic Church in America, and even made these accusations publicly in Congress.²³

Between 1913 and 1917, Lindbergh's activity in Congress was most notable for two of his major stances. The first was his vociferous opposition to the creation of the Federal Reserve Bank in 1913. A major recurring theme of Lindbergh's rhetoric was that the common producer – i.e., farmers – were being systematically exploited by trusts and monied interests which unfairly earned a profit off of the risk and labor of millions of ordinary Americans. To Lindbergh, the proposed Federal Reserve Bank would entrench this system and continue to perpetrate what he considered to be an exploitative situation. Lindbergh was

²²Charles A. Lindbergh, *Banking and Currency and the Money Trust* (Washington, D.C.: National Capital Press, Inc., 1913), passim; see also Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 107-113.

²³Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 206-208.

also concerned about the power of the proposed Federal Reserve Bank as being able to control or dictate policy and interest rates to smaller state and local banks – which he often championed and identified as being closer to agrarian interests. Although Lindbergh initially strongly opposed the Federal Reserve bill, and made several unsuccessful attempts to amend it, he ended up voting for it in the end in September 1913. Apparently he believed that – though the bill was flawed – it somehow represented an improvement over the existing banking system, and that he might still have a chance to amend it in a later draft. This did not happen however, and by December 1913 Lindbergh was once again denouncing the act, and would continue to do so until the end of his tenure in Congress.²⁴ One of Lindbergh’s last acts as a Representative in early 1917 was to introduce articles of “impeachment” against the Federal Reserve system in Congress, accusing it of colluding with a number of prominent national banks in creating a private-public money trust whose purpose was to defraud the American monetary system. Lindbergh’s attempt to impeach and roll back the Federal Reserve Bank went nowhere – nor did he expect that it would. His actions were taken largely as a symbolic act of defiance during his final lame-duck term to make his on stand on the issue clear.²⁵

The second of Lindbergh’s notable stances in this period was his opposition to America’s entry into the Great War (or World War I). Lindbergh publicly stated his opposition to American entry into the war early, starting in September 1914. Later, he spoke out against the war again when Congress was considering raising taxes internally to make up for an external tax revenue shortfall that had been caused by wartime conditions in Europe.

²⁴Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 161-165.

²⁵Lindbergh’s own letters from early 1917 attest to this, Lindbergh Family Papers, Box 16, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Lindbergh Papers]; see also Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 208-209.

Lindbergh's opposition to the war was related to his views that common Americans were constantly being manipulated and cheated by large corporate entities. He contended that the war itself was a machination designed by the monied interests and armaments industry to generate profits while sacrificing American lives for a distant cause in which Americans should not be involved. At one point before American entry into the war, Lindbergh even proposed the idea that war production industries should be banned from making a profit. Later, just before the Wilson Administration asked for a declaration of war against Germany in April 1917, Lindbergh attempted to publish a book denouncing the concept of American intervention titled *Why Is Your Country at War and What Happens To You After the War?* The work alleged that America was being pushed into the Great War by "Wall Street" and the monied interests to generate business and to secure American loans that had been made to Britain and France. Before the work could be published however, the plates were seized from the printer's office in Washington, D.C. The manuscript survived and was later published after being edited to leave no doubt that Lindbergh fully supported the American war effort.²⁶

Figure 3. Charles August Lindbergh was a farmer, lawyer and Republican "insurgent" politician from Little Falls, Minnesota. Lindbergh was first elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in the Sixth District in 1906, and held that seat until early 1917. Later, he was the Farmer-Labor coalition's choice for governor during the Republican primary in 1918. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



²⁶"Lindbergh Writes Two New Books – One Book Has Just Come Out of Press. Its Title Is: Why Is Your Country At War?" advertisement circular, Lindbergh Papers, Box 16; see also Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 179-190.

Before these controversies had developed fully, Lindbergh had been studying his options for advancing his political career. He made a decision in 1915 not to seek re-election for his own Sixth District House seat. Apparently, Lindbergh was aiming for a higher office with greater influence, and had determined that ten years in the House was enough.²⁷ He initially focused on the Minnesota governor's race, going so far as to announce his intention to run in 1915. However, the sudden death of the sitting governor – Winfield Scott Hammond, a Democrat – elevated the Republican lieutenant governor, Joseph A. A. Burnquist, to the governor's office.²⁸ Lindbergh was then confronted with the more delicate task of running against a fellow Republican and an incumbent. After consulting with Burnquist (whom he declared at the time to be largely in agreement with his own views), Lindbergh publicly withdrew from pursuing the governor's office in late 1915.²⁹

Seeing few options for his political advancement, in early 1916 Lindbergh made the decision to run for the Senate instead. The 1916 election was the first openly contested Senate election in Minnesota history (the Seventeenth Amendment providing for the direct election of Senators having been passed only recently). The incumbent Senator, Republican Moses Clapp, was a moderate progressive, and there seemed to be little rivalry between the two men in Washington, D.C. Even so, Lindbergh apparently made the decision that his record and appeal to the electorate would favor him in the primary, and that it was time for him to make his move to the Senate or face the end of his political career. It was anticipated

²⁷He had also dropped in his percentage of votes in the 1914 election – winning by only a plurality for the first time in his congressional campaigns – and he may have sensed that he would not win another congressional election in 1916; see Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 178.

²⁸In this period of time, elections in Minnesota for the governor's office were every two years, and the lieutenant governor's office was granted to the gubernatorial candidate with the second highest number of votes – typically a member of the opposition party. Hammond's death allowed the office to come under the control of the Republicans without an election and Burnquist would be governor of Minnesota until early 1921.

²⁹Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 191.

that the primary would be a close two-way race between Lindbergh and Clapp. Instead, the Republican field was crowded with four viable candidates – each with their own base of support within the party. Thus, Lindbergh was unable to portray himself as the lone opposition to the established party figure, and could not repeat the success of his 1906 campaign in attempting to unseat an incumbent Republican. Worse, of the four major candidates for the Republican nomination for the Senate, Lindbergh came in last in the primary. In the end, the nomination was won – not by Clapp – but by St. Paul lawyer Frank B. Kellogg, who in turn won the general election and became the Republican Senator from Minnesota until his defeat at the polls six years later in 1922 [see Chapter Three].³⁰

In early 1917, Lindbergh served out the remainder of his House term in Washington, D.C. It was also at this time that his book which railed against American intervention in the war was seized by government agents. There was a brief suggestion that he would be appointed to the War Commission and continue working in Washington, D.C. However, this proposed appointment was attacked by his opponents and it became politically unfeasible for him to be offered the position.³¹ Lindbergh then returned home and began to seek new opportunities for his political ambitions. As it turned out, he did not have to wait very long. Townley's NPL movement was gaining steam in Minnesota just as Lindbergh returned from Washington, D.C., and the movement's need for sympathetic, visible political figures would provide Lindbergh with new opportunities.

³⁰Theodore Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1975), 468; see also Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 192-197. Note that Blegen mistakenly refers to the 1916 Republican Senate primary as a “three-cornered” race.

³¹Lindbergh authored several letters during this period stating his willingness to serve, and then later claimed that such an appointment had been blocked by his political opponents, Lindbergh Papers, Box 16.

The Emergence of the Farmer-Labor Coalition in Minnesota

Even as Townley's political "prairie fire" was expanding and spreading out from North Dakota, other entities were moving towards forming a new political coalition in Minnesota as well. These included a number of leaders within Minnesota (some of whom were established political figures like Lindbergh). However, it also included a coalescence of organized labor groups, who – up until 1917 – had remained largely separate from each other both in terms of their organization and their political lobbying. Although the NPL was well prepared to enroll farmers into its program, approaching and incorporating labor elements was outside of its experience. Yet, as Townley himself would recognize by 1918, such an alliance was critical for the success of the movement in Minnesota. Thus, the pursuit of some kind of political alliance between the NPL and the labor movement in Minnesota would become a major theme of the effort to create a new political opposition in the state, and a significant reason for the different trajectory that the movement took in Minnesota (as opposed to North Dakota).

There were significant differences between Minnesota and North Dakota in the 1910s, and these differences had major implications for organizing an effective opposition political movement. Although the farm sectors of both states shared similar characteristics and had similar grievances against "big biz," Minnesota had a more varied economic landscape than North Dakota. Although Minnesota had a significant number of wheat farmers in the northwest part of the state, much of the southern part of the state was dominated by corn and dairy producers. In addition, the economy was more diversified and included a significant urban-labor base. Indeed, there was major urbanization and industrialization in the Twin Cities region (Minneapolis-St. Paul), Duluth, and on the Iron

Range (which stretched roughly from Hibbing to Virginia). The NPL leadership recognized that the voter demographic in Minnesota was different than North Dakota: “In Minnesota . . . the city and rural vote is about evenly divided . . . the farmers can not [sic] win without the help of labor, and labor is powerless without the help of the farmers.”³² In these industrial urban zones, there were significant numbers of workers – some unionized, some not. Taken altogether, they were a significant voting bloc within the state. Minnesota's labor movement was not united as a bloc in the 1916 elections, and by early 1918, organized labor had created a number of umbrella groups which served only as loose associations. These movements were typically small and were often separated by skills and other differences, especially ethnicity.³³

Initial plans to expand the NPL into Minnesota were formulated as early as July 1916 in the aftermath of the League's success in the North Dakota primaries.³⁴ Shortly after the NPL's stunning success in the 1916 general election, the League's organizers spread across North Dakota's borders to Montana, South Dakota and Minnesota. As early as December 1916, Townley was in St. Paul planning an NPL political strategy for Minnesota which included pursuing seats in the state legislature, running a Senate candidate, and targeting a sitting member of the state Railroad and Warehouse Commission.³⁵ In January 1917, the NPL announced that it was establishing its “national” NPL headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota. This move was made both to establish a more central location for a national headquarters (with ambitions to spread across much of the entire nation), and to deliberately counter the presence of the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce (a major supporter of the

³²“The Eyes of the Nation on Minnesota,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, June 10, 1918.

³³Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 20.

³⁴*The Princeton Union*, July 13, 1916, 4.

³⁵*The Northfield News*, December 22, 1916.

Minneapolis “flour ring” who directly opposed NPL interests). Townley was quoted as stating, "We intend to sail right into them with our program of state owned elevators, flour mills and packing plants." Interestingly enough, it was also stated that the NPL: “Ultimately . . . planned to have Federal ownership of grain elevators and other important and necessary adjuncts to marketing.” In other words, from as early as January 1917, Townley and the NPL had set their eyes on a national political strategy aimed at pursuing the NPL’s version of the agrarian cause at the federal level, which included government ownership of agribusiness entities.³⁶ The move to St. Paul in 1917 was also a signal that the NPL was about to begin its major organizational efforts in Minnesota. Sure enough, these recruitment efforts were realized effectively, and by 1918, the League had over 80 organizers in Minnesota, each equipped with a Ford Model T and working to sign-up members and promoting the League’s membership.³⁷

The NPL’s approach in Minnesota was generally the same as it had been in North Dakota. This included the use of automobiles as a chief means of transportation for the NPL organizers, holding meetings with small groups of farmers, and then encouraging them to join the organization and pay their dues (either in cash or with post-dated checks). The northwestern counties of Minnesota in the Red River region – close witness to the NPL success in North Dakota in November 1916 – became an early area of recruitment. Meanwhile, in North Dakota, the NPL continued to grow even after the 1916 election. By early 1918, the NPL claimed that it had over 150,000 members in that state alone. But even with this success, the League maintained its policy of charging members only about \$8-\$9 a

³⁶“Four States Added To League List: National Headquarter of Farmers' Organization to be at St Paul,” *Willmar Tribune*, January 24, 1917.

³⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 18, 13.

year for membership. The NPL's *The Nonpartisan Leader* remained the main organ of NPL mass communication, even as its focus became spread over other states, and it was even occasionally published in such languages as German and Swedish.³⁸

The NPL's swift growth in Minnesota in early 1917 did not go unnoticed by its opponents. Fearing the same "prairie fire" that had taken place in North Dakota the previous year, some opposition figures devised the plan of creating an alternative "Non-Partisan League" as a means to confuse farmers or compete with the NPL and blunt its activity in Minnesota. In March 1917, articles of incorporation were filed for this new "Non-Partisan League" – however the scheme was uncovered by the press and denounced as being deceptive – one of the few instances where the Minnesota mainstream press took the side of the NPL.³⁹ In less than five months, the phony "Non-Partisan League" had run its course.⁴⁰ Thus, this effort to confuse farmers had little effect on the NPL's growth.

The NPL's growth attracted the attention of labor groups in Minnesota, who began to regard the NPL as a separate but fraternal movement with some common political goals. After April 1917, labor groups began to increasingly consider joining the NPL in an effort to create a wider anti-"Old Guard" coalition in Minnesota. Many of these groups were connected to organized labor elements in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth. One signal of emerging farmer-labor cooperation can be seen in the May 26, 1917 edition of the Duluth-based *The Labor World*. The newspaper noted that Samuel Gompers and Townley were starting to converge in their opinions on the issue of unproductive land use owned by wealthy individuals. Gompers called for the tax on such idle lands, while Townley called for it to be

³⁸Charles E. Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 230-231.

³⁹Martin W. Odland, "No Primary Legislation At This Session," *Little Falls Herald*, March 30, 1917, 4.

⁴⁰Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 128.

“distribute[d] . . . among the hundreds of thousands of farmers who will make this land productive.” Such editorials are proof that labor elements and the NPL were starting to regard each other more favorably in Minnesota.⁴¹

This alignment of organized labor with the NPL movement was not immediate, however, and took place in phases and only because of several factors. The initial collection of labor groups which showed an interest in collaborating with the NPL was not significant. According to the *Minneapolis Journal*, reporting on the NPL convention in St. Paul in March 1918, the labor groups joining the NPL in its early caucus and convention meetings were the most leftist. Many of these were associated with socialist leaders or organizations. In this case, the NPL’s supposed association with the Socialist Party may have given it some credibility with these groups, who aimed to broaden their base and were willing to join in with what was becoming a swiftly growing political lobby.⁴²

Most of Minnesota’s organized labor groups – many under the umbrella of the Minnesota branch of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) chose to participate in the Democratic Party primary in 1918 instead of influencing the Republican race. There, a struggle was occurring in the gubernatorial nomination race between the more liberal figure, Willard L. Comstock, and the conservative, Fred E. Wheaton. The AFL groups strongly supported Comstock in the primary. However, Wheaton defeated Comstock in the primary, and the AFL groups were disillusioned by the idea of Wheaton as a gubernatorial candidate. Soon after the primary, these labor groups began to look for political alternatives. By August,

⁴¹*The Labor World*, May 26, 1917.

⁴²Clark Miller, “Unlucky Lindy: The Nonpartisan League and the Origins of the Farmer-Labor Coalition in Minnesota,” paper prepared for presentation at the Social Science History Association third annual meeting at Columbus, Ohio, November 3-5, 1978, 28.

they had begun to gravitate towards the NPL, making the loose alliance between the growing agrarian movement and the established labor groups more significant.⁴³

Labor endured setbacks in Minnesota with the onset of war in April 1917. The creation of the new state agency known as the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS) quickly instilled a controlling presence within the state that typically stifled political dissent – including labor agitation. Alternative political rhetoric and union activity – never popular among the established order, but tolerated more freely in a peacetime environment – became wholly unacceptable during a time of war. Acts of “disloyalty” – loosely defined and often aligned along existing socio-economic or political lines – were often used as an excuse by the commission and its supporters to suppress free speech, break up meetings, harass groups and individuals, or even conduct interrogations and arrests. Radical labor groups such as the Industrial Workers of the World (the I.W.W. or “Wobblies”) were considered especially suspect since they were known to be associated with socialism (which was hostile to the war effort) and their organizing activities often bordered on the disruptive. Since the war depended on production, strike activity – or even the threat of it – was enough to bring charges of disloyalty or even “pro-Germanism” against any group or person embracing unionism or significant political change. Most of the mainstream labor groups complied with the war production demands. However, labor groups in Minnesota typically resented the commission’s heavy hand and were further alienated by the lack of a sympathetic labor representative on the commission’s board. In October 1917, a serious strike broke out among the St. Paul street railcar workers. The main issue was over wages and the right to unionize. The strike went through many phases of walkouts and mediation between October 1917 and

⁴³Miller, “Unlucky Lindy,” 28.

April 1918. As a result of this ongoing strike, organized labor groups in the Twin Cities began to increasingly look for political allies. After labor's attempt to influence the Democratic primary had failed in the primary races of June 1918, many labor groups began to increasingly seek an alliance with the growing NPL, forming a loose anti-establishment coalition.⁴⁴

The Great War: Tensions on the Home Front

In April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany and its allies. This action was taken after a long period of tension in which many American ships had been sunk in the Atlantic Ocean by German submarines (especially in the waters around the British Isles), and the recent German announcement that they would resume "unrestricted" submarine warfare there. The Zimmerman Telegram – in which the Germans encouraged Mexico to attack the U.S. in an alliance with Germany – was another factor in Wilson's decision. Since the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, the United States had tried to remain neutral, but had been increasingly pulled towards the Entente side, regularly providing materiel and food supplies mainly to the British and French. American loans to Britain and France were also substantial between 1914 and 1917. After two and a half years of walking a thin line between neutrality and a pro-Entente stance, the United States declared war against Germany in April 1917 and thus committed itself to an Entente (or Allied) victory in Europe.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 49-51, 85-86, 123-124, 183-205.

⁴⁵Thomas Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory: America In World War I* (New York: Perseus Books, 2003), 1-3.

The effect of this declaration of war within the United States was immediate and dramatic. The Democratic Party and Republican Party leaders assumed a solid pro-war stance, and encouraged support for the war both officially and unofficially. This included increased spending on the army and navy, a draft intended to increase the size of the American armed forces, a public relations campaign (often conducted through posters and demonstrations) underlining patriotism and support for the war effort, and the implementation of a federal system of coordinating production for industry and agriculture. The United States was about to undertake the transition of mobilization for war and the transfer of large numbers of troops across the Atlantic to fight in Europe. Citizens were encouraged to enlist in the military or auxiliary corps, work hard, conserve food and resources, purchase Liberty Bonds, openly demonstrate their loyalty, and to be on the lookout for enemy agents.⁴⁶

However, participation in the war was not universally welcomed by all segments of American society. Many German-Americans (some of whom were recent immigrants that still spoke German as their chief language) were especially opposed to America's entry into the war. Many Scandinavian-Americans (especially Swedes) also tended to favor a stance of continued neutrality. Few of these Nordic-Americans openly favored German aggression in Europe, yet at the same time many did not see the need for American armed intervention there. In the 1910s, a large number of German and Scandinavian communities were concentrated in the upper Midwest, especially in the Dakotas, Minnesota and Wisconsin.⁴⁷ They soon came under close scrutiny by state and local governments starting in April 1917.

⁴⁶Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, 275-278.

⁴⁷*Hammond United States History Atlas* (Maplewood, NJ: Hammond Inc., 1984), U39.

Significant numbers of young men in the German-American community also faced a dilemma about confronting their ethnic brothers on the battlefield – and some German-American leaders actively called for exemptions in this case. A letter from George S. Viereck – the editor of a large German-language periodical – addressed to Minnesota Governor Burnquist on June 15, 1917, stated in part:

Viereck's Weekly advocates on purely humane grounds that we should spare German Americans the horror of fratricide . . . It seems to me that the conscientious objection of the man who shrinks from putting a bullet into his brother is as weighty as the scruples of . . . a Quaker . . . It seems to us that we should offer such men a generous and humane solution . . . ⁴⁸

Burnquist kept the letter in his files – apparently as evidence of a manifest representation of the questionable loyalty of the German-American community.

The war also had its political opponents. Many socialists and organized labor figures viewed America's entry into the war with suspicion. In Europe – where socialism was more prominent – the socialist party leaders of many European countries had denounced the war in 1914 and identified the coming struggle as an “imperialist” conflict as a bid for power or colonies in which the proletariat had little interest. The socialists in Europe had failed to achieve international worker solidarity and stop the outbreak of the war in 1914. Their American cousins had taken a similar attitude towards the war before April 1917. The American Socialist Party publicly committed itself to opposing the American war effort in the months before the declaration, and this stance even included the suggestion of

⁴⁸Letter from George S. Viereck to Governor Burnquist, June 15, 1917, Joseph A. A. Burnquist Papers, Box 13, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Burnquist Papers].

encouraging draft resistance. Even after the American entry into the war, some socialists had continued to actively speak out against American intervention.⁴⁹

The federal, state and local governments were aware of this potential dissent, and took steps that were specifically designed to quell it. In Minnesota, these approaches were largely led by the aforementioned Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS), formed in April 1917. The commission consisted of Governor Burnquist, the state attorney general, and five appointed members (including former governor John Lind, a noted progressive). The commission was granted wide authority by the legislature. In theory, it was legally granted the right to exercise any power not directly in contradiction with the state and federal constitutions. Its purpose was to support the war effort, ensure compliance with the draft, suppress anti-war dissent, maximize production for the war effort, and guard against “alien” or hostile persons or influences. The commission became the most powerful branch of the state government beginning in April 1917, and did not officially disband until 1920.⁵⁰

The commission also authorized local sheriffs and county-level councils to carry out its mission as well. It established an independent police force of over 600 officers – and it used this force to ban or disrupt meetings which it deemed questionable or “disloyal” and to combat union organization efforts. This force was later complemented by a much larger force of about 7,500 armed personnel known as the Home Guard. In the eyes of the commission and Governor Burnquist – any efforts to express dissent or organize workers (or farmers) against the power of the government and the economic status quo came to be viewed as highly suspicious. Union leaders were particularly singled out, and were often associated

⁴⁹Weinstein, *The Long Detour*, 68-69.

⁵⁰Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 89-102.

either with efforts to sabotage the war effort, or as being an extension of a radical socialist agenda (which either opposed the war or sought to overthrow the government itself). The commission also targeted and surveilled “suspect” populations, most notably the German-American community in Minnesota.⁵¹ In addition, the MCPS specifically targeted the Swedish-American community as well, keeping files on Swedish language publications.⁵² A member of the MCPS, John McGee, even affirmed the commission’s anti-German and anti-Swedish policy publicly before the U.S. Senate in April 1918.⁵³ The commission also railed against “alien” influence and sought to remove German language teaching from the schools, banned certain German books, and strongly encouraged the instructional use of English in all schools.⁵⁴

There seems to be significant evidence to suggest that German-Americans and Swedish-Americans did indeed tend to be the most skeptical of the war effort in Minnesota in 1917-1918. This was recognized both by the loyalist faction within Minnesota and often by these groups themselves – although there is some dispute as to how deep or uniform these sentiments were within these ethnic communities, and whether or not such sentiments warranted persecution by the MCPS. There also seemed to be a correlation between a higher personal connection to the ancestral homeland and anti-war sentiments: for first-generation immigrants (whether older or younger), opposition to the war was stronger. For those who were second-generation or even more removed from their ancestral homeland, these anti-war sentiments seemed to be less pronounced. Even so, as a whole these two ethnic communities

⁵¹Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 470-473.

⁵²The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety Papers, Box 3, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter MCPS Papers].

⁵³Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 299.

⁵⁴La Vern J. Rippley, “Conflict in the Classroom: Anti-Germanism in Minnesota Schools, 1917-19,” *Minnesota History*, Spring 1981, 171-183.

in Minnesota were often less than enthusiastic in their support of the war – and they constituted a significant portion of Minnesota’s population. According to a report compiled by the MCPS from the 1910 Census, over 70% of Minnesotans were either foreign-born immigrants or the children of such during this period. Of these, almost 25% were of German heritage.⁵⁵

The commission took these figures seriously and began to operate on the assumption that persons of German or Swedish background were justifiable targets of surveillance and even repression. Governor Burnquist’s office was encouraged in this view by many sources outside of the state government which encouraged the MCPS to aggressively pursue reports of “suspicious” or “disloyal” persons and groups. A number of letters were sent to (and collected) by the governor’s office which demonstrated the supposedly suspicious nature of many persons in the German-American and Swedish-American population. These messages point to significant support for the activities of the MCPS in this period.⁵⁶

Along with suspected pro-German elements and radical labor groups, the MCPS also saw a danger in the growing NPL movement. The rhetoric of Townley and the NPL (and later its gubernatorial candidate, Charles A. Lindbergh) was strongly anti-establishment, initially skeptical of the American entry into the war, and prone to accusing the ruling political figures of collusion with war “profiteers.” For the conservatives of the MCPS and their supporters, such expression was tantamount to disloyalty, since it suggested the re-arrangement of the economic status quo – a condition that the war’s supporters had identified

⁵⁵*Report of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety* (St. Paul, MN: Louis F. Dow Company, 1919), 31; see also D.J. Tice, *Minnesota's Twentieth Century: Stories of Extraordinary Everyday People* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 24.

⁵⁶Burnquist Papers, Box 13; letters were commonly sent directly to the MCPS or to the governor’s office, naming specific individuals as being suspicious. These reports were often followed up by MCPS personnel.

as crossing a line into disloyalty. Many in the MCPS viewed the NPL as a mere front for “pro-Germanism” and often assumed or suggested the association of the NPL with socialism or disloyalty.⁵⁷

The commission itself was a wide organization with branches in every county of Minnesota, and the political factors supporting its operations were significant. Burnquist was under considerable pressure starting in April 1917 to ensure Minnesota’s compliance with the draft and to meet production goals set by the Wilson Administration. Patriotism and loyalty were the watchwords of the day. Attitudes towards suspect groups or persons were highly intolerant. The commission itself was often responding to charges or complaints launched by other entities or individuals within the state. Many of these charges were spurious, and may have been nothing more than personal vendettas. Others resulted from simple misunderstandings. One case in point was the Finnish-American community (largely concentrated on the Iron Range region) many of whom resisted the draft because they were under the impression that conscription meant deportation back to Russia to fight for the dreaded czarist regime.⁵⁸ Such misunderstandings were apparently frequent in communities where English was not commonly spoken. One of the purported main purposes of a major German-American rally in New Ulm in July 1917 was to properly instruct German-American men on their obligations under the current draft laws.⁵⁹

By June 1917, the commission had recognized the suspicious nature of the NPL when it concluded that the League was blocking efforts to conduct a farm census in the area around New Ulm. Even so, the commission did its best to publicly portray itself as being officially

⁵⁷Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 14-15, 167.

⁵⁸From 1808 to November 1917, Finland was an outlying province of the Russian Empire.

⁵⁹Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 122-123, 154.

neutral in its judgment of the NPL and continuing to supposedly observe the League's First Amendment rights. A letter sent in August 1917 from the MCPS to one citizen concerned about the NPL's loyalty stated that the commission had no "official opinion of the character of the Non-Partisan League."⁶⁰ This was well after the MCPS had identified the League as being a target of its anti-disloyalty efforts.

The commission's suppression of the NPL, organized labor and German-Americans and Swedish-Americans in Minnesota in 1917-1918 alienated a significant number of voters away from their Republican Party affiliation and into the arms of the growing farmer-labor coalition. The emergence of the commission's growing powers – and its willingness to use them – often polarized the voting public and turned increasing numbers of persons away from the mainstream Republican Party, then under the leadership of Governor Burnquist.⁶¹

Figure 4. Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist in the early 1920s. Burnquist had assumed office upon the death of Governor Hammond in 1915. Burnquist chaired Minnesota's Commission of Public Safety starting in April 1917, an entity which is often cited as being one of the most repressive in the state's history. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



The outbreak of war in April 1917 had presented the NPL with a dilemma, since its organizing efforts were now increasingly viewed with suspicion by the state government. Even so, such activity was absolutely essential to its mission. The NPL leaders continued to focus on domestic agrarian issues in their recruitment efforts, and contended that such a discussion of domestic issues was warranted and protected by the Constitution and the First Amendment. However, the League's critics and opponents viewed their actions differently. It

⁶⁰Letter from the MCPS to C. H. Chader, August 29, 1917, MCPS Papers, Box 9.

⁶¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 22, 25.

did not help the NPL's position that its main base of recruitment – the largely German and Scandinavian farmer base of rural Minnesota – was more likely to be opposed to the war than the critical mass of public opinion. In retrospect, it seems apparent that the leaders of the NPL did not initially recognize the importance of the war issue, and often continued in their anti-establishment rhetoric – which after April 1917 began to sound suspicious to many. Some NPL rhetoric continued to contend that the war was being fought for the benefit of banks and profiteers. Nevertheless, the American entry into the war forced the NPL to shift from a position of supporting neutrality to paying at least lip service to support for the American war effort.⁶² Despite this shift, opponents of the League both in North Dakota and Minnesota did their best to portray league members as being disloyal agents. As the NPL stance was quickly adjusted, Townley and the NPL leaders began to publicly offer their unqualified statements of support for the United States in its war efforts. League recruiters began to fly the American flag on their cars at about the same time.⁶³

In this atmosphere, the NPL did its best to continue its campaign while avoiding open criticism of the war. In the platform for their 1918 convention, the League specifically stated their loyalty to the U.S. government and its support for the war effort. The NPL also started to begin their meetings with an overt pledge to the flag. Furthermore, the NPL continued to state its official support for the war in the *The Nonpartisan Leader* and other printed materials. Despite these measures, some NPL speakers were not successful in avoiding controversy. In 1917-1918, several NPL figures were arrested and charged with sedition because of allegedly disloyal statements they had made. The NPL's political activity thus

⁶²Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota*, 147.

⁶³Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*, 232-234.

continued to attract MCPS scrutiny, and the League and its leaders remained highly suspect. Furthermore, many of the NPL leaders (and associated politicians such as Robert La Follette and Charles A. Lindbergh) typically had a long track record of denouncing American intervention overseas and had expressed skepticism about the existing economic order before April 1917. Once America had entered the war, it became more difficult for these figures to portray such former statements and stances in an acceptable light. In the meantime, critical incidents between the MCPS and suspect groups increased in frequency and severity.⁶⁴

An incident in New Ulm on July 25, 1917 became critical in creating a rift between the German-American community and the Republican Party in Minnesota. New Ulm was a center of the German-American community in Minnesota, and a source of considerable discontent about American participation in the war. A parade and rally was organized there featuring several prominent speakers (including the mayor, Dr. Louis A. Fritsche and the city attorney, Albert Pfaender). A main theme of the speakers at the rally was the question of whether or not America should be involved in the war and how the situation was causing unfair stress on the German-American population. Some speakers also called for a referendum on the war itself to determine if it was truly supported by popular opinion. The rally's speakers did not openly advocate draft evasion or sabotage of the war effort, but even so, the anti-war sentiments of the event's participants were clear. When news of the rally reached the MCPS, an investigation was quickly conducted. After the major figures of the rally had been directly questioned by the MCPS, a number of New Ulm and Brown County officials were "removed" from office by the MCPS. Governor Burnquist himself would later head a "loyalty" rally in New Ulm in early September which pointedly refuted the themes of

⁶⁴Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 167-175.

the July 25 rally, and which called for unqualified patriotic support of the war and openly denounced German aggression in Europe.⁶⁵ The local press hailed the loyalty rally as a great success. Interestingly enough, none of the main political figures who spoke at the rally were figures from the New Ulm area.⁶⁶ Less than two weeks after the rally, Dr. Fritsche's own son, William H. Fritsche, was drafted into the army and was part of the first contingent of draftees to leave New Ulm.⁶⁷

Figure 5. Dr. Louis A. Fritsche first rose to prominence during World War I when – as Mayor of New Ulm – he helped stage the infamous rally which raised the ire of the MCPS. Fritsche remained popular as a leader for German-Americans however, and he would later seek office under the Farmer-Labor banner. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



On the same day as the New Ulm rally (July 25, 1917), another critical incident occurred further north which likewise alienated labor groups from the Burnquist administration. In Bemidji, a large mob had formed and had forcibly deported the I.W.W. organizers present in that town. Under the threat of force, the I.W.W. organizers were herded onto a train (their tickets paid for) and told to leave and never return again. This action was taken in response to the impression that a fire which had burned down a local lumber mill on July 21 had been started by Wobbly saboteurs. However, there was no evidence in this regard, nor was there any legal proceeding. Instead, a well-organized mob (with apparent wide public support) simply rounded up and deported the union figures. Thus, within one

⁶⁵Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 133-135, 150-152.

⁶⁶“Loyalty Meeting Is Great Success: Thousands Gather in City to Hear Governor Burnquist’s Talk,” *New Ulm Review*, September 5, 1917.

⁶⁷“Drafted Men Will Leave Wednesday: Brown County Contingent to Start From New Ulm Next Week,” *New Ulm Review*, September 12, 1917.

day, both organized labor and the German-American community experienced incidents which created significant grievances and began the process of pushing these groups closer towards each other in a loose political alliance.⁶⁸

The war economy brought both increased prosperity and frustration for Minnesota farmers. While higher crop prices provided economic gains, many had grievances against the federal government's price controls on wheat instituted shortly after April 1917. This action was designed to stabilize markets and prevent extreme fluctuations in supply and demand. However, the way the controls were implemented were controversial, and often benefitted the agribusiness industry but not the common farmer. Specifically, price ceilings were put on payments to farmers for their crops, but no similar controls were placed on agribusiness concerns. Thus, the power of the federal government was used to stifle profitable market forces for farmers, but imposed no such control in the pricing of wheat and other crops for larger business entities. The price of wheat itself had increased since the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, and was rising more during the period of 1917-1918. However, even with this relatively beneficial rise in wheat prices, farmers were often dissatisfied with being unable to collect higher prices for their crops when the market warranted it. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) wheat price figures for these years indicate a limit of just over \$2 a bushel for farmers imposed by Herbert Hoover's U.S. Food Administration. No corresponding price limits were placed on millers and other food processors. Instead, the administration relied on agribusiness entities to show patriotic "restraint" in their pricing.⁶⁹

⁶⁸Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 136-139.

⁶⁹Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*, 235; see also Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 169; see also USDA "Table 18--Wheat: Average price received by farmers, United States" http://www.ers.usda.gov/datafiles/Wheat_Wheat_Data/Yearbook_Tables/Domestic_and_International_Prices/WheatYearbookTable18.xls, accessed October 14, 2013.

By August, the NPL and some of the labor leaders of the Twin Cities were in close contact with each other and discussing the possibility of forming a unified political movement. Although significant differences existed between the farmer and labor branches of this emerging coalition, there was enough interest and cooperation between the two to move forward with joint meetings. The continuing repression of union leaders and the NPL by the MCPS further encouraged these ties. This trend would eventually lead to a unified farmer-labor coalition movement that would take its first official political steps in the 1918 elections.⁷⁰

A critical episode in forging these farmer-labor ties occurred in September 1917, when the NPL organized a “Producers and Consumers Convention” in St. Paul. A major theme of this conference centered on the issue of “war profiteering” but it was also intended to address a main issue that divided farmers and laborers: disagreement over food pricing. Townley and the NPL leadership saw the issue as critical in bringing both sides together into a political alliance. Farmer demands tended to call for higher pricing for food – since they often wanted more money for their agricultural products. However, labor – or more accurately, proletariat consumers – wanted lower food prices in order to achieve or sustain a higher standard of living. The convention arrived at a compromise position in which the NPL members accepted the federal ceiling on wheat prices in exchange for a plank in the movement which called for federal control of food pricing and distribution.⁷¹

During the convention, the NPL speakers themselves scrupulously proclaimed statements of loyalty, going so far as to state: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our

⁷⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 34-35.

⁷¹Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota*, 149.

sacred honor to our country and our flag in this, OUR WAR.” However, the closing keynote address was to be delivered by Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette – quite possibly the war’s greatest critic in Congress. Both the NPL and the local newspapers anticipated controversy regarding La Follette’s speech, and the crowds both inside and outside the auditorium were large. La Follette himself offered to withdraw from speaking, but it was agreed instead that he would confine his rhetoric to a set of statements that had been reviewed by the NPL. However, La Follette was unable to confine his speech to just these prepared remarks. In response to several hecklers, La Follette stated that America did not have enough reason to be at war with Germany, and that the sinking of the *Lusitania* did not warrant a declaration of war – since the ship was in fact carrying munitions. La Follette’s comments were taken out of context and he was misquoted in both the local and the national press – and this caused an instant furor. He was immediately branded a “traitor.” A motion was even introduced into the Senate by Frank B. Kellogg to have him removed from Congress. Without question, the League – already suspect in the eyes of Governor Burnquist and the MCPS – now came under even greater scrutiny.⁷²

This scrutiny began with the commission summoning Townley himself to undergo questioning in late September in St. Paul – just after the conclusion of the “Producers and Consumers Convention.” For the first time, Townley and the MCPS – overt and bitter political opponents – faced each other directly. The transcript of this session however, reveals a degree of restraint on both sides, with the MCPS interrogator, Ambrose Tighe, focusing on the origins, finances and structure of the League and Townley’s role within in.

⁷²Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 24; see also Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 142-146.

Townley was factual and restrained in his answers. Both sides avoided overt accusations. At the deposition, Townley insisted that La Follette had been briefed before the rally to avoid any discussion of the war issue, and that La Follette had broken his word.⁷³ On September 26, the MCPS passed a resolution condemning La Follette and asking the U.S. government to expel him from the Senate. Any efforts to prosecute La Follette under Minnesota law were ruled out. Townley himself escaped without any official condemnation. However, the eyes of the MCPS were watching him more closely than ever, and it even assigned a special branch to surveil the League and its activities.⁷⁴

Evidence of this increased MCPS surveillance can be seen in some of the commission's subsequent communications with its county branches and field agents. Within a month from Townley's questioning before the MCPS, the commission was authorizing its field agents to shadow Townley at NPL rallies. The apparent purpose for this activity was for agents to capture any inflammatory or seditious statements that Townley might make, write them down, and then submit these transcripts directly to the MCPS.⁷⁵

From the period of late 1917 to early 1918, the NPL continued its recruitment efforts in Minnesota under great duress. The MCPS had given authorization to county sheriffs to block or prevent their rallies – which occurred frequently. The mainstream press within the state – as well as a significant portion of the non-NPL constituent population – was becoming more hostile to the NPL and Townley. Newspaper articles from the influential *Minneapolis Journal* and *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* in this period often mentioned the NPL, socialists

⁷³“Testimony of A. C. Townley, President of the Nonpartisan League taken in the office of Governor Burnquist at a meeting of the Public Safety Commission, September 25, 1917,” MCPS Papers, Box 9.

⁷⁴“Want La Follette Ousted: Safety Board Make Demands on U. S. Senate,” *Aitkin Independent Age*, September 29, 1917; see also *Report of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety*, 163-164.

⁷⁵Letter from the MCPS to J. B. Ludlow, October 15, 1917, MCPS Papers, Box 9.

and disloyalty in the same headings or paragraphs.⁷⁶ A delegation of NPL representatives (led by Magnus Johnson) to the governor's office in February 1918 received a polite reception from Burnquist, but little promise of action to protect their rights. Even so, on several occasions in this period, the governor did go on record to publicly state that the League's political activity was protected on constitutional grounds. However, this seemed to be a thinly veiled nod to First Amendment rights – which, in fact, the MCPS had strongly worked against in recent months.⁷⁷ Likewise, the mainstream press in Minnesota took its cue from the MCPS, and denounced the NPL, noting – even applauding – the increased hostility and difficulty that the League was encountering:

Since the notorious meeting in St. Paul, at which Senator La Follette and A. C. Townley, head of the Nonpartisan league [sic], hurled so many incendiary missiles at the government, and especially at the conduct of the war, the League is having a hard time to find communities in the state where they receive a very hearty welcome. The League speakers have been refused permission to hold meetings in several cities, it is reported, and in many others have been compelled to give assurance that the meeting would be loyal.⁷⁸

Despite increasing pressure from the MCPS in Minnesota, Townley and the NPL continued to gain members and influence throughout late 1917. The culmination of Townley's rise to power can be seen in his visit to New York City and the White House in late November and early December where he spoke at Cooper's Union and then conferenced with President Wilson and Herbert Hoover over national farm policy. At the White House, Townley made the case for federal loans to farmers as a means to support continued high levels of production and aid the war effort: "The Northwestern farmers are not asking for any

⁷⁶"Nonpartisan's Aim is to Seize All Land, E. H. Nicholas Says," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 2, 1918, 16; this is but one of many examples where the NPL is maligned and labeled as both socialistic and disloyal by the mainstream press in Minnesota during this period.

⁷⁷Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 179-180.

⁷⁸"The State Buys Liberty Bonds," *The Northfield News*, October 19, 1917.

bonus. We merely ask that special legislation be passed to permit federal funds to be loaned to farmers.” Townley pointed out that millions in government funds were being loaned to Russia and to support the munitions industries, but that farmers were struggling and needed aid as well. Upon his return to Minnesota, Townley further asked farmers to write to their congressional representatives to support such a policy, and even asked the press – which he acknowledged was often hostile to the NPL – to join in the campaign as well.⁷⁹ Townley’s meeting seemed to have some impact on the President. In a message to Congress shortly after his meeting with Townley, President Wilson stated that:

“ . . . farmers complain with considerable justice that while regulations of food products restricts their incomes, no restraints are placed upon the prices of most of the things they purchase . . . profiteering still runs impudently rampant.”⁸⁰

When the NPL met in March 1918 to begin its process of endorsing candidates for the 1918 primaries, it made one final (and inexplicable) effort to reach out to Governor Burnquist. The NPL leadership invited Burnquist to address its convention during the opening ceremony in St. Paul on March 19, 1918. Burnquist – like the MCPS itself, normally restrained in his written statements – responded directly and without any hint of diplomacy to the League’s invitation. He stated that he would never appear at a League event, accusing the NPL of connections to the “I.W.W.” and the “Red socialists.” Burnquist further alleged that evidence of league treachery and its disloyalty could be traced back to the League’s September 1917 convention in which the NPL members had openly applauded La Follette’s treasonous statements. If the NPL leaders expected their invitation to embarrass the governor

⁷⁹“U. S. Loans Asked To Help Farmers: Nonpartisan Head Tells Wilson Aid is Needed to Prevent Shortage in Food,” *Willmar Tribune*, December 12, 1917, 10.

⁸⁰President Woodrow Wilson, *Fifth Annual Message to Congress*, December 4, 1917, <http://millercenter.org/president/wilson/speeches/speech-3799>, accessed June 2015; also quoted in Joseph J. Sperl, Letter to the Editor, *New Ulm Review*, December 26, 1917, 4.

or to generate sympathy for their cause, they were gravely mistaken. The governor's remarks were printed in newspapers across the state, and support for Burnquist's sentiments was reinforced by much of the mainstream press.⁸¹

Even so, the MCPS did its best in the following months to avoid officially authorizing the repression of NPL meetings in the state on paper, embracing a policy of apparent plausible deniability instead. Nevertheless, the wishes of the commission in regards to such activities were obvious. In a letter to one of its agents in May 1918, the MCPS advised its agent that it would not ban outright a planned NPL rally. Instead, the matter of "stopping meetings of a disloyal or seditious nature is left with the sheriff and proper local authorities."⁸² In other words, local authorities and commission branches were encouraged to enact the enforcement of the commission's aims without its overt official authorization.

The Primary Campaign and Election of 1918

The year 1918 marked the first attempt by the NPL to influence the Republican Party's choice of candidates in Minnesota. The NPL strategy attempted to replicate the success that it had experienced in the 1916 North Dakota elections. Like North Dakota, Minnesota was dominated by the Republican Party in most districts, and most of the state and national offices were held by Republicans (including the state legislature). In the 1918 primary campaign, the NPL's specific focus was on the governor's office, which was considered a viable electoral target due to the controversies caused by Burnquist and the MCPS. The NPL also made a weaker challenge to unseat Republican Senator Knute Nelson

⁸¹Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 294.

⁸²Letter from the MCPS to A. M. Crandall, May 15, 1918, MCPS Papers, Box 9.

(and ran candidates for several other prominent congressional seats as well). Nelson had been elected governor in 1892, and then had later moved to the Senate. However, Nelson had the good fortune of being known both as a moderate and as one of the first Scandinavians to attain high political office in Minnesota. He traditionally had a strong rapport with farmers and was much less accusatory than Burnquist in targeting the NPL as being troublemakers. As a result, the League was unwilling to confront him as directly as it confronted Governor Burnquist.⁸³

The NPL made no attempt to contest primary elections within the Democratic Party in 1918. During the period of 1917-1918, the Democratic Party within Minnesota was a mere shadow opposition. It typically performed poorly in most elections in Minnesota, frequently losing races and earning only a small percentage of the vote. The sole exception to this trend was its ability to win congressional seats in the mainly urban districts of Minnesota (such as Ramsey County, where St. Paul is located). Some analysts claim that the party was in a state of internal conflict in this period, had too small of a party base (much of it based in the Irish Catholic community in St. Paul), and hence could not provide a significant opposition to the Republican Party in Minnesota as a whole. As mentioned earlier, it had also experienced a divisive primary in June 1918 [see above]. Thus, any real opposition to the mainstream Republican Party in 1918 would emerge through a primary challenge for control of the Republican Party itself, and this was precisely the NPL's intent.⁸⁴

The Socialist Party also had a presence in Minnesota during this period – as it did nationwide. The party had reached a national peak of influence during the 1912 elections

⁸³Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 38-41.

⁸⁴Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 36-37.

when its presidential candidate, Eugene Debs, had received 6% of the vote. Although the party's base was relatively small and concentrated in urban regions, it was fairly well organized and had achieved some success. One of the most notable of these successes was the election of the Socialist Party candidate Thomas Van Lear to the Minneapolis Mayor's office in 1916. As mayor, Van Lear often stood in opposition to the city's business interests (championed by the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, the sheriff, and the newly formed Citizen's Alliance – an anti-union coalition of Minneapolis businesses). Van Lear was openly sympathetic to labor and even refused to allow Minneapolis police to aid in breaking up strikes during his tenure. There was also a tenuous political association between the Socialist Party and some labor groups in the Twin City area. Outside of the urban regions however, the Socialist Party had little support in Minnesota. Van Lear would serve only one two-year term and would be narrowly defeated in the 1918 general election.⁸⁵ Later however, he would later play a major role in forming the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota.

In March 1918, the NPL held its convention in St. Paul to nominate candidates to run in the Republican primaries. Organized labor groups were also invited to attend, and they formed a separate but coordinated shadow convention. Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr. was selected to be the NPL-endorsed gubernatorial candidate.⁸⁶ Lindbergh was known as being opposed to the war, had actively associated with NPL leaders, was sympathetic to farmer and labor interests, and enjoyed significant name recognition among the state's farmers and Scandinavian population. Townley himself addressed the convention on March 20 during the closing rally. He ended the session dramatically, asking farmers and laborers to literally stand

⁸⁵Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 40-42; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 33, 48.

⁸⁶“Want Mr. Lindbergh To File - Nonpartisans Also Endorse Sheldon And Jacobson For House,” *Little Falls Herald*, March 15, 1918.

up for each other. They met his rhetorical demand with great applause and enthusiasm. The appearance onstage of a striking St. Paul street railcar worker holding his baby (and weeping spontaneously) added to the drama of the event. The elements for a new significant political opposition had now been put together. Townley had managed to expand the NPL into Minnesota in 1917-18 despite the repressive atmosphere created by the war. Labor groups – alienated by Burnquist and the commission’s heavy hand – were increasingly associating with the NPL in an effort to form a viable opposition coalition. Townley himself literally welcomed them onto the stage. Although it would be some time before a critical mass of labor voters would defect from other parties, the structure for the new coalition had now been put into place.⁸⁷

From late March to June 17, 1918, Lindbergh and his NPL supporters undertook an all-out effort to win the Republican primary and campaigned continuously across the state. This political campaign was possibly the most controversial and bitter one in the state’s history. NPL members and Lindbergh supporters saw in their candidate a true hero willing to stand up against a powerful opposition and seek economic equity for the common man against the privileged class. Lindbergh’s critics and opponents – and they were many in number – portrayed the former congressman as a bona fide traitor and disloyal anti-war leader. Although Lindbergh’s rallies often drew thousands of people to hear him speak, they also attracted nasty hecklers and local mobs that perpetrated petty acts of violence against his entourage and occasionally hung him in effigy.⁸⁸ The mainstream press also condemned the League and its candidates, one newspaper declaring the primary race to be an: “issue . . .

⁸⁷Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 191.

⁸⁸Carol Jenson, “Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota,” *Minnesota History*, Summer 1972, 55-56.

squarely and unequivocally between loyalty to the country and disloyalty.”⁸⁹ Even worse for the movement, Lindbergh himself was arrested on June 8 in Martin County (in the southern part of the state) and charged with “unlawful assembly.” Lindbergh was arraigned in Fairmont before Judge J. A. Everett and was released on \$1,000 bail.⁹⁰

It should be noted that the war in Europe had entered a new phase almost at the exact same time that the League had concluded its convention. This factor may have affected domestic tensions negatively. The Russians had effectively surrendered to the Central Powers, and had formalized their surrender with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The Central Powers had then gained significant territory – including grain producing regions in the Ukraine – which made their military posture on the Western Front much stronger. The Germans would launch a new offensive in the west starting on March 21, 1918, and the outcome of this offensive (the Second Battle of the Marne) was far from certain. The threat of a German victory in France was very real at this time, and Paris itself came under German artillery fire in late March. It was not until July 1918, when the Allied forces had pushed the Germans back to the Marne River and then later began their encroachment towards Germany itself that the war’s outcome became evident. Lindbergh’s campaign – occurring at the exact time when this German offensive was reaching its peak – no doubt raised domestic tensions on the war issue.⁹¹

The Republican primary election was held on June 17, 1918. The incumbent Governor Burnquist defeated Lindbergh and carried 54% of the vote. For the moment, the

⁸⁹“The Issue” *Rochester Daily Post and Record*, June 14, 1918.

⁹⁰“Lindbergh Arrested: Candidate is Held for Unlawful Assembly in Martin County,” *Little Falls Herald*, June 14, 1918.

⁹¹Michael S. Neiberg, *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2008), 26-118.

party's "Old Guard" seemed safe from the kind of insurgency that had been witnessed in North Dakota two years earlier. But these results were not indicative of the League's demise, since their candidates had done very well overall – often scoring in the 40% range. Thus despite Lindbergh's defeat, the farmer-labor movement was gaining steam. The success of the North Dakota experiment in 1916 had not been replicated in Minnesota yet – but the struggle was just beginning.⁹² In fact, a week after the primary, *The Nonpartisan Leader* declared that the movement had done well overall, having generated 150,000 votes for its candidates in the state.⁹³ Even so, much of the mainstream press often portrayed Lindbergh's defeat as devastating, and proclaimed such statements as: "The Nonpartisan and Townley element met utter defeat . . ."⁹⁴ Such pronouncements implying permanent defeat of the farmer-labor movement turned out to premature, however.

With Lindbergh's bitter defeat in the Republican primary, he ended his attempt to run for governor. However, the League's leaders and the growing farmer-labor coalition were not willing to give up so easily. After Lindbergh's defeat in the primary, they organized a new series of meetings in St. Paul in August 1918. Separate committees met for the labor side and for the NPL, but efforts were made to arrive at a consensus over support for candidates. Significant disagreements existed at these meetings – not only between the labor representatives and the NPL representatives, but between those who favored the formation of a third party and those who simply wanted to endorse sympathetic "independent" candidates for office in the 1918 elections. The results of these efforts in August 1918 were a series of joint farmer-labor endorsements for a number of candidates for many state and federal

⁹²Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 27.

⁹³"Minnesota Farmers Win the Legislature," *The Nonpartisan Leader*, July 1, 1918, 5.

⁹⁴"Election Results" *The Twin City Star*, June 22, 1918.

offices. This included the endorsement of David H. Evans for governor. Unlike Lindbergh, Evans was a Democrat known for his support of Wilson and the war, and was even an ancillary member of the MCPS. Evans and the other NPL-backed candidates then filed the necessary paperwork for running in the general election. Although the intention was to run these candidates as endorsed “independents,” the state attorney general refused to accept such listings, and demanded that they list a formal party affiliation. Thus, the label of “Farmer-Labor” was first used in an electoral contest in Minnesota – even though the formation of an official party was really just beginning.⁹⁵

Despite his less controversial background, Evans still endured criticism and scrutiny from the Burnquist campaign and the MCPS. During the general election campaign, the MCPS published a series of letters exchanged in 1917 between William Haywood (an I.W.W. leader and Socialist Party figure who had been convicted in 1918 for violating the Espionage Act of 1917) and Arthur LeSueur, then Secretary of the NPL. This publication was an attempt to connect the I.W.W. to the NPL and discredit the League in general and Evans’ gubernatorial campaign in particular.⁹⁶

Thus, the first Farmer-Labor electoral campaigns took place in Minnesota between August and early November of 1918. Although the coalition managed to field candidates in a number of races and run their campaigns, the party met only with limited success. In the general election, the established Republican Party candidates were able to prevail in almost all of the major races (losing only two congressional seats to Democrats in traditionally Democratic districts). Governor Burnquist was re-elected. Nevertheless, the Republican

⁹⁵William E. Lass, *Minnesota: A History* Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 221-222; see also Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 207-208.

⁹⁶“More Letters Showing LeSueur’s Connection with the I.W.W. Gang” [MCPS publication] (1918), MCPS Papers, Box 9; see also Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 309.

electoral majorities were relatively slim in some of these races, and Burnquist won the governorship with only a plurality of 44%. More significantly, the Democrats were largely eclipsed by the new farmer-labor bloc in most of the state's districts, and the fledgling movement essentially became Minnesota's second largest political bloc. A brief third party movement founded by pro-war former socialists and prohibitionists – the National Party – also made a showing in this election but failed to make any serious inroads and finished a distant fourth in most races. It was in the state legislature races that the NPL-backed farmer-labor candidates really showed their strength, however. The NPL endorsed 37 state Senate candidates (of 67 total seats), of which 11 won their races. In the House, 22 NPL candidates won election out of 49 endorsed (in a 131 seat chamber).⁹⁷

The NPL candidates did even better in North Dakota in the 1918 elections, holding their legislative majority in the state House and capturing the state Senate as well, further enhancing their position there.⁹⁸ However, shortly after the 1918 election in North Dakota, anti-NPL forces would rally and would soon conduct a successful campaign there against the League's hold on the state's power.

In Minnesota, it was now apparent that the farmer-labor movement had significant potential, and had even become what might be termed the main political opposition force within Minnesota. Supporters of the new movement were encouraged by the gains they had made and became determined to continue their political activity. Beginning in 1920, the real political contest in Minnesota would be between the Republican Party and the emerging farmer-labor coalition – a coalition which would soon form its own official third party.

⁹⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 47-48.

⁹⁸Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 208-211.

Thus, the years 1917 to 1918 were crucial in the formation of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota. The growth of the NPL in Minnesota starting in 1917 had largely coincided with the onset of the war, and proved to be controversial activity during wartime – especially since the aims of the agrarian movement were to agitate on behalf of farmers. The repressive policies of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety – supposedly justified by the war – created an atmosphere of intolerance and intimidation that would have long-lasting effects. The MCPS targeted the NPL movement, organized labor leaders, and much of the German and Scandinavian population in Minnesota during this time. As the MCPS and the Republican administration of Governor Burnquist railed against supposed disloyalty, political activity became highly polarized, and the farmer and labor sectors – seeking similar gains against a prevailing status quo, and experiencing a similar foe in the MCPS – grew closer in response. A significant shift had now occurred in which many rural voters had moved away from the mainstream Republican Party, and the labor elements of the state were favorably viewing a political alliance with the NPL-led crusade.

This trend would prove to be an enduring one.

CHAPTER III

A VIABLE THIRD PARTY: 1919-1922

The election of 1918 had signaled the emergence of the new farmer-labor political coalition in Minnesota. Although this new “Farmer-Labor” ticket had not replicated the dramatic success of Townley’s Nonpartisan League (NPL) in North Dakota, the movement was still significant and had quickly overshadowed the Democratic Party as being the main political opposition to the Republican Party within the state. From early 1919 to November 1922, a number of factors would shift and coalesce, leading to the creation of the Farmer-Labor Party as a long-term third party. The emergence of this Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party would occur chiefly through the leadership efforts of Twin Cities urban-labor leaders in the state beginning in 1919. These figures were able to create a labor-oriented grassroots membership group similar to the NPL while maintaining a connection with the agrarian wing of the movement, and eventually transform this coalition into a full-fledged political party.

Although the Republicans had triumphed in the 1918 general election overall, the results had been too close for them to take much satisfaction in their victory. Six days later, on Monday, November 11, the Great War officially ended at 11 AM on Armistice Day. Thus, the main reason for many of the tensions during the 1918 campaign (which had stretched from March to November of that year) became relatively unimportant in less than a week’s time after the general election – or so it would seem. In fact, the divisions exacerbated (or created) by the war and the state government’s response to political dissent and ethnic

associations between 1917 and 1918 had created rifts which would have long-term effects on the politics in the state well after the end of the war.

Transitions: 1919-1921

The role of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS) changed almost immediately at the war's end – yet it did not cease its activities right away. One of the unofficial goals of the MCPS in 1918 had been to defeat the NPL challenge in the 1918 elections and re-elect Joseph Burnquist governor. In this, they had succeeded. They had done so even with Burnquist's "non-campaign" of 1918 (in which he claimed to be so focused on running the state that he could not afford to waste his time campaigning). Despite Burnquist's declaration, both the Republican Party machinery and the MCPS apparatus had exerted great effort to extend publicity for the Burnquist gubernatorial campaign under the guise of "loyalty" messages and demonstrations as a means to encourage electoral support for their candidate. Although the MCPS did not officially disband immediately after the war's end, in his 1919 inaugural address, Governor Burnquist referred to the MCPS in the past tense, praising it for its work during the war but implying that its tenure was almost over. Indeed, the Commission met officially only a few times after the war's end, and mainly to wrap up its business.¹

Even so, there is some evidence to suggest that the commission was still in the business of following up on suspected cases of disloyalty – even after the war's end. A letter sent to the editor of the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* in February 1919 which expressed

¹Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 314-315, 326-327.

extreme criticism of Governor Burnquist and the war itself was forwarded by the newspaper's editor directly to the MCPS. The MCPS in turn forwarded the letter to the local division of the U.S. Department of Justice in St. Paul for possible further investigation. This activity seems to suggest that at least some of the commission's figures sought to continue its mission in some way after the war's end.²

Nationally, there were significant changes on the social and political scene. It is generally thought by most historians that the war brought about the end of the progressive movement in the United States. This was due to several factors. Much had changed in the American political and social landscape between 1917 and 1920. Foremost of these factors was the American experience with the war and the tensions it had caused at home. American military intervention in 1917 had caused serious rifts in many left-leaning organizations, such as unions and political parties. Although some elements of organized labor (such as the AFL) had supported the war effort fully, others (such as the I.W.W.) had not. A split had also occurred in the Socialist Party over the war issue, and its membership declined significantly after 1917. Eugene Debs (the Socialist Party's leader) continued to oppose the war after America's entry, and was convicted in 1918 of sedition and was imprisoned just after the war ended.³

Furthermore, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 had caused considerable concern in America (and a "Red Scare" fueled by the rise of communism there). Some bombings in the spring of 1919 led to an atmosphere of political intolerance and enhanced

²Letter of Mrs. Lon Dickenson to the *Minneapolis Tribune* (forwarded to the MCPS by the editor), February 17, 1919, Minnesota Commission of Public Safety Papers, Box 3, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter MCPS Papers].

³David L. Sterling, "In Defense of Debs: The Lawyers and the Espionage Act Case," *Indiana Magazine of History*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (March 1987), 17-42.

security. The Palmer Raids in 1919-1920 resulted in the detention and deportation of more than 500 American residents without trial (most of whom were suspected radicals and many of whom were deported to Soviet Russia). There was indeed a continuing extension of wartime intolerance towards leftist persons and movements. The progressives also found themselves without a renewed agenda and major leadership (Theodore Roosevelt had died in 1919, Woodrow Wilson was ailing by 1920, and Robert La Follette was at least somewhat discredited by his anti-war stand). Also, much of the progressive agenda had been accomplished by 1920, the last major initiatives of the movement being the passage of universal female suffrage and Prohibition in 1920. Progressive initiatives in general became less popular in the 1920s – a decade which would be characterized by isolationism, nativism, and suspicion of leftist ideologies (with communism becoming one of the most widely feared ones). There was also increased intolerance along racial and ethnic lines. The KKK rose again starting in 1915 and would reach a peak in America in the 1920s – and was even active in northern states such as Minnesota. Nativism, anti-immigration sentiment, and a strong sense of mainstream Americanization became social norms as well. Politically, the elections in 1918 had brought both the House and the Senate under Republican control, and President Wilson was unable to win Senate approval for the Peace of Paris and America's entry in the League of Nations. Isolationism – perhaps even encouraged by regret over intervention in the Great War – would be the American policy for much of the interwar period. Ironically, this position now gradually shifted from the left end of the political spectrum towards the right end as well. The 1920 presidential election would sweep the Republican candidate, Warren G. Harding, into office and usher in a long era of the Republican domination of Congress and the Presidency. The 1920s would be a decade of individualism, commerce, and the pursuit of

leisure. These trends would become the norm – reactions of a new generation against the continuous – and perhaps stifling – righteousness of the progressive era and the sacrifices of the war.⁴

For those Americans who choose to continue to embrace leftist politics, their choices were narrowed by the factionalism which was present on the left end of the political spectrum. In general, support for such left-of-center groups as the Socialist Party went into decline (although Debs – running for President in 1920 from his prison cell – managed to poll almost a million votes in the general election). Those parties and groups which remained on the left were often forced to either face a significantly diminished base, and/or align themselves with the communist regime in Moscow as a means of achieving some support or legitimacy. The Soviets had created the Comintern after their revolution as a means of “coordinating” workers’ revolutions in other countries around the world. Many leftist parties in America were forced to either follow the Moscow-led Comintern and its strict vision of socialism, or faced a rapid decline in influence. Membership in leftist parties in general fell in America during the 1920s (the growing farmer-labor movement in Minnesota would be one exception to this trend). The Socialist Party – which had made decent showings in many state and national elections until then – lost a significant portion of its voter base.⁵

⁴Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 304-315; see also David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1-65; see also Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle, *The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013), 47-72.

⁵Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1949), 404; see also John D. Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy: 1921-1933* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960), 16; see also “Application of the Socialist Party of America for Membership in the Communist International: A letter from Otto Branstetter to Grigorii Zinoviev” March 12, 1920, Document in the Comintern Archive f. 515, op. 1, d. 37, l. 2. (one of several examples of American leftist parties cultivating ties to the Comintern in an attempt to be recognized by Moscow as being the official party of American Soviet-sponsored socialism) <http://www.marxisthistory.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1920/0312-bran-applicationtoci.pdf>, accessed December 20, 2013.

Oppression by the political establishment of “Bolsheviks” and “agitators” was in full force – both nationally and in Minnesota in 1919-1920. After the war’s end, the anti-union Minneapolis Citizen’s Alliance was freed from its ties to the National Labor Board (which often discouraged confrontation with organized labor) and faced a much friendlier mayor in Minneapolis with the defeat of Thomas Van Lear in the 1918 election. The Citizen’s Alliance would remain a major obstacle to unionization in Minneapolis well into the 1930s. The result of the 1918 election had temporarily reinforced mainstream Republican politics in the state. However, the swift growth of the NPL-labor vote had been significant. This farmer-labor coalition would become increasingly well-funded, organized and determined during the period of 1919 to 1922. The experience of the war – and the polarization caused by the MCPS – lived on in the memories of many and became a rallying point for many anti-establishment voters – including German and Scandinavian-Americans resentful of their treatment during the war.⁶

In Minnesota, the question of how much the state government under Burnquist would continue to stifle political dissent in the absence of war initially remained an open question. The MCPS was in the process of being disbanded by early 1919. However, Governor Burnquist attempted to keep a state paramilitary force in place (the “Motor Corps”). In January-February 1919, he made efforts to retain the Motor Corps (an armed group originally organized by the MCPS) specifically as a means of combatting “socialism.” Although the Motor Corps (under the auspices of the MCPS) had committed acts of anti-labor and anti-NPL repression which had crossed constitutional lines during the war, its supporters were

⁶Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 315, 318-319; see also Millard Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 50-51.

apparently willing to overlook such actions as a necessary price to pay for maintaining public security. Even so, in two events in late 1918, the Motor Corps had also been afforded an opportunity to highlight its more beneficial nature, and this was noted by Governor Burnquist when he praised the Motor Corps in his inaugural speech in January 1919:

One of the best institutions, organized under the Safety Commission is what is known as the Minnesota Motor Corps. Our state is the only state in the country that has a uniformed, armed and organized military body of this kind. It is composed of 124 officers and 2,450 enlisted men. Nearly all of them are professional and business men, who have unselfishly given their time and the use of their cars without expense to the state. They have furnished their own uniforms and equipment. The services performed by these officers and men at the time of the Tyler tornado and during the recent forest fires are well known. The war has not developed in Minnesota a more useful body of men for all emergencies than the Motor Corps.⁷

Despite Burnquist's continued support for the role of the Motor Corps, in February 1919 a bill authorizing its continued existence was defeated in the Minnesota Legislature and the group was disbanded. Although there seemed to be some support for continuing the group as a paramilitary force, the issue of its cost appeared to be the major factor in its demise. Thus, despite the victory of the Burnquist faction in the 1918 election, the end of the war had caused a shift in the political atmosphere of the state. Although there were those willing to continue to use state-funded paramilitary forces to suppress "questionable" elements, a critical mass within the legislature would not support the cost to maintain such an approach.⁸

Political changes were in the offing in Minnesota. In May 1919, the death of Democratic Representative Carl C. Van Dyke provided the first electoral test in Minnesota

⁷*Inaugural Message of Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist to the Legislature of Minnesota*, 1919, 6. <http://archive.leg.state.mn.us/docs/NonMNpub/oclc18196670.pdf>, accessed September 13, 2013.

⁸Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 316.

for a national office since the 1918 election. A special election was called for the Fourth District congressional seat, which was chiefly composed of urban Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul. Once again, the Republican primary saw a struggle between the Old Guard and an outside challenger. The outsider candidate, Oscar E. Keller, was a St. Paul city commissioner, council member and utilities executive who was an outspoken supporter of organized labor. Keller had strongly supported labor's causes during his political career and his actions were not forgotten by this constituency.⁹ He openly supported the right to unionize, government provision of health insurance, and government ownership of transportation and communications facilities – significant issues in the Fourth District. He was also an active and outspoken supporter of St. Paul labor during the controversial street railcar strike in 1917-1918.¹⁰ Keller was defeated in his bid for the Republican nomination – but just like the Farmer-Laborites in 1918 – he ran as an independent in the general election. Keller was not endorsed by the NPL, and his platform did not focus on agricultural issues. However, his positions on labor issues reflected those of the labor wing of the farmer-labor coalition, and his candidacy was viewed favorably by them. In the general election, Keller beat his Republican-endorsed and Democratic-endorsed rivals by a significant margin, earning a plurality of the vote.¹¹ He then became an “Independent Republican” until he was officially endorsed by the party in the primary the following year (when he ran again and won as a Republican-endorsed candidate). Keller would remain an outsider to the party, however, and although he never officially aligned himself with the Democrats or the Farmer-

⁹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 52.

¹⁰“St. Paul Labor Elects Keller: Organized Labor in Minnesota Scores Another Political Victory by Naming Solon,” *The Labor World*, July 5, 1919.

¹¹*The Appeal*, July 5, 1919, 3.

Labor Party, he became a Farmer-Labor *de facto* ally. In many ways, his success in 1919 was indicative of some of the political changes to come in Minnesota in the early 1920s.¹²



Figure 6. Oscar Keller had served as a St. Paul City council member and a utilities executive. His strong support for labor causes made him an unusual candidate in the Republican Party, but very popular with the labor contingent in St. Paul. Keller used this base to win election in 1919 over his major party opponents in the general election. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Decline of the NPL and the Rise of the WPNPL

Even as the Burnquist faction's power over the Minnesota Republican Party and state government started to fade in 1919, other factors were emerging which would also have a significant effect on politics in the state in the coming decade. Keller's victory in 1919 had highlighted an important fact concerning the main political opposition in the state. Namely, that the NPL was not the sole major agent of potential political change in Minnesota, and that opposition based on labor-oriented platforms had significant potential. Keller had won the election based on his associations with labor; his ties to the NPL were virtually non-existent.

At the same time, there were substantial changes between 1919-1922 within the NPL that weakened its influence in Minnesota, North Dakota and elsewhere. A number of NPL representatives had been accused of sedition during the war, and several had been formally charged and prosecuted. These cases were often instances of local justice applied with extreme prejudice, and in most cases the charges did not stick. Arthur C. Townley himself was very careful in crafting his comments and writings during the war, constantly

¹²Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 319.

emphasizing the NPL's support for the war and his own personal role in the Liberty Bond campaign. Even so, in 1918, several local prosecutors attempted to indict Townley for sedition. One of these cases was carried forward to trial. In 1918, Townley and a codefendant (Joseph Gilbert, another League leader) were charged with sedition in Jackson County, Minnesota. The trial was scheduled for early 1919 in the county seat of Fairmont. The judge presiding over the trial had gone on record with his anti-NPL stance and had even been quoted in the local press labeling the NPL as a treasonous organization. The prosecutor was also known to harbor anti-League views. Yet despite this, no change of venue was granted, and none of the hand-picked jury members were NPL members. Townley's lawyers attempted to pursue a capable defense. However, the judge in the case was biased and often sustained the prosecution's objections. Thus, much of the evidence in Townley's defense was either not heard or not considered. Townley's lawyers eventually resigned in protest over the situation. Townley then asked the judge if he himself could make a closing defense statement, but was denied even this concession.¹³ Incredibly, the hand-picked jury initially had trouble coming to a decision, but after several hours of deliberation found Townley and Gilbert guilty. *The Nonpartisan Leader* ran a scathing editorial condemning the verdict ("a trumped-up charge of conspiracy") and shoring up support for Townley with statements from prominent liberals who denounced the trial's outcome.¹⁴ Townley soon filed for a new trial and made a series of appeals.¹⁵ He would remain free until these efforts were finally exhausted in late 1921. However, the trial and the many resulting legal proceedings took time and energy away from his main duties of managing the NPL, and this was occurring just as

¹³The reason given for this decision was that Townley could not be cross-examined after his own defense summation, see *Little Falls Herald*, July 18, 1919, 4.

¹⁴"National Leaders on the Townley Trial," *The Nonpartisan Leader*, August 18, 1919.

¹⁵*The Tomahawk*, December 25, 1919, 2.

the organization was facing its greatest threat.¹⁶ The Townley-Gilbert case went on for some time, finally ending up before the state supreme court, where the defendants were denied their petition to re-argue their case. A stay of ninety days was then granted for Townley's lawyers to file an application for review with the U.S Supreme Court. However, the case was not accepted there.¹⁷ Townley finally served his sentence starting in November, 1921 – more than two years after he had been found guilty.¹⁸

Also, between 1919 and 1921, the structure of the League itself began to shift and change as well. In its early days, the NPL had been a centralized organization with Townley at its head, concentrated geographically mostly in the Dakotas and Minnesota. From 1915 to 1919, the League had enjoyed the prospects of swiftly increasing membership (along with the continual increase in funding from dues payments). NPL success in the North Dakota elections of 1916 and 1918 had enabled the spread of the organization to other states in the west and Midwest by 1920. However, this expansion came at a price. State branches of the NPL began to assert more control over their own League chapters at this time, and increasingly began to collect the bulk of membership dues. The amount passed on to the national organization located in St. Paul decreased over time. This trend also occurred at about the same time that an agricultural recession set in after the end of the war. The drop in crop prices meant fewer farmer dollars were available for spending on political activity.

¹⁶Robert Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 255-261.

¹⁷“Townley Plea Denied,” *New Ulm Review*, July 20, 1921.

¹⁸“Jailing Townley,” *The Labor World*, November 26, 1921.

Thus, NPL membership and revenue declined starting in about 1920 – just as the national office was losing its control over the state branches.¹⁹

The political situation in North Dakota also began to change starting in 1919. Although the NPL-endorsed candidates had won an even larger sweeping victory in 1918 than they had in 1916, opposition to the NPL was growing substantially. The “New Day” of the NPL faction was increasingly challenged by a well-funded citizens’ group (the Independent Voters’ Association or IVA). The IVA was dedicated to the sole purpose of opposing the NPL agenda and the League itself – just as the NPL was reaching its peak of influence. From 1917-1921, the NPL was constantly berated by its critics and many of the mainstream North Dakota newspapers. During the war, it had been accused of harboring pro-German sympathies, being socialistic and disloyal (as it had been in Minnesota). Once the war had ended, the League was accused of complicity with Soviet “red” communism and of even harboring “free love” principles. Possibly the most damning criticisms however, were accusations of financial mismanagement (both within the League itself and within some of its newly created state enterprises in North Dakota). Some of these accusations seemed to have some validity. It was these factors – combined with Townley's reputation for running the League in a dictatorial fashion – that eventually began to lead to factionalism within the League and larger opposition to its activities in North Dakota.²⁰

A severe break occurred within the North Dakota NPL in 1919, when three of its original candidates from 1916 – led by the state attorney general, William Langer – publicly and vociferously broke with the League. Overnight, Langer and his companions became the

¹⁹Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), 32; see also Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 338.

²⁰Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 208-209.

League's strongest opponents and confirmed at least some of the criticisms that had been leveled against the NPL. Langer himself published a scathing "tell all" book in 1920 denouncing the League's dishonesty and its "socialist" leadership. The IVA jumped in to support these accusations, and between 1919 and 1921, North Dakota was awash in accusations and wild political rhetoric. Much of the controversy centered on newly created state entities such as the Bank of North Dakota. Charges of ineptitude, insolvency and cronyism tarnished the NPL image.²¹ Worse, because of the instability and politics associated with North Dakota's new state-owned enterprise initiatives, the buying of state bonds by outside sources was negatively impacted, with major financial institutions often refusing to make investments in such controversial entities.²²

To add to the North Dakota NPL's miseries, a power struggle broke out between the remaining League leaders at about the same time. Although the North Dakota NPL triumphed in most of its electoral races in 1920, its opposition was now stronger than ever and the League's margins of victory were slipping statewide. Soon after the 1920 election, the IVA planned a new strategy. Namely, they decided to undertake the process of initiating a recall election through petition – ironically, made possible by one of the reforms that had been implemented earlier by NPL legislators. Their goal was to force another election in the hopes of undoing the results of the 1920 election. The IVA then pursued a statewide initiative to gather the necessary number of signatures, which they succeeded in doing by September 1921. In late October of 1921, the recall elections were held and the NPL stalwart, Governor Lynn Frazier, was removed from office (until 2003, the only state governor ever to be

²¹William Langer, *The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities and Leaders* (Mandan, ND: Morton County Farmers Press, 1920), passim; see also Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 317, 322-324.

²²Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 307.

successfully recalled).²³ IVA candidates also made gains in other races. Although it was too early to decipher the NPL's long-term future, the League had been dealt its worst setback and would never fully recover. Even so, NPL (and former NPL) figures such as William Langer, Lynn Frazier and William Lemke would continue to be prominent figures in North Dakota politics for many years (often championing the agrarian cause). The 1921 recall campaign also attracted the support of Minnesota Governor Jacob A. O. Preus, who had faced his own NPL challenge in the 1920 elections in Minnesota [see below]. Preus campaigned in North Dakota on behalf of the IVA candidates – an indication of cross-state anti-league ties.²⁴

Elsewhere, the NPL had made gains in several states by 1921, including Montana, Colorado, and Wisconsin. However, the movement never attained a critical mass in those regions and – as in North Dakota – suffered decline after 1921. The national NPL office continued to exist, headquartered in St. Paul, Minnesota. However, the League was in decline there after 1920 as well. Much of this was due to the tarnish of league scandals, factionalism and accusations of “socialism.” However – as mentioned earlier – another practical and measurable reason for decline in NPL membership in Minnesota was a drop in crop prices starting in about 1920.²⁵ Although this economic squeeze made the farmers' conditions worse, it also had the effect of limiting their ability to pay optional expenses – including membership in the League. Membership dues began to dry up, and even some of those that were pledged were often not honored. Since membership dues were the most direct source of NPL funding, this had a detrimental effect on League finances. By the early 1920s, the NPL

²³Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 32.

²⁴“Farm League Not Out Yet: Nelson and Preus of North Dakota [sic] Say It Has Been Defeated but Not Finished,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1921, 83.

²⁵Douglas R. Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 42-43.

membership overall was in serious decline. By 1921, *The Nonpartisan Leader* itself would even cease publication.²⁶

The decline of the NPL contributed to Townley's loss of influence in Minnesota, and some of the movement's leaders there began asserting their leadership even before 1920.²⁷ After the League's defeat in the 1921 North Dakota recall election, Townley came under increasing criticism from members of the farmer-labor coalition in Minnesota, and his leadership lost any significant influence. By 1922, even the NPL convention in North Dakota refused to allow him a leadership role. As Townley and the NPL declined, support for his "nonpartisan" approach declined as well. As early as 1920 there were open discussions within the Minnesota farmer-labor coalition about forming a permanent official third party. Townley continued to oppose this approach, however, communicating directly to William Mahoney in early March that:

The purpose of the Non-Partisan League was not to develop or establish a political party . . . its main object was and is, to popularize and secure the realization of a definite legislative program . . . public sentiment in favor of political demands is more easily created when the effort is coupled with a minimum of partisan politics.²⁸

At the Minnesota NPL convention in 1922, Townley spoke vehemently against the creation of a third party, believing that it would simply absorb the League's interests without taking appropriate actions. At the same time, Townley realized that his stance was now in the minority and that his leadership role in the movement was ending. He resigned the League president's position in 1922. This action further strengthened the hand of those within the

²⁶Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 32; see also Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 347.

²⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 67.

²⁸Letter of Arthur C. Townley to William Mahoney, March 11, 1922, National Nonpartisan League Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter National Nonpartisan League Papers].

Minnesota farmer-labor coalition who wanted to create a third-party. This effort would be led mainly by urban-labor leaders under the direction of William Mahoney (a noted labor lawyer and former Socialist Party candidate for Congress) and Thomas Van Lear (a former union figure and the former Socialist Mayor of Minneapolis). They had begun their efforts earlier with the creation of the Working People's Nonpartisan Political League (often abbreviated WPNPL) in 1919.²⁹

Both Mahoney and Van Lear had a long history of championing the cause of labor in the political realm. Mahoney had graduated with a degree in law from the Indianapolis College of Law in 1902. His thesis addressed the issue of the law and social justice, and included the somewhat prophetic statement: "The law is conservative and changes slowly, compared with the social and industrial conditions . . . such tendency is overcome by the law of self preservation [sic] which . . . compels the adoption of such course as best subserves [sic] its own life and well-being."³⁰ Mahoney established himself in St. Paul as a lawyer specializing in labor causes and rose to lead a number of organizations, including eventually becoming the President of the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly. In 1914, Mahoney had run for Congress as a Socialist candidate in the Fourth District (with the campaign phrase "Defeat Capitalism: That Is The Labor Issue Today") – but lost the election.³¹ Mahoney had also been an outspoken supporter of Charles Lindbergh during his 1918 primary campaign,

²⁹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 69.

³⁰William Mahoney, "Indianapolis College of Law: Law School Thesis" (1902), 14, Mahoney Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Mahoney Papers].

³¹Mahoney 1914 campaign ad, Mahoney Papers, Box 2.

and had even drafted a letter to the editor of the *St. Paul Daily News* which strongly defended Lindbergh's campaign.³²

Van Lear was originally from Maryland, had worked in the Appalachian coal mines as a youth, and then served in the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War. Van Lear later settled in Minneapolis, where he became a machinist and the leader of a local union branch. From there, he moved into politics, running for Mayor of Minneapolis several times in the 1910s and for Congress in 1914 (all under the Socialist Party banner). He had a reputation as a dynamic speaker and energetic campaigner. Van Lear won the 1916 Minneapolis mayoral race, and served a two-year term as Mayor of Minneapolis starting in 1917, but was narrowly defeated in the 1918 election.³³

Mahoney and Van Lear had both separated from the Socialist Party in 1917 because of the party's opposition to the war. However, both men remained committed to the concept of government intervention in the economy, and had always strongly favored the cause of labor. In 1920, Mahoney responded in writing to questions about whether or not he considered himself to be a socialist. Mahoney responded in a detailed and articulate manner, rejecting doctrinaire classifications of his political views but also giving an indication of his belief in interventionist government. He also emphasized his belief that political education of the masses was a necessary step for bringing voters around to supporting leftist causes:

I am not a member of the Socialist Party. I severed my connection with it at the beginning of the world war at the time the Socialist Party ensured an attitude of hostility toward the United States government.

³²William Mahoney, Letter to the Editor (*St. Paul Daily News*), 1918, Mahoney Papers, Box 1.

³³David Paul Nord, "Minneapolis and the Pragmatic Socialism of Thomas Van Lear," *Minnesota History*, Spring, 1976, 3-4, 6.

During my connection with the Socialist Party, I never considered the organization of any practical political significance. I always deemed it an educational movement in which study and discussion of great economic and social questions were promoted.

The term “socialism” is a vague and indefinite one, and I have found a great range of diversity of ideas and beliefs among those connected with the party organization.³⁴

Thus, although both Mahoney and Van Lear had a previous strong Socialist Party association, by 1919, they had moved towards a wider definition of themselves and their movement. This was somewhat similar to Townley’s transformation (from 1914 to 1915) who – like Mahoney and Van Lear – had originally been a Socialist Party figure but had moved beyond the confines of that party towards a broader-based mass appeal political approach. Mahoney and Van Lear would take the same path, but in the realm of labor – as opposed to Townley’s agrarian approach.

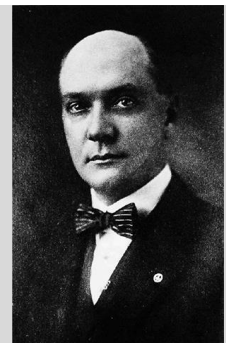
The recent rise in union membership in Minnesota was another reason why labor groups were beginning to exert a stronger influence over the farmer-labor coalition after 1919. Between 1916 and 1919, union membership within the state had grown significantly, and by 1919, the unionization rate of labor within Minnesota had risen to about 50%. Although Townley’s NPL had initially exerted more influence within the farmer-labor coalition, the WPNPL’s membership would grow quickly between 1919 and 1922, while the NPL membership would stagnate and then decline after about 1920. Eventually (and unquestionably) this trend would make the WPNPL the main body of the farmer-labor movement membership by 1922.³⁵

³⁴Letter of William Mahoney to H. K. Soule, April 12, 1920, Mahoney Papers, Box 1.

³⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 54.

The origins of the WPNPL sprang from existing labor organizations and their associated leading figures. These organizations had often conferenced on a regular basis, but rarely took steps to undertake sustained political efforts. For example, the Minnesota State Federation of Labor had met annually for over thirty years. However, it had never undertaken any extensive deliberate partisan political strategy. This changed during the 1919 convention, when – under the strong urging of Mahoney and Van Lear – the body decided to undertake sustained collective political action.³⁶

Figure 7. Thomas Van Lear in 1918. Van Lear had a long history of Socialist and pro-labor political activity in the 1910s. In 1916, he had been elected the first (and only) Socialist Mayor of Minneapolis. Later, he officially separated from the Socialist Party because of the war issue. Even so, he was unpopular with conservatives and business owners and was narrowly defeated in the 1918 mayoral election. *Photo courtesy of the Hennepin County Historical Society.*



Just before the Minnesota State Federation of Labor conference in July 1919, Mahoney and Van Lear drafted a working document outlining the purpose and goals of their proposed new organization, then titled the “Working People’s Non-Partisan Political League of Minnesota.” This document included a preamble, which asserted that the recent war had been caused by “military, industrial and political imperialists” and that concerted effort by organized labor was needed to prevent wars in the future. The document’s “Declaration of Principles” further claimed that the wealth and resources of the country were “capable of supplying abundantly all the wants of the people” but that “comparatively few individuals . . . arbitrarily determine the share of wealth that the mass of people shall receive.” The

³⁶Rhoda R. Gilman, *Stand Up! The Story of Minnesota’s Protest Tradition* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 71.

document further outlined a twelve-point “Political and Legislative Program” which called for – among other things – the right of collective bargaining, workman’s compensation, “complete equality of men and women” and “public ownership and operation of” most utilities, banks, modes of transportation, and “stockyards, packing plants, grain elevators, [and] terminal markets.” Mahoney and Van Lear then presented this plan at the convention.³⁷

The July 1919 New Ulm convention was attended by over 300 labor representatives. The agenda was dominated by Mahoney’s and Van Lear’s proposal to create their new league – the WPNPL – and ally it politically with the existing NPL movements of North Dakota and Minnesota. Like the NPL, this new WPNPL was to be “nonpartisan” – and its executive officers (which included Mahoney as President and Van Lear as Secretary-Treasurer) were officially required not to be “affiliated with any other political party.” This implied – in a sense – that the new organization was a sort of political party itself (even though it invited persons associated with all existing parties to join). In fact, some media accounts labeled the new group a “New State Political Party.” Mahoney also claimed that meaningful political reform must be enacted since people were losing faith in the democratic process and "something must be done because there is a trend toward direct action" instead. The delegates of the convention expressed overwhelming support for the proposed League, and the WPNPL was thus born.³⁸ From that point on, Mahoney and Van Lear would lead the political arm of the organized labor movement in Minnesota, eventually moving it towards the formation of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party.

³⁷*Working People’s Non-Partisan Political League of Minnesota: Declaration of Principles and Platform of Organized Labor of Minnesota*, July 20, 1919.

³⁸“Labor Delegates Organize New State Political Party,” *The Labor World*, July 26, 1919.

Shortly after the July 1919 convention, Mahoney and Van Lear – now officially President and Secretary-Treasurer of the newly-formed WPNPL respectively – sent out a form letter to labor groups throughout the state. This action represented the first major organization effort by Mahoney and Van Lear under the auspices of the WPNPL. They declared the advent of the WPNPL and invited all labor groups present at the convention – and those who were not – to join in “one great movement” to “exercise united action at the ballot box.” Mahoney and Van Lear further claimed that the WPNPL had been sanctioned by the Minnesota Federation of Labor in its mission, and that the goal was to enroll “every local labor union or lodge in the state.” In addition, unorganized workers and persons sympathetic with the WPNPL’s mission were invited to join as well. Membership dues were low, and were set at 25 cents a year for each member of any participating group. Though membership dues would increase over time, these dues remained substantially lower than NPL dues, and as a result presented less of a barrier to membership.³⁹

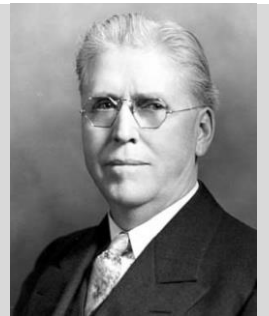
Mahoney then later also authored what appears to be the original draft of the Farmer-Labor Party constitution. This type-written document outlined would become the basis for the main structure of the party in the near future. This draft included defining the general purpose of the party (“to provide a political agency . . . to secure the enactment of laws that will promote the common welfare”) and membership procedures. Mahoney also outlined the organizational structure of the new party with a state central committee at the top, and extending down to the congressional district, county, and township/precinct level. The

³⁹Letter of William Mahoney and Thomas Van Lear of the WPNPL to “Organized Labor of Minnesota,” [likely August 1919], William Mahoney Papers, Box 2.

proposed constitution also established that a party state convention would meet in March of every election year.⁴⁰

Both Mahoney and Van Lear also signaled a strong partisan approach with their own campaigns for major offices. In March 1920, St. Paul held elections for mayor and the city council. The WPNPL sponsored a slate of five candidates (four for city council, and one for mayor). It was William Mahoney himself who was chosen as “Labor’s Candidate” for mayor.⁴¹ Although Mahoney lost the mayoral race, three of the four “Labor’s Candidates” won election to the city council.⁴² This episode can be viewed as the WPNPL’s first successful political victory – and also evidence of an increasing lean towards open “partisanship” on the part of the organization.

Figure 8. William Mahoney in 1932. Mahoney had a long career as a labor lawyer and political organizer. It was mainly through the combined efforts of Mahoney and former Minneapolis Mayor Thomas Van Lear that the labor element eventually became dominant in Minnesota’s farmer-labor coalition through their formation of the WPNPL in 1919. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



In May 1920, Mahoney called members of the fledgling WPNPL to a July conference at Rochester.⁴³ It was obvious that the WPNPL as an organization had done well in the past year. Even *The Rochester Daily Post and Record* – normally critical of the farmer-labor coalition – uncritically proclaimed the impending conference to be a meeting of the “Leading

⁴⁰William Mahoney, “Proposed Constitution and By-Laws for Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, Jan. 23” Mahoney Papers, Box 1, undated [likely 1919].

⁴¹*The National Advocate*, March 6, 1920, 4.

⁴²*Proceedings: Second Annual Convention of the Working People’s Nonpartisan Political League of Minnesota* (July 18, 1920), 4-5.

⁴³“Labor to Help Early Closing: Union Men and Families to Patronize No Store After Six O’clock Saturdays,” *The Labor World*, May 29, 1920.

Men of Labor.”⁴⁴ The resulting Second Annual Convention of the WPNPL met on July 18. A summary of the previous year’s progress was presented by Secretary-Treasurer Thomas Van Lear. Van Lear revealed that 75% of the organizations that had signed up with the WPNPL since 1919 had done so merely through correspondence. In other words, an effective letter campaign had saved the organization significant funds by using mail instead of directly sending speakers and organizers to recruit members (i.e., the old NPL method). Even so, this approach had managed to build a membership of 45,000 persons by July 1920. Van Lear also pointed out that – despite the coalition’s recent loss in the Republican primaries – “the fact is, we made very substantial gains. We have never carried in the state more than 30 counties before, now we have carried 54 counties out of a possible 86.”⁴⁵ There seemed to be little doubt in Van Lear’s mind that the WPNPL was growing substantially in both its membership and influence – and that political victory was just on the horizon. It was also evidence that – within a short period of time – the new WPNPL had eclipsed the NPL in terms of membership and organization. Mahoney and Van Lear then advocated joining with the NPL in the general election, and once again fielding farmer-labor coalition candidates in the November general election.⁴⁶

It should be noted that the new WPNPL structure extended its membership drive into the black communities of Minneapolis-St. Paul as well as into the realm of newly enfranchised female voters. The WPNPL included a women’s auxiliary league, and attracting female members and voters was a priority for Van Lear. Van Lear also personally courted

⁴⁴“Leading Men of Labor To Be On Hand,” *Rochester Daily Post and Record*, July 14, 1920.

⁴⁵*Proceedings: Second Annual Convention of the Working People’s Nonpartisan Political League of Minnesota* (July 18, 1920).

⁴⁶“Labor Holds Sway in Rochester: Nonpartisan Political Men Hold Meeting At The Armory,” *Rochester Daily Post and Record*, July 19, 1920.

black voters by making speaking appearances at black churches.⁴⁷ He and Mahoney also authorized the creation of a “colored” branch of the WPNPL (including a “Colored Women’s Nonpartisan Club”). These efforts were later rewarded when Van Lear ran for Mayor of Minneapolis in 1921 and he received the open support of the black community.⁴⁸

Over time, it became clear that Mahoney and Van Lear preferred the partisan strategy and had developed a strong desire to form an official third party. As the WPNPL membership grew, this view became more dominant within the movement as a whole as well. In 1921, Van Lear ran again for mayor of Minneapolis in an election centered chiefly on the issue of the unionization of the streetcar industry. He was again narrowly defeated. However, the WPNPL faction did well in the city council elections and would continue to make gains there until 1923.⁴⁹ Like the city council elections in St. Paul the year before, this trend seemed to indicate a rise in WPNPL power, and provided the earliest examples of farmer-labor electoral success. For the WPNPL base, these early victories validated their strategy of sustained, permanent political action. Their conclusion was not only to continue such activity, but also to form a third party to challenge the major parties more effectively. The growing influence of the WPNPL – as well as their early electoral victories – now became the main impetus for continued farmer-labor political activity. By 1921, the WPNPL dominated the Minnesota farmer-labor coalition – just as Townley’s leadership and the NPL itself was heading into serious decline.

⁴⁷*The National Advocate*, January 31, 1920.

⁴⁸*The Appeal*, June 11, 1921, 4; Van Lear’s popularity with the black community in Minneapolis can be traced all the way back to his term as mayor, when he sided with the black community in their opposition to a live staging of a production of *The Birth of a Nation*.

⁴⁹David Paul Nord, “Minneapolis and the Pragmatic Socialism of Thomas Van Lear,” *Minnesota History*, Spring, 1976, 10; see also Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 37.

The 1920 Election

Republican-led legislative efforts to blunt the rising edge of the farmer-labor movement began as early as 1919, when the legislature attempted to pass a bill that would have repealed the direct primary vote. However, House-Senate differences over the bill eventually ensured its defeat.⁵⁰ The defeat of this initiative meant that the Republican Party would face the same challenge that it had faced from the farmer-laborites in 1918. And so, in 1920, the farmer-labor coalition once again sought to infiltrate the Republican Party during the primary races in a bid to nominate their candidates. The coalition had made improvements in both organization and planning since the 1918 election, and seemed convinced that success was on the horizon. In the 1920 primaries, they ran candidates in all the congressional districts, and contested all of the major state offices.

The Republicans had largely fended off the farmer-labor challenge in 1918, but there was a realization that concessions needed to be made in order to shore up their electoral position. There was disagreement within the Republican Party over the nature and degree of such accommodations, however. The party was divided into several factions with competing interests. One was a steel faction based in Duluth and was centered on the iron mining industry located there and on the Iron Range. Another faction was centered on the milling industry in Minneapolis. The party also had its reformist wing, led by such figures as Jacob A. O. Preus and others. Despite these divisions, the Republicans did undertake to offer some reforms which appealed to both farmers and progressives. These included a tax on iron ore production and some tax relief for farmers. The iron ore “tonnage” tax was designed to

⁵⁰“Making a Legislature Change Its Mind: Primary Repeal Measure Killed by Minnesota Lawmakers at Demand of 100,000 Voters – Governor Vetoes Tonnage Tax,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, October 6, 1919.

extract more money from the iron industry, the idea being that the permanent extraction of such a finite and non-renewable resource should not be suborned without proper compensation to the state. In 1919, the tax had been proposed by the legislature but vetoed by Governor Burnquist. The party's eventual change on this issue positioned it to better appeal to undecided voters and defanged some of the anti-corporate rhetoric of the farmer-labor insurgency in the 1920 elections.⁵¹

During the 1920 primaries, the farmer-laborites actively sought to infiltrate the Republican races using all legal – but some potentially dishonest – means. State laws in place in 1920 dictated that major parties could require that their voters had voted for a “majority” of their party's candidates in the last election in order to qualify as bona fide party voters in the current primary election. This law was openly challenged by the farmer-labor leaders, however. Thomas Van Lear led the strategic charge in April 1920 by urging NPL and WPNPL members to answer only questions that were legally posed by party officials and judges during the primary, and – if questioned about their past vote for a “majority” – to simply “swear” that they had in fact done so. Van Lear's emergence as a leader in this instance is further evidence of the rise of the Mahoney-Van Lear leadership of the farmer-labor coalition, since Van Lear spoke on behalf of the entire movement, replacing Townley as chief spokesperson in this case.⁵²

In addition, the farmer-labor coalition also undertook an unusual failsafe strategy in the 1920 elections. They created a “Farmer-Labor party” shell organization as a means to create official nomination positions – in the event that their candidates who contested the

⁵¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 48-49.

⁵²“Townleyites Told How Law Can Be Evaded: Nonpartisans Advised to Swear They Voted Republican Ticket in '18,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 15, 1920, 1, 7.

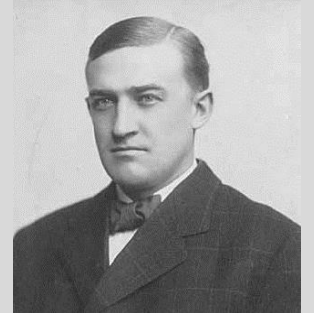
Republican primaries did not win them. These “nominations” were merely holds placed in case the NPL/WPNPL candidates would need to run in the general election outside the Republican Party. The plan was to withdraw these fake candidates in the general election, and then either throw all of their support to their candidates who won the Republican primary races or replace them later with more popular figures of the movement (i.e., those figures who were running in the Republican primaries but who might lose their primary race).⁵³

Although the Burnquist ticket had succeeded in winning the 1918 primary and general election, the race had been too close for comfort and the threat of NPL insurgency remained credible. By 1920, the Republicans were seriously concerned about another primary threat and had taken pains to make their candidates more attractive to the political center. Burnquist – one of the longest serving governors in Minnesota history and the icon of the Republican state war administration – was forced aside by party leaders in favor of his more moderate State Auditor, Jacob A. O. Preus. Preus himself was not sympathetic to NPL aims, nor did he hesitate to label “Townleyism” a dire socialist threat. However, Preus was more moderate in his platform than Burnquist and made an active effort both to appeal to undecided voters and to offer solutions that represented a significant change in Republican policies. Preus was openly sympathetic to farmers, proposing support for farmers’ cooperatives and rural credits. Preus also championed the “tonnage tax” to be assessed on iron ore mined in the state. The tax was not popular with the iron mining Republicans, but it was a necessary price to pay for Preus’s tack towards the political center. This strategy paid off, and Preus defeated his NPL-endorsed opponent in the Republican primary in June 1920.

⁵³The failure of this strategy was addressed by Mahoney at the subsequent WPNPL convention in 1921, see *Proceedings: Third Annual Convention of the Working People’s Nonpartisan Political League of Minnesota* (July 17, 1921), 3.

The iron ore tonnage tax then became a major issue in the governor's race during the general election. The state Republican Party – now under the more moderate tutelage of Senator Knute Nelson and Preus – then tacked back towards the right, labeling the League and its candidates a “socialist menace.” The phrase “Stop Socialism” became the major theme of the 1920 Republican campaigns in Minnesota.⁵⁴

Figure 9. Jacob A. O. Preus in 1918, running as a candidate for the State Auditor's office. Although strongly associated with the mainstream Republican Party, Preus took great pains to portray himself and his gubernatorial agenda as being moderate and friendly to farmers' interests. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



Despite Van Lear's strategy of encouraging voting in the Republican primaries whether or not league members were qualified to do so, the farmer-labor coalition candidates did not achieve wide success in the 1920 primaries. The lone exception to this was Oscar Keller's winning the Republican primary in the Fourth District. Although Keller had not been an officially-endorsed NPL/WPNPL candidate in 1918, his positions on labor issues attracted enough labor support within his district to earn him the nomination. Keller would remain an official Republican for the remainder of his congressional career, even though his stance on many issues were opposed to his own party and he was not supported by the Republican Party establishment during subsequent elections. Even so, the NPL/WPNPL base took pride on their decent showings in the primaries (since their margins of losses were often slim) – but substantial electoral victory remained an elusive goal.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 319-321; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 62.

⁵⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 55, 57, 59.

After its defeat in the Republican Party primaries, the NPL/WPNPL coalition decided – once again – to run independent candidates in the general election (as they had in 1918). However, several events transpired which weakened their general election efforts. Both the NPL and the WPNPL were planning to join forces in a single campaign for 1920. However, efforts by some national political activists to create a nationwide farmer-labor movement were being made at the same time in Chicago, and the controversy associated with this convention would have reverberations in Minnesota. This national gathering was dominated by radicals with little connection to the Minnesota movement but who sought to use the “Farmer-Labor” label as a cover for creating a new party dedicated to Soviet-style socialism. Both the local NPL leaders in Minnesota and Townley himself opposed any association with this national group. They widely believed that joining with the national movement would label the Minnesota movement radical as well (a label they desperately wanted to avoid). The WPNPL wing was less vehement on this issue, however. As a result, the WPNPL and the NPL were unable to agree on a coordinated general election strategy. The WPNPL-endorsed candidates took on the label of “Farmer-Labor” while the NPL-endorsed candidates simply ran as “Independents.”⁵⁶ Although the two factions did not compete against each other (the NPL ran candidates for Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Attorney General, while the WPNPL ran candidates for the offices of Secretary of State, Treasurer and Railroad and Warehouse Commissioner), their efforts were not coordinated and they ran their campaigns as two separate organizations. The 1920 general election resulted in a Republican sweep of power in which the Republicans won all of these major offices. However, many of the NPL

⁵⁶Although the label of “Independent” had been disallowed in the 1918 elections, apparently this approach was allowed in 1920. This may have been due to Andrew Volstead’s disqualification as an official Republican candidate and his own run as an “Independent” – a situation which necessitated the legal inclusion of this label in the 1920 general election by the Republicans.

“independent” candidates had finished in close second place, pushing the Democrats into a distant third place in many districts. The other “Farmer-Labor” faction members – those associated with the WPNPL – were clear losers in comparison to the NPL “independent” candidates. This indicated that rural farmer support for the movement was still alive and well – despite the slipping influence of Townley and the NPL itself. It was obvious however, that the movement needed more unity between the rural-agrarian wing and the urban-labor wing in order to win elections. Also, disassociation with the Chicago Farmer-Labor group was a further necessity (since the radical nature of that convention had tarred the Minnesota “Farmer-Labor” candidates during the campaign). Thus, the future of the party in Minnesota would hinge on the state movement asserting its complete independence from any association with the national Farmer-Labor Party in Chicago. However, this disassociation would not be complete until 1924 – and even then, charges of political extremism against Minnesota Farmer-Laborites would continue.⁵⁷

The 1920 election also saw the emergence of Henrik Shipstead as a statewide political figure for the first time. Of all of the Farmer-Labor candidates and political figures, Shipstead was initially the most prominent (next to Charles Lindbergh, Sr.), eventually becoming the longest-serving Farmer-Labor politician, and quite possibly the most capable political figure in the entire Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. Primary sources relating to Shipstead’s early years are scanty, but an authorized biography of him written by an admirer (Martin Ross) in 1940 provides an extensive background of Shipstead’s journey from humble farmer to political giant. The work – *Shipstead of Minnesota* – was published in 1940 without

⁵⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 61-62.

any bibliography or references, so it is impossible to verify its veracity. It seems clear that the work was intended to lionize Shipstead during his transition out of the Farmer-Labor Party and presents a very flattering picture of him. Even so, it is the singular biographical source used by almost all historians who describe Shipstead's political emergence.

Shipstead was one of eleven children born to Norwegian immigrants who were farmers in central Minnesota (in Kandiyohi County). As a boy, Shipstead learned both the ways of farming and the value of education. Taking after his father, he was a voracious reader from his early days, often taking a book out to the fields with him to read during breaks. As a young man, he came into contact with another young farmworker who had ambitions to attend dental school. Inspired by this other young man's ambition, Shipstead determined to go to dental school himself. He enrolled at Northwestern University in the early 1900s. In Chicago, he was influenced by the big city environment and the progressive political strains of the city, immersing himself in the debates of the time. In 1903, he graduated with a degree in Dentistry from Northwestern University. Shipstead then returned to Minnesota and set up a dental practice in the small town of Glenwood, in Pope County in the west-central region of the state.⁵⁸

Shipstead built his dental practice in Glenwood through hard work and networking, serving both the townspeople and local Scandinavian farmers. In a period of about nine years, he had become a popular figure in the town – known not just for his dentistry but also for his willingness to engage in political conversation (specifically, his support for farmer's causes and for Theodore Roosevelt's progressive aims). His popularity led him to become

⁵⁸Martin Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota* (Chicago: Packard and Company, 1940), 24-34; see also Barbara Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1968* (St. Paul, MN; Minnesota Historical Society, 1973), 76-77.

mayor of Glenwood in 1912, and he was re-elected in 1914. As mayor, he oversaw the authoring of a new charter for the town and worked cooperatively with city council members of both major parties. In 1916, he was chosen by the Republicans to run for state representative of the region, a race which he won handily. In November 1917, shortly after America entered the war, an NPL organizer came to Glenwood to hold a rally. Initially, the town's NPL supporters had rented the local opera house in order to hold their gathering. However, when the town's leading citizens and the local MCPS chapter heard of the impending meeting, the opera house owners canceled the rental and refused to host the rally. Some NPL supporters then approached Shipstead and asked him to intervene. Shipstead walked down the street to the opera house and rented it himself – and then turned control of the space over to the NPL organizers. The meeting was then held as planned. The sheriff and members of the local branch of the MCPS upbraided Shipstead for this action, but he simply replied that the Constitution guaranteed the right of free speech. Later that same day, Shipstead intervened again to escort the NPL speaker safely out of town when the threat of mob action emerged after the rally.⁵⁹ However, this dramatic account offered by Martin Ross in 1940 cannot be verified. In fact, an investigation performed by a local journalist in 1994 revealed no evidence of an NPL rally or disturbance in Glenwood during November 1917 (although it is uncertain whether or not such an event would have been chronicled by the local newspaper, the *Glenwood Herald*).⁶⁰ Even so, NPL meetings were officially banned in Pope County in February 1918.⁶¹ Whatever the veracity of this episode in Shipstead's life, there was apparently enough connection between him and the NPL to boost his credibility

⁵⁹Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota*, 34-38.

⁶⁰Dallas Ouren, "Shipstead may be one of Glenwood's most famous people: City dentist went on to become U.S. Senator for 24 years," *Pope County Tribune*, July 18, 1994.

⁶¹"County Public Safety Director Bars Non-Partisan Meetings," *Glenwood Herald*, February 7, 1918.

within the movement – even though he himself was not a member and apparently had no desire to become closely associated with the organization itself.

In 1918, the NPL had approached Shipstead and asked him to run for Congress in his district against the Republican incumbent, Andrew Volstead. Shipstead accepted this challenge and ran in the primary against Volstead as the NPL-endorsed candidate. Shipstead performed better in his race than his more famous colleague, Charles Lindbergh, Sr., did in the governor's race. Although Shipstead lost the primary, the percentages were so close that for some time, it seemed that he may have won an upset victory. However, Shipstead paid a heavy price for his campaign. Like Lindbergh, he was labeled a traitor. His opponents in Glenwood even painted his house yellow in retribution. After the campaign of 1918, Shipstead became a controversial figure in Glenwood – and his dental practice there began to decline.⁶²

Shipstead continued pursuing political issues, however. His profile had now been raised to a higher level, and by 1919, he was one of the more prominent figures within the growing farmer-labor movement. As Townley's NPL came into closer coordination with Van Leer's and Mahoney's WPNPL after 1919, the coalition began looking for established candidates with a proven track record to run in the Republican primaries. Shipstead was high on their list. In 1920, the coalition looked for a gubernatorial candidate with broad appeal. Both Van Lear and Shipstead were considered, but in the end, it was Shipstead's candidacy that prevailed.⁶³ Van Lear graciously accepted defeat, going so far as to discourage his

⁶²Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota*, 38-39.

⁶³“Victory Ticket Named in Minnesota: People's Forces Ready to Go Over the Top in Winning Fight for Democracy,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, April 12, 1920.

supporters from challenging the decision and later even campaigning alongside Shipstead.⁶⁴ Shipstead plunged into yet another Republican primary campaign. This was his first statewide campaign, and he undertook it with humble means, often driving himself in his own car from town to town, stopping to speak at meetings and church socials, and asking for campaign donations in the form of “gas money” to get him to his next destination.⁶⁵ As in 1918, Shipstead faced significant hurdles from the Republican opposition – including being shut out of an auditorium in Duluth.⁶⁶ Even so, Shipstead was so popular a figure, that there were a number of predictions that he would win the primary race.⁶⁷ In the end however, Shipstead lost the primary – but he had built up a state-wide voter base and had honed his campaign skills. Following the strategy used by the coalition in 1918, he was then endorsed by the NPL as an “Independent” for Governor in the 1920 general election, and he continued to run a similar campaign in the general election.⁶⁸ This double campaign of 1920 would bring him into direct contact with thousands of Minnesota voters and help to propel his reputation as a candidate of note.



Figure 10. Henrik Shipstead in an undated photo from the late 1920s. Shipstead was one of the Farmer-Labor Party’s earliest and most dynamic candidates. Shipstead would eventually become the longest-serving Farmer-Laborite in Congress. *Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

⁶⁴“Nominees for State Offices Named by Labor and Farmers,” *The Labor World*, April 3, 1920 and “Shipstead Meeting at Woodman Hall Thursday,” *The Labor World*, October 23, 1920.

⁶⁵Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota*, 40-43; see also Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota*, 77-78.

⁶⁶“Does The Shrine Refuse?” *The Labor World*, May 29, 1920, 4.

⁶⁷*Freeborn County Standard*, June 3, 1920, 6.

⁶⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 61-62.

Shipstead's aspirations for the governor's office in 1920 left a vacancy for a viable Farmer-Labor candidate in the Seventh District. This vacancy was filled by the political newcomer, Ole J. Kvale. Kvale was born and raised in northeast Iowa, near Decorah. After completing college at nearby Luther College, Kvale had faced career indecision. Strongly influenced by his father and his faith, he entered the Lutheran theological seminary in Minneapolis several years later. After he was ordained, Kvale served most of the time as a minister between 1894 and 1917 in rural Wisconsin. In 1916, he graduated with an advanced degree from the University of Chicago. In 1917, he was re-assigned to be the pastor of a Lutheran Church in Benson – the county seat of Swift County – about 30 miles southwest of Glenwood in west central Minnesota. Kvale's immersion in the Lutheran religion and rural life no doubt influenced his outlook. Shortly after his arrival in Benson, Kvale became connected to the NPL movement, emphasizing the moral aspects of non-exploitation as a campaign theme. Kvale's speaking skills – no doubt honed by years of speaking in front of congregations – were enough to generate sufficient support within the regional NPL constituency to attain their endorsement for the congressional seat in the Republican primary.⁶⁹

Kvale's primary campaign in 1920 was the most successful of all of the major NPL candidates. In the primary contest in June, he actually beat the incumbent Representative Andrew J. Volstead, polling 17,369 votes to Volstead's 15,059.⁷⁰ It looked as though the Farmer-Laborites might have their first victory for a national office. However, a group of "contestants" (plaintiffs) led by I. P. Flaten swiftly brought suit against Kvale in July,

⁶⁹Ole J. Kvale Papers, Box 2, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Ole J. Kvale Papers]; see also Bruce L. Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota: A Political Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), 259, 261.

⁷⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 59.

alleging that the Lutheran minister had violated a 1913 campaign law which forbade any candidate to “knowingly make false statements” against their opponent. Kvale was accused by these contestants of labeling Volstead “an atheist” in both speech and print during the primary campaign. Indeed, Kvale had distributed literature with the following quote: “If, as I understand, Mr. Volstead is a pronounced atheist and opposed to the Bible, that is his affair.” The case eventually wound up on the Minnesota Supreme Court, which found in favor of Flaten et al in October and invalidated Kvale’s nomination.⁷¹ Even so, the court refused to allow an official Republican endorsement of Volstead. The timing of this decision was detrimental to the efforts of both campaigns, and neither side was satisfied with the ruling. Even so, the incumbent Volstead ran as an “Independent” in the 1920 general election, and Kvale did essentially the same thing. In the end, Volstead won the general race – but only by a slight margin.⁷²

Figure 11. Ole J. Kvale in the 1920s. Kvale first ran for Congress in the 1920 Republican primary and had outpolled his opponent by a considerable percentage. However, the primary result was successfully challenged by his opponents, who accused him of falsely labeling Volstead an atheist. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



Charles Lindbergh, Sr. also returned as a farmer-labor candidate in the 1920 election. After his unsuccessful primary campaign in 1918, Lindbergh had turned his attention to the publication of *Lindbergh’s National Farmer* – initially a large and attractively colorful magazine. The magazine’s content covered some issues of concerns to farmers, but was

⁷¹Ole J. Kvale Papers, Box 2; a set of court documents relating to this case are in his papers.

⁷²Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 62.

mostly a vehicle for Lindbergh's political editorials – which maintained many of the themes that he had enunciated in earlier years [see Chapter Two]. Low subscription numbers (never more than a few thousand) along with a rise in printing costs forced Lindbergh to scale back the publication until it was no more than a three-by-six inch black and white pamphlet by January 1920. After losing money on the project and seeing no hope for turning a profit, Lindbergh discontinued the publication in March 1920.⁷³

The drama of the 1920 Republican primaries attracted Lindbergh's attention, but not his participation. Shipstead's failure to capture the Republican nomination had essentially mirrored his own experience two years earlier. However, after being approached by several groups, Lindbergh agreed to consider running in the general election as the NPL-endorsed "Independent" candidate for his old Sixth District congressional seat – with the stipulation that a sufficient number of signatures were gathered to demonstrate enough voter support. By August 1920, these signatures had been collected and Lindbergh was on board – if even only reluctantly. During the campaign, Lindbergh emphasized his "independent" status. His opponent, Republican Harold Knutson, emphasized his own party affiliation and his opposition to radical politics – an obvious barb aimed at Lindbergh and his associations with the NPL. No Democratic candidate was fielded in this race and the results were much more lopsided than Lindbergh's 1918 campaign. Lindbergh lost to Knutson by a ratio of more than 2 to 1, earning less than 31% of a vote contested only by himself and Knutson. In fact, Lindbergh – once the standard bearer of the fledgling farmer-labor coalition – had one of the

⁷³Lindbergh Family Papers, Box 10, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Lindbergh Papers], a copy of the January 1920 edition of *Lindbergh's National Farmer* is in his papers; see also Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 255-256.

worst showings of any farmer-labor candidate, even though he was running within his own home district.⁷⁴

The mainstream press trumpeted the Republican Party's 1920 triumphs, going so far as to declare "the rout of Townleyism" and that "the nonpartisan league . . . has ceased to exist as a dangerous factor in Minnesota politics." Interestingly enough, it was also recognized that – despite the label of "Townleyism" – that the movement was increasingly under the leadership of Mahoney and Van Lear as well.⁷⁵

However, the farmer-labor movement was far from finished. Although defeated in the 1920 general election, measurable gains had been made. Many within the NPL/WPNPL ranks could sense future impending victory. In fact, *The Nonpartisan Leader* – always eager to depict the movement in a positive light – trumpeted that the movement had earned a million votes in 1920 – a figure which had increased in size by a factor of four since the 1918 election.⁷⁶ The farmer-labor coalition thus began to look to the next election. Some NPL-endorsed candidates had been elected to the state legislature in 1920, and this was taken to be a good sign. Many of the other races had been close. The Democratic Party appeared to be continuing to head towards insignificance – at least on the statewide level and in most districts outside of St. Paul. Their voter percentages were consistently and significantly lower than most of the farmer-labor candidates, especially in the western and northwestern parts of the state.

An early electoral test came in 1921 with a special election for the Mayor's office in Minneapolis. As noted earlier, Thomas Van Lear ran for his former position, but was

⁷⁴Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 259-260.

⁷⁵"The Rout of Townleyism," *Rochester Daily Post and Record*, November 8, 1920, 8.

⁷⁶"A Million Votes Cast for the League Program!" *The Nonpartisan Leader*, November 15, 1920.

narrowly defeated. Even so, between 1920 and 1923, WPNPL candidates made gains on the Minneapolis City Council, and would eventually constitute a majority. This signaled a shift in Minneapolis from 1916 to early 1920s when much of Van Lear's original voter base moved from supporting Socialist candidates to supporting Farmer-Labor figures instead. This trend also established the strength of the urban-labor voter base even before 1922.⁷⁷

The Republican Exclusion Strategy of 1921

The close elections in Minnesota in 1920 had been yet another stern warning to the Republicans within the state, and it underlined their need to take action to prevent future NPL/WPNPL insurgencies within their primaries. Their eventual solution was an exclusionary primary law, which they would legislate in 1921. In fact, the planning for this initiative had begun much earlier (in March 1920), when 1100 Republicans "voluntarily" met at an unofficial statewide convention to consider the question of how best to deal with the growing farmer-labor challenge.⁷⁸ At this time, the NPL faction in North Dakota had reached the peak of its power, and it had become apparent that the NPL would be running candidates in the Republican primaries in Minnesota in the 1920 races as well. Leading Republicans thus recognized that they needed a defensive strategy against them.⁷⁹

Upon his election as governor in late 1920, Jacob A. O. Preus began working on a proposal which he presented to the legislature in his inaugural address in early 1921. In the

⁷⁷Nord, "Minneapolis and the Pragmatic Socialism of Thomas Van Lear," 10.

⁷⁸The term "voluntarily" should be interpreted to mean *unofficially*, since an official meeting might attract persons who favored the growing farmer-labor coalition.

⁷⁹Jacob A. O. Preus, "Stillwater Speech," June 12, 1922, Jacob A. O. Preus Papers, Box 23, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Preus Papers].

first section of his speech titled “Election Reform,” the incoming Governor Preus announced on January 5, 1921:

That the laws relating to primary elections are defective is universally conceded. Any law which permits a party candidate who is defeated at the primary election of his party to become a candidate of another party for the same office at the ensuing general election is not only absurd and politically dishonest, but it makes a mockery of the oaths of party allegiance voluntarily taken by all candidates who file at the primary.

The Republican platforms of March 20th and May 8th, 1920, each specifically declares in favor of legislation providing for the nomination of party candidates by the convention system and prohibiting the misuse of the party name. Legislation covering these points should be promptly passed. The convention system can be easily safeguarded at its source by requiring delegates to be elected by the primary method, and by having the returns of the election of the delegates officially canvassed and declared, contests can be eliminated, and honest conventions fully representing the people assured.

Under our law the members of the legislature are elected without party designation. This is a paradox. Political parties are a necessity in representative government, and will exist whether recognized by law or not.

To illustrate, an organization exists in Minnesota the foundation of which is political. Not only has it avoided recognition as a political party, thus evading the legal obligation of every political organization to give due publicity to its expenditures, but it has deliberately disregarded and ignored the will of the majority of a great political party as expressed at the primary election. At the last primary election, it undertook to nominate its candidates on the Republican ticket and failing to do so caused its candidates' names to be printed upon the election ballot as nominated by petition.

I call attention to this fact to show that whether the law provides for the recognition of political parties or not, they will exist just the same. Political parties exist so far as the legislature of the State of Minnesota is concerned notwithstanding the fact that the members thereof are elected without party designation. But whether members of the legislature should be elected upon party tickets and party platforms is peculiarly a question for the legislature itself to determine, and I refer the question to the legislature believing that in its wisdom, it will find the correct answer.⁸⁰

⁸⁰*Inaugural Message of Governor Jacob A. O. Preus to the Legislature of Minnesota, January 5, 1921, https://books.google.com/books?id=XFURAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA3-PA3&dq=Inaugural+message+Preus&hl=en&sa=X&ei=OwCSVY__O5T_yQTbILfoDQ&ved=0CCwQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=Inaugural%20message%20Preus&f=false, accessed September 24, 2013.*

With this declaration, the intent and strategy of the Republican Party *vis-à-vis* the growing farmer-labor coalition became abundantly clear. Given the experience of the recent elections, this exclusion strategy seemed to have merit, since the proposed approach would either prevent farmer-labor candidates from running in the Republican primaries or prevent those who did from running as opponents in the general elections. Either way, the Republican Party leadership had calculated that it would benefit from this approach and that with this primary exclusion law the farmer-labor challenge could be headed off. Unfortunately for Preus and his Republican allies, this bit of legislation would have unintended consequences, and these would become obvious very quickly starting in 1922.

The Republicans held a majority in the 1921 legislature and they concurred with the governor on the issue of primary exclusion strategy. In 1921, the Minnesota Legislature officially passed the new primary law – much as it was outlined in Preus’ inaugural speech. At first, it seemed that the Republican Party had triumphed with their legislative efforts and had achieved the security for their primaries which had eluded them in the last two elections. In addition, by April the Minnesota Legislature under Preus’ “masterful leadership” had also passed the iron ore tonnage tax and extended the state Department of Agriculture to oversee more aspects of the agricultural sector, allowing for some expansion of cooperatives within the state.⁸¹ Together, it was hoped that this “carrot and stick” approach would satiate farmer demands and stem the rising tide of farmer-labor politics in the state.

However, instead of ending the farmer-labor challenge, the primary exclusion law simply encouraged the farmer-laborites to form their own official party. In addition, all of the

⁸¹George E. Akerson, “State Legislation Ends Record Session: Pledges Made By G.O.P. All Carried Out,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, April 21, 1921, 1.

major parties later complained about aspects of the primary exclusion law, many of which were unwieldy. Since the law had the opposite effect that was originally intended by its Republican authors, and because the law was unpopular within all of the major parties, it was repealed in 1923 – but not before the damage to the Republican Party had been done.⁸²

In the meantime, between 1921 and 1923, the implications of this new law would become clear. Far from discouraging challenges, the passage of the exclusionary primary law had a decisive nurturing effect on the formation of the new Farmer-Labor Party. Since the farmer-labor coalition was essentially excluded from running in the major party primaries, and because a critical mass of the coalition had by now abandoned Townley’s embrace of the “nonpartisan” approach, the decision to form an official third party was almost a foregone conclusion. The farmer-laborites – now led largely by Mahoney’s and Van Lear’s WPNPL – would begin these efforts in earnest in 1921, sowing the seeds of their new party and reaping the harvest of their efforts in the 1922 elections.⁸³

The Creation of the Farmer-Labor Party

The economic grievances of both the farmer and labor constituencies remained significant in the early 1920s and continued to fuel political discontent within the state. Crop prices had dropped after World War I, creating a renewed agricultural recession starting in the early 1920s. While it is true that this greatly impinged upon the NPL’s membership drive and its funds, it also increased farmer discontent with the economic situation and seemed to stiffen their political resolve. In other words, the NPL itself may have begun to fade away

⁸²William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN; Minnesota Historical Society, 1926), Volume III, 374.

⁸³Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 37-41; see also Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 343-344.

after 1921, but the grievances of many ordinary farmers did not. This increased farmer discontent enabled the agrarian wing of the coalition in Minnesota to gain members through 1920, and then retain them as voters in the 1922 election. At about the same time, union membership had increased in the state, and although many of these unions were relatively new (“mushroom unions” that had sprouted quickly), they nevertheless represented a wide base of organized labor that could be mobilized for political action. Whereas Townley had been the first to suggest a farmer-labor fusion, it would be Van Lear and Mahoney who would take the lead on cementing this alliance, and see this initiative through to completion. They would achieve this by maintaining farmer support for a wider movement as the rural-agrarian constituency essentially abandoned the NPL and its nonpartisan approach, and instead openly embraced the creation of a new third party – the Farmer-Labor Party.⁸⁴

After the failures of the 1920 general election, the leaders of the farmer-labor movement worked to keep its most successful elements while rejecting those which clearly did not work. What worked was the formation of a broad political coalition based on farmer and labor demands, which commanded a significant portion of the electorate and could become a major political base. Grassroots organization and campaigning in communities advocating the farmer-labor political agenda also worked, and was retained. What did not work was an association with radical politics. A clear stand against radicalism – or socialism or communism, etc. – was thus necessary for the party’s advancement. This meant the disassociation of the fledgling Minnesota party from the national Farmer-Labor groups in Chicago. What had also clearly not worked was the primary insurgent strategy of 1918 and

⁸⁴Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 65-66.

1920. Since the implementation of the 1921 primary law precluded the insurgency approach for 1922 anyway, the necessity to form a political party now became obvious. This initiative was joined with new efforts to portray the movement as populist but not radical. Farmer-Labor figures such as Henrik Shipstead (and others) would increasingly portray themselves as representing significant but reasonable reforms intended to address legitimate economic grievances.⁸⁵

By the time that the WPNPL held its annual convention in July 1921, a definite change was in the offing for the League's political strategy. In his report to the delegates, President Mahoney noted that the strategy used in 1920 of running candidates in the Republican primaries and then switching out these failed primary candidates to run in the general election had not only caused tension within the movement's ranks but had simply not worked. That fact – in conjunction with the recent Primary Exclusion Law and the need to focus efforts on a single campaign strategy – led Mahoney to forcefully advocate for a change in the WPNPL's "nonpartisan" approach. Mahoney further suggested that farmer-labor voters would never carry NPL/WPNPL candidates in the Republican primary races because they could not "hold their noses" and "stomach the thought of asking for a Republican ballot" during the primaries. In other words, in order to maximize the movement's electoral support "The wisdom of continuing as a nonpartisan organization has

⁸⁵Leslie Gene Rude, "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1962, 46; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 71.

been brought into question . . .” and that the time had come to seriously consider forming a third party.⁸⁶

Led by the WPNPL, the farmer-labor movement undertook the task of unifying its organizational units and establishing party headquarters in all of the state’s counties. Believing that the essence of their agrarian agenda had been retained by the state movement, by late 1921 most of the NPL membership had embraced the third party approach as well and looked to the WPNPL leadership to create this new party structure. Although Townley continued to speak out against the third party strategy, a critical mass of the movement’s members were now firmly in support of creating a new political party in Minnesota. By late 1921, there were discussions about the party’s name. The label “Progressive Party” was one choice that was offered. However, in the end – and despite the potential association with the national movement in Chicago – a majority of leaders and members decided to keep their original name: “Farmer-Labor.” It was at this point that the party was officially born. A set of women’s auxiliary organizations was formed from within both the NPL and WPNPL which complemented the new structure, and actively sought to recruit female supporters. The party itself then established central committees in various regions of the state to coordinate and authorize party activity. Funds were also diverted from the NPL/WPNPL to create the new *Minneapolis Daily Star* newspaper, which became an early media outlet of the party, and from its inception had a significant circulation.⁸⁷

⁸⁶*Proceedings: Third Annual Convention of the Working People’s Nonpartisan Political League of Minnesota* (July 17, 1921), 3-5.

⁸⁷Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 38-40.

The organizational gains of the movement were made obvious by the time of the joint NPL/WPNPL convention in Minneapolis in March 1922. This meeting would prove to be the final debate about both pursuing the third party strategy and about combining the two groups into the Farmer-Labor Party. Delegates from both sides agreed that any candidates endorsed by the convention would be filed solely on the Farmer-Labor Party ticket, and would run only as Farmer-Labor candidates. It took several meetings in April to finalize the party's choice of candidates, and coordinate the official merging of the two groups. In July 1922, the WPNPL held its last statewide convention, at which point it effectively liquidated its assets entirely into the Farmer-Labor Party organization ("Resolution No. 1"), and sent messages to the NPL groups across the state to do the same. These NPL groups complied with the WPNPL directive as well – further proof that the Mahoney-Van Lear leadership was the driving force behind the creation of the party. These groups would retain their NPL and WPNPL titles for some time; however, it was now understood that they were essentially chapters of the new Farmer-Labor Party.⁸⁸

The Election of 1922

The Minnesota Farmer-Labor campaigns of 1922 were different from the earlier elections simply because the path to victory – or defeat – was clear from the beginning. Unlike the 1918 and 1920 elections, there was no two-pronged strategy – either in terms of splitting the farmer and labor support for different candidates, or in running separate

⁸⁸*Proceedings: Fourth Annual Convention of the Working People's Nonpartisan Political League of Minnesota* (July 16, 1922), 3-5, 7, 10.

campaigns for the primaries and the general election. This enabled the party to concentrate all of its efforts on recruiting both voters and viable candidates, spread its campaign message to the voting public, and place most of its emphasis on the general election race. In addition to running candidates for the state legislature, the Farmer-Labor Party also contested the highest state offices – including the governor’s seat. On the congressional level, the party reduced its ambitions in 1922, running candidates in only eight of Minnesota’s ten districts. However, the real prize was the open Senate seat, and this race would become the most visible campaign in Minnesota in 1922.⁸⁹

As before, the leading statewide figure of the Farmer-Labor campaign in 1922 was Henrik Shipstead. From 1920 to 1922, Shipstead had established himself in Minneapolis and had agreed to become part of the Farmer-Labor third party strategy. Even so, his nomination for the Senate was not assured until he pushed for it himself. When delegates at the statewide convention had waived in nominating him, Shipstead showed up and urged them to “stick to their guns.” Without question, Shipstead was sufficiently well-known, a great speaker, an experienced campaigner, and followed a careful path in his rhetoric which passionately called for meaningful reform but avoided the “hot button” phrases and planks that might label him as a socialist radical – although he did assert that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats could serve the voters effectively.⁹⁰ He presented a program called “the new deal” which was friendly to farmer and labor interests without suggesting the dismantling of capitalism. He avoided association with the radical elements of the Farmer-Labor Party (his main opponents within the party) and any oratory that called for building a new social order

⁸⁹Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 41.

⁹⁰Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota*, 56.

or other obviously socialistic planks. His credibility was also enhanced by his Norwegian background and his Minnesota rural-agrarian roots.⁹¹

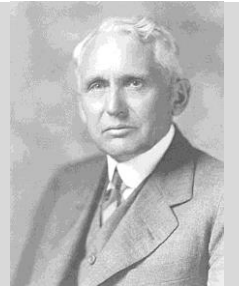
In the general election, Shipstead faced the Republican incumbent, Senator Frank Kellogg. Kellogg had strong support from within his own party, and had made significant contacts in Washington, D.C., since his arrival there in early 1917. Kellogg was also known to be relatively friendly to agrarian interests. However, Kellogg had an image problem that was hard to dispel. Shipstead and other critics portrayed Kellogg as the ultimate tool of corporate interests, a bought-and-paid for politician (he had worked directly for U.S. Steel for a number of years, even prosecuting a competitor in the name of “trustbusting”). Kellogg was lambasted for consistently voting in favor of corporate interests and for being chauffeured around in an expensive Pierce-Arrow automobile – an image which represented the epitome of an out-of-touch elitist politician. In fact, Kellogg had advocated strongly for some farm issues between 1920 and 1922, but the image of his earlier years in office and his consistent alignment with the steel interest hounded him. In contrast, Shipstead conducted his statewide campaign by driving himself around in his own car (as he had in 1920), appearing at church socials and outdoor gatherings, making speeches, and often winning over undecided or even opposed voters. There is little doubt that Shipstead spoke to more voters and projected a “common man” image much more ably than Kellogg did. Shipstead’s oratorical abilities – even in the face of a hostile audience – were also impressive, and he was often able to win over critical crowds when he spoke to them in person.⁹²

⁹¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 73.

⁹²Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota*, 48, 52-53.

Kellogg was also hurt by a personal rivalry with Preus and by the defection of the Republican Representative from the Tenth District, Thomas Schall, who openly supported Shipstead in the Senate race. The reasons for Schall's support for a Farmer-Labor Senator stemmed from his liberal tendencies and personal opposition to Kellogg.⁹³ Schall also had some supporters within the NPL, and his name had even been suggested earlier for NPL support. Schall was even praised by *The National Leader* during the campaign for his efforts in aiding Shipstead's campaign.⁹⁴

Figure 12. Frank Kellogg in about 1925. Although Kellogg's Senate career would end in the early 1920s, he would return to the national political stage in the mid-1920s when he became Secretary of State under President Calvin Coolidge. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



Kellogg was further plagued by lingering associations with the wartime Republican establishment in the state. Specifically, a question arose over the appointment of former MCPS member John McGee to a federal judge's seat in Minnesota in 1922. The former MCPS hardliner (who had testified before a congressional committee during the war and had suggested that dissenters should be shot) sought support for this new position from his Republican colleagues. However, McGee faced stiff opposition in his efforts, and his attempts to win the judge's seat began to bring up sore issues from the recent past, since sentiments against McGee and the MCPS remained strong. Some Republican figures had to back away from openly supporting him. This included Senator Kellogg, who refused to push

⁹³Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota*, 79.

⁹⁴"League Farmers Score Great Victories," *The National Leader*, November 1922, 7.

for McGee's appointment during the 1922 campaign. In the end, McGee received the federal judge's appointment anyway – although he later committed suicide in 1925, citing his extreme workload and a high degree of anxiety.⁹⁵



Figure 13. John McGee in 1918. McGee had been one of the most ardent enforcers of the MCPS during 1917-1918. McGee's attempt to secure a federal judge's seat in 1922 became an embarrassment for the Republican Party in Minnesota, who preferred not to endorse such a controversial figure. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Shipstead was also helped in his campaign by the appearance of Robert La Follette at rallies in Mankato and St. Paul. Although controversial, La Follette was still a big national political name with considerable influence and drawing power. His well-known progressive and isolationist sentiments had once again become popular with many after the end of World War I. La Follette's impassioned attacks against Kellogg created a stir, and generated more voter sympathy for Shipstead.⁹⁶

In the gubernatorial race, the Farmer-Labor Party nominated Magnus Johnson to run as their candidate. Johnson had been born in Sweden in 1871 and had immigrated to the United States as a young man, obtaining his citizenship in 1898.⁹⁷ Johnson had long been a leading figure within the NPL, and had in fact been one of the NPL emissaries sent to petition Governor Burnquist during the war to request the MCPS's restraint in suppressing

⁹⁵Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 327-332.

⁹⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 75.

⁹⁷Magnus Johnson Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Magnus Johnson Papers].

NPL rallies (a petition which fell on deaf ears). Johnson proudly boasted of his farming background and spoke with a Swedish accent – an asset for obtaining Nordic agrarian votes within the state. Unlike Shipstead, Johnson was specifically aligned with the NPL agrarian branch of the party and had a long association with the NPL before entering politics. Governor Preus thus faced another difficult challenge from the farmer-labor coalition. However, he had made good on some of his campaign promises from 1920 and would continue in these efforts, even later signing a bill which expanded farming cooperatives in Minnesota.⁹⁸

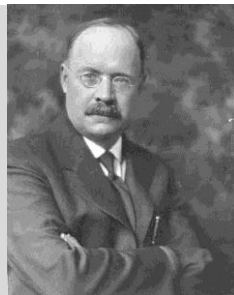


Figure 14. Magnus Johnson in about 1920. Johnson had been one of the earliest NPL leaders in Minnesota and proudly (and deliberately) emphasized his agrarian roots. Johnson would become the Farmer-Labor Party's candidate for governor in 1922. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

The Farmer-Labor Party also fielded seasoned candidates in the congressional races, most notably Ole J. Kvale in the Seventh District and Knud Wefald in the Ninth District. Both had run for Congress before in their respective districts in 1920, and both had done well (even though both had lost). Wefald was a Norwegian immigrant who had come to the United States in 1887, and had lived in the Hawley region (just east of Fargo) since 1896. There he had taken up farming and had managed a local lumber business. In the early 1900s, Wefald had served on Hawley's council and as its president. In 1912, he had been elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives. The Ninth District's proximity to North Dakota –

⁹⁸Theodore Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1975), 477-478.

and its similar farm economy – undoubtedly played a role in support for Wefald, since knowledge of the NPL’s success in North Dakota had made the region one of the earliest in Minnesota to sign up for the NPL cause. Farmer support for Wefald was significant, as Wefald had effectively attacked his Republican opponent for supporting bills unfavorable to farmers (most notably, the Transportation Act of 1920, which had set higher rates of freight transport and induced additional costs to many farmers).⁹⁹

For obvious reasons, the Farmer-Labor Party decided not to contest the congressional seat in the Fourth District, which was the base of Republican insurgent Oscar Keller, a vigorously pro-labor figure whose upset win in 1919 (and subsequent re-election in 1920) provided the farmer-laborites with a firm ally. Republican Party support for Keller in 1922 was virtually non-existent, even though he had won the primary again in that year. In fact, Governor Preus sent messages asking that Keller’s name and image be removed from all statewide campaign posters and literature, and the party complied.¹⁰⁰

An attempt at Democratic-Farmer-Labor fusion in 1922 almost changed the political landscape that year. The Democrats, led by former governor and MCPS member John Lind, approached the agrarian wing of the Farmer-Labor convention in March with a proposal for union. The Democrats proposed fusion with the new party as a means of creating a united front against the Republican Party. Lind and the Democrats proposed that the Farmer-Labor group withdraw their gubernatorial candidate. In exchange, the Democrats would then drop their own Senate candidate and endorse Shipstead for Senate instead. At first, the agrarian wing representatives thought this to be a reasonable offer and they initially agreed. However,

⁹⁹Jon M. Wefald, “Congressman Knud Wefald: A Minnesota Voice for Farm Parity,” *Minnesota History*, 38 (December 1962), 177-178.

¹⁰⁰Letter from Governor Preus to Republican Party officials, 1922, Preus Papers, Box 23.

when word of the proposed fusion reached the WPNPL leaders, a strongly worded statement from William Mahoney to the agrarian caucus accused the farmer wing of selling out their cause and the deal was quickly scuttled. Thus, the Democrats left the Farmer-Labor convention without a fusion arrangement and instead ran their own candidates in every major race. John Lind declined taking on the Senate nomination, however. Seeking a new direction, the Democrats then nominated Anna Dickie Olesen of Cloquet for the Senate race. The Democrats also nominated a female candidate for Lieutenant Governor as well.¹⁰¹

Olesen was a highly qualified candidate – having been the first female to serve on the National Democratic Committee. She had been part of the Wilsonian contingent of Minnesota Democrats during the war. She had also been an extended member of the MCPS – part of the “Winter Organization” group, which had been a women’s auxiliary branch.¹⁰²

Olesen had campaigned in the primary very much like Shipstead did in the general election – with meager funds, and often driving from one campaign stop to the next in a humble sedan. Olesen was not only the first female Senate candidate to run in Minnesota, but she was also the first female to run for the Senate on a major party ticket in the United States.¹⁰³

Indeed, the issue of gender was an unknown electoral variable in 1922. The 1922 Senate race was the first Senate election in Minnesota after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, and there was some question among all parties as to the effect of female votes on electoral outcomes. Olesen captured 17.3% of the vote in the 1922 general election – less than the Democratic candidate in the 1916 election (Daniel Lawler), who won

¹⁰¹“Mrs. Peter Olesen Indorsed for Senate by Democrats: Cloquet Woman is Named After Nonpartisan-Fusion Hopes Fail,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, April 1, 1922, 1; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 69.

¹⁰²Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 248.

¹⁰³“Woman Nominated For U.S. Senator; Mrs. Olesen, Named by Minnesota Democrats, Is All for “Common People; Says She’s Eager To Serve, Wife of a School Superintendent, She Campaigned the State in a Little Sedan,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1922.

almost 31% of the vote. However, Olesen outpolled every other major Democratic candidate in the state in 1922, so it is possible that her gender may have indeed worked in her favor.¹⁰⁴ Since Olesen's numbers were about twice as high as they were for any other major Democratic candidate, it is possible that Olesen's gender may have pulled at least some female votes away from Kellogg. Contemporary local media coverage after the election seemed to support this view.¹⁰⁵

Figure 15. Anna Dickie Olesen was the first female to ever run for the U.S. Senate on a major party ticket. Although she did not win the general Senate election of 1922, her campaign raised the Democratic percentage of the vote to one of its highest levels for a state race in that year. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



The general election was held in November 1922. All of the results were not immediately known, due to the various rates of vote reporting (and the slower means of calculating votes typical of that period). However, as the votes were counted, it became apparent that the Farmer-Labor Party had finally scored some major victories. By mid-November, all of the results had been tabulated, and the news for both the Republicans and the Democrats was not good.

The big upset was in the Senate race, in which Henrik Shipstead beat the incumbent Republican Frank Kellogg and won with a plurality of 45.5% to Kellogg's mere 33.8%. Olesen came in a distant third with 17.3 % of the vote. Even so, the Republicans retained

¹⁰⁴Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, 219.

¹⁰⁵“State Election Results,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 13, 1922, 6.

control of the major state offices, including the offices of Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Auditor, Secretary of State, and Attorney General. Preus was narrowly re-elected to the governor's office, but only with a plurality of 43% against Magnus Johnson's 41%. The two would face each other again in an election much sooner than either of them expected.¹⁰⁶

Further north and west, the Farmer-Labor ticket met with additional success on the congressional level as well. Ole J. Kvale won the House race in the Seventh District, unseating the well-known Republican incumbent, Andrew Volstead. Kvale's victory there was a culmination of an electoral struggle that had begun with the controversies of the 1920 election. The Farmer-Labor candidate in Minnesota's Ninth District, Knud Wefald, was also elected to Congress by a wide margin.¹⁰⁷

On the state level, the results were more mixed, but the trend was still leaning towards Farmer-Labor gains. Although Preus had been re-elected, the Farmer-Labor Party had increased its number of seats in the state legislature. Although the state government would remain largely under the control of Governor Preus and a thin Republican-majority legislature in 1923, the Farmer-Labor representation in the state legislature had grown, and this factor would impact legislation (though in some cases, this aided Preus in some of his reform efforts).¹⁰⁸ Also, in urban Hennepin County, the Farmer-Labor Party was able to elect

¹⁰⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 75-77.

¹⁰⁷Minnesota had ten congressional districts before 1933. This number was reduced in 1933 from ten to nine, and then again in 1963 from nine to eight; for election figures, see Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 75-76.

¹⁰⁸Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty*, 330; see also "Legislature Narrowly Republican," *Aitkin Independent*, November 11, 1922.

six candidates to the state legislature – proving definitively that the movement was not just agrarian-based.¹⁰⁹

The results of the 1922 election officially signaled the realignment of Minnesota politics. The Farmer-Labor candidates had won three national offices: Shipstead had been elected to the Senate, and Kvale and Wefald had been elected as congressional Representatives. Jacob A. O. Preus had defeated Magnus Johnson, but his margin of victory had been slim. The Republicans retained control of the state offices and a slight majority in the state legislature, but the opposition Farmer-Labor Party had made impressive gains. Overall, even with the notable exception of Anna Dickey Olesen, the Democrats had done poorly, and were confined to a distant third place in state politics. For much of the next two decades, this would remain their position in most of Minnesota's districts and in the statewide and congressional races.

The instincts of Mahoney and Van Lear had turned out to be correct: the third party approach was viable and the movement had triumphed as a third party and without any fusionist compromises. The strategy of joining the farmer and labor lobbies into an official party had finally been validated by the 1922 election results. Townley's NPL and the "nonpartisan" approach were forever finished. From this point on, the impetus would be to expand the party structure and to reach out to the voter base through a broad grassroots approach. The nascent Farmer-Labor Party would now officially become the main opposition to the dominant Republican Party in Minnesota. What had started out as a protest movement

¹⁰⁹“County Elects Six Laborites to Legislature: Nolan Gets Largest Vote – Conservatives Elect Eight in Senate,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 10, 1922, 9.

of farmer and labor groups to infiltrate the major parties had now become a viable third party of its own.

Although Mahoney and Van Lear's WPNPL wing had initially been the junior partners in Townley's farmer-labor crusade, this relationship had changed entirely between 1919 and 1922. By 1922, the labor tail was wagging the farmer dog, and there seems little question that the push to create a third party and the subsequent formation of the Farmer-Labor Party itself was due to the strenuous leadership efforts of Mahoney and Van Lear – and not to the fading influence of Townley and the NPL.

The November 1922 edition of *The National Leader* (Arthur Townley's then current media outlet), applauded the election of Shipstead and proclaimed the recent election a triumph in general for the cause. However, in the same edition, Townley himself authored a full-page editorial which rejected the idea of forming a third party, declaring that third parties: “. . . never come near to carrying one state” and are “unable to show any result[s].” He thus concluded that “two parties . . . are the most that I can see doing business in America.” In other words, Townley expressed his complete rejection of the third party path – even in the wake of the Farmer-Labor Party's success in the 1922 election – which he himself trumpeted. Such sentiments would signal his increasing removal from the leadership of the farmer-labor movement in Minnesota.¹¹⁰

What Townley did not see was that the Farmer-Labor Party had become more than just a viable third party. By 1922 it had essentially become the real second major party in Minnesota's *de facto* two-party system of the 1920s and '30s.

¹¹⁰A. C. Townley, “Should We Restore a Party or Build a New One?” *The National Leader*, November 1922, 5.

CHAPTER IV

THE OPPOSITION: 1923-1929

The election results of 1922 had signaled the unquestioned rise of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota. Many questions remained, however, about the potential longevity of the movement and the effectiveness of its elected representatives. In early 1923, Henrik Shipstead, Ole J. Kvale, and Knud Wefald all journeyed off to Washington, D.C. to take their seats in Congress. The Republican insurgent, Oscar Keller, had also been re-elected in 1922 and – although not a Farmer-Labor Party member – was sympathetic to many of the Farmer-Labor aims, and was considered an ally to the Farmer-Labor Party.¹ It would be some time before the efforts of these men and their positions on a variety of issues would become fully manifest. In the meantime, changes were occurring nationally – and within Minnesota – that created favorable conditions for the continuation of the Farmer-Labor Party as a third party movement.

Minnesota in the 1920s

One of the major trends on the national level that affected Minnesota in the early 1920s was the decline of agricultural prosperity in general. This trend was most pronounced in the regions of the South, the Midwest and the agricultural areas of the Great Plains states.

¹“Our Progressive Congressmen,” *The Minnesota Leader*, November 18, 1922; Keller was saluted by the Farmer-Labor press for his 1922 victory, along with Ole J. Kvale and Knud Wefald.

This economic decline was due to several factors. First, a fall in agricultural demand after the end of the war had led to a significant drop in crop prices in the early 1920s. Second, the Transportation Act of 1920 had set higher rates of freight transport and had increased transport costs to farmers.² Third, the prevailing social and political atmosphere of the 1920s had turned away from reform impulses, leaving farmers largely to struggle on their own, or at most only with the support of their now dwindling political lobbies (the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota being one of the few successful exceptions to this trend). Crop prices would fluctuate throughout the 1920s, alternating between deflated prices early in the decade and more stabilization in the latter part of the decade. In general however, the 1920s was not a period of great agricultural prosperity. Rural regions also lagged behind in electrification and other infrastructure services considered standard for most urban areas.³ Last, the cost of new (and ever more expensive) farm machinery (the tractor was becoming increasingly ubiquitous in this period) and enhanced taxation on farmsteads (money which was often used to fund new highway and road construction) placed additional financial burdens on farmers. Expanded production undertaken during (or just after) the war – along with mortgages taken out to finance such ventures – were also a common pattern that pressed farmers economically. In short, the 1920s was a tough economic decade for many Minnesota farmers.⁴

²Jon M. Wefald, “Congressman Knud Wefald: A Minnesota Voice for Farm Parity,” *Minnesota History*, 38 (December 1962), 177-178.

³Edmund Lindop and Margaret J. Goldstein, *America in the 1920s* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, 2010) 52-53.

⁴Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 73.

Some significant statistics bear out the nature of this agrarian economic decline. In 1919, Minnesota farm crops as a whole were valued at \$506 million. By the end of the 1920s, this figure had been reduced to \$310 million. This drop in crop values was not due to reduced productivity. In fact, the 1920s saw a significant increase in acreage use. A lack of overall demand coupled with overproduction was largely to blame for this crop price deflation. Farmers who had obtained more land or increased their acreage use during the war years often found themselves overextended in the early 1920s. Mortgage defaults on farm properties rose. Farmers were also affected by the default and consolidation patterns of small banks within the state (which was part of a larger regional trend during this period). In Minnesota between 1921 and 1929, 320 state banks and 58 national banks went bankrupt. Such bank failings were serious events in this era before the FDIC, and depositors (in many cases, from rural or small town areas) often lost their bank balances if their bank failed. This bank failure trend would accelerate after October 1929, placing even more strain on the rural farm economy. Even so, larger banks would expand throughout the 1920s in Minnesota, consolidating and growing in this period. However, these larger and centralized banks often lacked the same personal connection to rural communities as the smaller banks which had preceded them.⁵

Likewise, the labor constituency suffered setbacks during the 1920s. After reaching a historic high point during the peak production years of the war (1917-1918), union membership in America as a whole swiftly declined. Organized labor in general would be on retreat during the 1920s, ignored or even targeted by business and government. The fears of

⁵Theodore Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1975), 480-481.

radicalism which had emerged in 1919 and 1920 continued to characterize much of the political mainstream's reaction to labor activism, as did the association between labor movements and the fledgling Soviet Union (which many saw as a political and social anti-thesis to the American way). Unionism would swiftly decline in the early 1920s and remain at relatively low rates for the remainder of the decade. From 1919 to 1929, the ranks of organized labor fell sharply, as did strike activity. In 1920, there were about 5 million unionized laborers in America, but this number had declined to 3.5 million by 1923. By 1929, that number had fallen to about 289,000 (or a total drop from 1920 to 1929 from about 21% to 1.2% of the workforce).⁶ Specific unionized labor statistics for Minnesota are lacking; however, these national trends were reflected in Minnesota as well, and encouraged by government policies and business organizations (such as the Minneapolis group, the Citizens' Alliance) which strongly discouraged unionization.⁷ Politics on the national level were also unequivocally pro-business. However, the general prosperity of the 1920s led to relatively low rates of unemployment and stable (even rising) wages for labor overall, and the "welfare capitalism" approaches of some businesses sought to address employee needs outside of a union structure. All of these were factors in discouraging strong unionization during this period.⁸

The 1920s also saw major changes in media and transportation in Minnesota. Radio became commercially viable in the early 1920s. The first commercial radio stations were

⁶Robert Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, Second Edition (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 5; see also David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 66-88.

⁷William Millikan, "Maintaining 'Law and Order': The Minneapolis Citizen's Alliance in the 1920s" *Minnesota History*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (Summer, 1989), 219-233; see also Vally, *Radicalism in the States*, 79.

⁸Lindop and Goldstein, *America in the 1920s*, 51-52; see also Vally, *Radicalism in the States*, 108; see also John D. Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy: 1921-1933* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960), 16, 70-74; see also see also Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*, 66-88.

established in Minnesota at this time and the growth in popularity of radio broadcasting would increase exponentially by the end of the decade. Although much of radio broadcast programming in the 1920s was not political in nature, during the campaign seasons – or during periods of political controversy – radio would become an increasingly used and effective tool for reaching wide audiences by some political figures. Those candidates or parties with compelling or dramatic rhetorical messages often benefitted accordingly, and the growth of the radio medium changed the campaign process during this period. Many Farmer-Labor candidates and figures would use radio broadcasts throughout the 1920s and 1930s as a means of reaching mass audiences, capitalizing on their bold and dramatic rhetoric. Transportation underwent significant changes in the 1920s as well. With the mass production and consumption of automobiles and other vehicles for the first time in American history, the need for building a road infrastructure system became apparent. Road and highway construction became a major emphasis of the state government throughout the 1920s. These initiatives would allow greater access to and from rural areas, but would also raise taxes – not just on licensed vehicles but also on property owners of rural districts (especially farmers).⁹

The Election of 1923

The election of 1922 had resulted in surprise wins for the Farmer-Labor Party. Even as the party leaders scrambled to create a more cohesive organization, another electoral opportunity swiftly emerged which presented them with yet another chance to prove their growing influence. In April 1923, the aging Republican Senator, Knute Nelson, passed away.

⁹Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 483-485.

Nelson's death would lead to another struggle in Minnesota between Republicans and the Farmer-Laborites in the form of a special senatorial election. The sitting Republican governor, Jacob A. O. Preus, viewed the Senate seat as a means of political advancement. Preus had expressed senatorial ambitions earlier (in 1922), but had been discouraged by party elders from challenging Kellogg at that time. In fact, Preus' ambitions for the Senate seat in 1922 had been one of the main reasons why Preus's support for Kellogg in the 1922 race had been nominal. But now – with no incumbent Republican competitor for the seat – Preus saw his opportunity. As governor, Preus had the power to appoint a Senator to the open seat (even himself). However, he wanted to win the seat through an open election and demonstrate both his general popularity and the Republicans' ability to stem the Farmer-Labor challenge. Apparently, Preus and his supporters perceived that Shipstead's victory in 1922 had been more of a fluke rather than an emerging trend, and did not anticipate a significant challenge from another major Farmer-Labor figure in 1923.¹⁰

Preus called for a special Senate election and quickly made preparations to run for the primary election which was to be concluded in June, with the general election to be held in July. Unfortunately for Preus, a number of other Republicans wanted the Senate seat as well. Eventually, the Republican primary turned into a race of no less than eight major party figures, including Preus, Representative Thomas Schall, and even former governor Joseph A. Burnquist. Preus eventually prevailed in the primary with a high plurality – enough to win the race, but not quite the ringing endorsement that he had hoped for.¹¹

¹⁰Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 41.

¹¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 78.

The Farmer-Laborites likewise seized the opportunity to occupy the open Senate seat. Still flush from their victory several months earlier, the Farmer-Labor leaders saw the chance to consolidate their gains and achieve what had been inconceivable only a few months earlier, namely, electing two Farmer-Labor Senators. Winning the Senate seat would cement the party's position as the main opposition in the state, and open the doors to a long-term future. There was, however, some disagreement on strategy, and three prominent Farmer-Labor figures rushed to run in the party primary and win the party's endorsement. These included Magnus Johnson (the 1922 Farmer-Labor gubernatorial candidate), Dr. Louis Fritsche (the infamous former Mayor of New Ulm who had been removed from office by Governor Burnquist in 1917), and the aging Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr. As a result, this race would become the most hotly contested Farmer-Labor primary to date. According to Magnus Johnson's son, Francis, Lindbergh attempted to dissuade Magnus Johnson from entering the race. Lindbergh's reasoning was that Preus had defeated Johnson in a statewide race less than six months earlier, and as such, Johnson had little chance of winning. However, Johnson was not swayed by this thinking, since he had come very close to beating Preus in November 1922, and felt certain that his showing would improve (or at least certainly be better than Lindbergh's). Despite this intra-party competition, the primary campaign on the Farmer-Labor side was civil. The decision hinged on matters of voter preference and image. In this regard, Johnson held the edge and he emerged the clear winner in the June primary.¹² In a

¹²Bruce L. Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota: A Political Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), 271-272; 274.

show of support of party unity, Dr. Fritsche enthusiastically campaigned on Johnson's behalf during the general election.¹³

The general election race between Preus and Johnson lasted only about a month. During the campaign, Johnson was labeled a "dirt farmer" by his Republican opposition. The label was meant as an insult – i.e., that Johnson was unsuited for office and supposedly lacking in his intellectual capacity. As a first generation immigrant, Johnson spoke with a Swedish accent. However, the label sounded mean and worse – smacked of the kind of Republican elitism that the Farmer-Laborites had just handily defeated in the 1922 election. Johnson reinforced this point by proudly embracing the label (emphasizing his close identification with Scandinavian farmers) and turned his apparent disadvantage into a show of strength: "The only issue our opponents have raised so far is the cry that a plain farmer like myself is unfit for such an important office."¹⁴ He also used a creative sense of humor. During the many speeches that he delivered in farm settings, he would stand on a manure spreader and proclaim that it was "the first time he ever stood on a Republican platform."¹⁵ Johnson also received the strong support of the movement's friendly newspapers, including the *Minnesota Union Advocate* and the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* – which by July was praising him in no uncertain terms, and reminding voters that the party's mission was to address "widespread dissatisfaction with the present economic conditions" – and that Johnson represented the voter's choice for "change."¹⁶ Johnson was further aided by a defection of some progressive Minneapolis Republicans who supported the Farmer-Labor

¹³"Fritsche Asks Friends to Aid Magnus Johnson," *The Minnesota Leader*, July 14, 1923.

¹⁴"High Spots in Johnson Speech," *The Minnesota Leader*, July 14, 1923.

¹⁵William E. Lass, *Minnesota: A History* Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 222.

¹⁶"The Voice of Labor for Magnus Johnson: Why Magnus Johnson Should be Sent to Washington," *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, July 11, 1923.

candidate as well.¹⁷ Johnson's campaign strategy paid off: he won the general election by a wide margin and became the second Farmer-Labor Senator elected in Minnesota. Preus continued on as governor; however, he had now become a political liability to the Republican Party and would not seek re-election in 1924.¹⁸ The Farmer-Labor vote in the rural counties was significant, and Johnson's victory was considered a setback for the Republicans and even the Harding Administration.¹⁹ At the same time, Johnson's candidacy received significant majorities in Minneapolis, where he carried eight of thirteen wards – further proof of strong urban-labor support for the Farmer-Labor cause.²⁰

In the meantime, Henrik Shipstead had taken his seat in Congress in the spring of 1923. Knute Nelson's death in April had prevented the senior Senator from officially introducing Shipstead to the Senate. Instead, that duty was performed by Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin. During much of the early part of that year, there had been speculation about Shipstead's upcoming activity in the Senate since he had a reputation as a radical and was a third party politician. There was a considerable expectation that Shipstead would begin his career in Washington, D.C., with a series of high profile speaking engagements and episodes of "grandstanding." However, in this sense Shipstead's detractors were to be disappointed, since the new Senator behaved with tact, restraint, and even decorum during official and unofficial functions.²¹ Likewise, Magnus Johnson had also reinforced his reputation as a moderate soon after his election by giving a speech before a progressive labor forum at Carnegie Hall which was covered by the national newspapers. His rhetoric was

¹⁷"Local G.O.P. Progressives Join in Johnson Campaign," *Minnesota Daily Star*, July 6, 1923.

¹⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 79.

¹⁹"Johnson Swamps Preus: Farm-Labor Candidate for United States Senator Gets Large Majority in Country," *Minnesota Daily Star*, July 17, 1923.

²⁰"Preus Vote in City Badly Shattered," *Minnesota Daily Star*, July 17, 1923.

²¹Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota*, 80.

moderate in its tone and made no mention of socialist or radical policies or proposals – although he did complain about the Republican and Democratic parties in general, and he attacked the role of the Federal Reserve.²² For a brief period between mid-1923 and early 1925, Minnesota’s two Senators would both be Farmer-Laborites, and this represented a peak of national influence in the Senate for the fledgling third party.

The Farmer-Labor Federation and the Farmer-Labor Association

The Farmer-Labor victories in 1922 – along with the swift victory in July 1923 – were cause for much celebration within the party. Townley’s “nonpartisan” approach had been permanently refuted and the third party approach validated by these victories. With Townley’s resignation as state league president in May 1922, the influence of William Mahoney and Thomas Van Lear had grown and the movement had established itself as a formal third party. However, Van Lear and Mahoney – the party’s chief architects – remained concerned about the party’s structure and its lack of hierarchy. In fact, throughout much of 1922 and 1923, the Farmer-Labor “Party” was really a coalition of political caucuses, grassroots organizations, and even politicians from other parties who had agreed to accept or run on a Farmer-Labor endorsement. Much of the party structure between 1921 and 1923 had been formed from local NPL and WPNPL cells, along with their women’s auxiliary groups. There were divisions and disagreements within the movement itself – despite its recent electoral successes. Mahoney especially worried about the cohesiveness of the party – both in a bureaucratic sense and in terms of its platform and ideology. The movement had

²²“Sees Us Drifting Toward Autocracy; Magnus Johnson Tells Progressive-Labor Audience Plain People Are Nation’s Hope,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 1923; see also “I’m Some Guy’ Says Senator Johnson, In From The West,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 30, 1923; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 80.

demonstrated that it could win elections; it was still uncertain whether it could maintain its coalition, formulate an agreed upon and consistent platform, or even keep its own candidates under its control.²³

Mahoney took the lead on consolidating the party's structure and unity in 1923. He envisioned a strong unified party organization (one without separately labeled farmer and labor groups), a central party authority, a uniform platform, and candidates fully accountable to the party (and not "independent" candidates – or worse, candidates from other parties). Mahoney also continued to reject the "fusionist" approach and continued to proclaim the failure of Townley's earlier "nonpartisan" tactic.²⁴ In February 1923, a faction aligned with Mahoney founded the Farmer-Labor Educational Association. The official purpose of the organization was to promote political education designed to instill "values of democracy and citizenship" and resist the influence of corporate interests. The headquarters for this new branch of the party was the St. Paul Labor Temple building located at 411 South Main Street in downtown St. Paul – yet another strong indication that the farmer-labor movement was under the direction of urban-labor leaders.²⁵

This group (which controlled the publication of the *Farmer-Labor Advocate*) became a strong center of support for what later became known as "the Mahoney Plan." The branch worked to convince members within the movement to abandon their separate factions and instead embrace a wider, more unified party structure under centralized leadership.

²³Rude, "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement," 82; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 81.

²⁴Even so, Townley was too important a figure to ignore completely, and he was given a prominent spot at the 1923 Farmer-Labor Conference, see Arthur C. Townley, "What is the National Producers' Alliance?" *Farmer-Labor Convention Proceedings, 1923*, 34.

²⁵The corporate charter documents for the Farmer-Labor Educational Association can be found in the Floyd B. Olson Papers, Box 2, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Floyd B. Olson Papers].

Mahoney's long-term plan was ambitious. He sought to first consolidate the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, and then eventually seek an alliance or cooperation with other leftist groups across the nation, and possibly form a nationwide third party movement. A key element in the first phase of the plan was the abandonment of the old separate grassroots groups and organizations in Minnesota, and the creation of a new body – the Farmer-Labor Federation (or FLF) – which was to become the umbrella for all local party membership. The FLF was to be separate from the party itself, although the party would control the leadership of each local chapter. Each FLF group would work to enlarge its membership, collect dues, and “educate” potential voters on issues in such a way as to make them become loyal party supporters.²⁶ The establishment of such an organization would also help the party get around strict state laws (passed in 1912) which had originally been designed to weaken the power of party central committees over local party cells. In other words, the new Farmer-Labor Federation would serve the purpose of recruiting members and driving voter support for party-selected candidates, but was technically not part of the party's central committee structure.²⁷

Mahoney's plan was presented at a statewide conference – the “Farmer-Labor Convention” in early September of 1923. By this time, Mahoney had drafted a proposed constitution and set of by-laws for the new federation. These nine articles outlined the purpose, membership, structure and governance of the proposed organization. The FLF was to “carry on an intensive program of education and organization, incidental to participation in the political campaigns of the **Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota**” [emphasis in the

²⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 82.

²⁷Paul S. Holbo, “The Farmer-Labor Association: Minnesota's Party within a Party,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 38, No. 7 (Sep., 1963), 302.

original]. In other words, the FLF was technically a separate entity – even though its obvious purpose was to support the Farmer-Labor Party’s campaigns. Membership was open to NPL and WPNPL members, as well as union members and members of various farmer organizations. Article II, section 3 specifically stated that affiliated organizations would retain their “autonomy” but would pledge to co-operate in political campaigns under the direction of the “State Committee.” The Farmer-Labor Party State Committee would have authority over the FLF, and were to be elected at annual conventions, however an “Executive Committee” consisting of five persons were to “handle any routine matters” on a daily basis.²⁸

The proposed plan was generally supported by the WPNPL and the urban-labor wing of the party. However, the NPL wing and some other figures were less enthusiastic in their support. Mahoney was even opposed by his former partner, Thomas Van Lear, who – apparently suspecting communist influence in taking such an approach – spoke out against the formation of the proposed federation at the conference.²⁹ In addition, the Mahoney plan was also criticized by the state party chair, Frederick Pike, who thought that the federation might become too strong in its influence on the party, and that instead the central committee should remain the controlling entity. Pike – like Van Lear – was also concerned about communist influence since the new federation was likely to be dominated by Mahoney and his urban-labor leader allies.³⁰

The most open opposition however, came when Mahoney’s plan – and his character – was vehemently attacked by “Delegate Lush” who stridently accused Mahoney of deception

²⁸*Constitution and By-Laws of Proposed FARMER-LABOR FEDERATION*, 1923, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul.

²⁹*Farmer-Labor Convention Proceedings, 1923*, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, 17.

³⁰Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 43.

and of pushing the plan “down the throats” of the delegates. Mr. Lush had little support in this show of protest however, and Mahoney himself dispatched Mr. Lush’s arguments succinctly – and received an ovation from the delegates in doing so. In the end, the plan was approved, and a committee which included Mahoney was set up to coordinate implementation of the new federation.³¹ Even so, the debate over the implementation of the FLF would continue for almost a year within the party.³²

For a short time, Van Lear continued his opposition to the creation of the FLF. By 1923, Van Lear had settled into the job of editing the new *Minnesota Daily Star*, and he used this outlet to campaign against Mahoney’s proposed federation. In an editorial on September 11, 1923, the *Star* denounced the Mahoney Plan, asserting that such a process of consolidation would allow for communist infiltration and influence – and would eventually mean the death of the party since it would be tarnished with a label of bona fide radicalism.³³ Van Lear and Mahoney never resolved this conflict, and Van Lear retired from politics and publishing altogether shortly thereafter and relocated to Florida.³⁴

Despite this significant initial resistance, Mahoney’s plan advanced steadily. In late 1923, Mahoney officially changed the name of the existing WPNPL to the Farmer-Labor Federation. This was the first step in creating a consolidated infrastructure. In early 1924, the majority of NPL chapters finally accepted Mahoney’s concept of consolidation and voted to abandon their NPL structure and take on the FLF label as well (although some chapters of the

³¹*Farmer-Labor Convention Proceedings, 1923*, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, 17, 42.

³²Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 82-83.

³³*Minnesota Daily Star*, September 11, 1923, 6.

³⁴Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 48.

NPL would remain independent and outside the FLF).³⁵ Then, in March 1924 at the state Farmer-Labor Party convention, the delegates of the party agreed to recognize the Farmer-Labor Federation as being the main local departments of the party's structure.³⁶ In theory, the new FLF groups would be grassroots cells with an agenda driven by its members. The main purpose of the FLF was to recruit and retain members (and collect dues), "educate" members on social and political issues, conduct caucuses to discuss policy, and support Farmer-Labor candidates during campaigns. However, the party itself would maintain control over each group's finances, and much of the agenda of each chapter would be driven by the party and federation leaders in St. Paul.³⁷

In March 1924, Mahoney tried to shore up support for his plan by stating that "A political party in Minnesota is a mere formal shell. Special interests, supported by well-meaning reformers, have emasculated party organizations."³⁸ Mahoney's statement emphasized the need for a broad-based grassroots organization to not only maintain the party's existence, but to also prevent it from being infiltrated by special interests that might be hostile to the party's goals. Furthermore, at the March 1924 state convention, Mahoney and his supporters prepared an extensive platform which outlined the nature of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor cause. The platform did not shy away from socialist-tinged rhetoric, declaring that "government . . . [had been] used by both the old parties for the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many." The platform included calls for "Public ownership of transportation and industrial utilities, including stockyards . . . grain elevators, terminal

³⁵Despite the clause in Article II, Section 3 of the *Farmer-Labor Federation Constitution* which guaranteed "sovereignty" for participating member organizations.

³⁶Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 44-45.

³⁷Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association," 301-309.

³⁸*Minnesota Union Advocate*, March 6, 1924; see also Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association," 302.

warehouses, pipe lines and tanks . . .” This also included public ownership of public utilities and “principal natural resources” such as coal and oil. As part of its concept of “Equal economic, political and legal rights for all,” the platform also included specific planks supporting labor rights and equity for farmers. The document further “deplore[d] the present situation of the farmers . . .” and pledged efforts to “substantially and permanently aid” them. This included open calls to enact state and federal legislation to “enable cooperative agencies to acquire and operate the marketing machinery” of agriculture and to also create a pool for storing agricultural surpluses for sale on the world market.³⁹ The platform was ambitious and significantly leftist in nature. The party’s desires for state and federal activism also necessitated some kind of national strategy, and Mahoney would pursue that as well.

As the debate over the consolidation of party-associated groups into the proposed Farmer-Labor Federation continued into 1924, Mahoney turned his attention to national efforts at party organization, seeking the possibility of the creation of a nationwide Farmer-Labor Party. Eventually, a conference was organized in St. Paul in June 1924 which included leftist delegates from many states and parties. The purpose of the meeting was to attempt to organize a nationwide movement and possibly even extend the Farmer-Labor Federation outside of Minnesota. The presidential elections of 1924 were looming, and there were strong sentiments among the left that a unified campaign led by Robert La Follette of Wisconsin would be a worthwhile effort. However, the convention would prove to be highly problematic for Mahoney and the Minnesota farmer-labor movement.⁴⁰

³⁹“Platform of the Farmer-Labor Federation,” typescript draft, March 25, 1924, Farmer-Labor Association Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Farmer-Labor Association Papers].

⁴⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 82.

A national Farmer-Labor Party had existed since 1918, and was headquartered in Chicago. However, this Chicago-based party was strongly associated with hardline labor groups and even communists. Membership in the movement was small, but meetings had been held regularly since its founding. This national group went through several stages of mergers, name changes and consolidations. A coordinating arm, known as the Conference for Progressive Political Action (CPPA) had also attempted to unify various parties and movements. In 1923, the Chicago branch was renamed the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. Like the Minnesota Farmer-Laborites, this group faced controversy in including communists in its ranks – however, the national movement was more closely aligned with radical leftist groups and individuals, and had more of its base in that sector (as well as within labor in general). Despite these issues – and in a reversal of strategy from the 1922 elections – Mahoney now saw the Chicago group as a potential partner in creating a national third party.⁴¹

The national conference met in St. Paul in June 1924, and caused considerable controversy in Minnesota. The meetings were dominated by left-wing labor interests and communists, and factionalism was rampant. The communists – instructed by the Comintern to use the opportunity to seize control of the movement – suddenly asserted themselves and made attempts to take control of the convention and its agenda. The convention then embraced a platform which included the nationalization of industries and backed radical candidates – rejecting the more moderate progressive figures. In the end, the national convention signaled the end of the Farmer-Labor organization as a significant national

⁴¹James Weinstein, “Radicalism in the Midst of Normalcy” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (March 1966), 775-778; see also “Labor Party of the United States; Farmer-Labor Party of the United States; Federated Farmer-Labor Party: 1918-1925, Organizational History” <http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/farmerlaborparty.html>, accessed February 12, 2014.

movement, since it had now become indelibly tainted with a radicalism and communism. It was the end of Mahoney's effort to unify the state party with the national movement, and the end of open accommodation with radical elements within Minnesota. From this point on, the national Federated Farmer-Labor Party would remain a small and radical group headquartered in Chicago, while the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party would continue on its own, entirely as an entity within the State of Minnesota. In the meantime, the radical nature of this convention would spill over into local politics and create significant issues for the Minnesota Farmer-Laborites in the 1924 elections.⁴²

One of the original intentions of the conference had been to align a base behind La Follette's run for the White House. However, La Follette himself had turned away from the conference upon learning of communist infiltration, seeing the danger of being labeled as too extreme. He disavowed the convention and denounced it as a meeting of radicals. He further refused their endorsement or support for his presidential run in 1924. Instead, La Follette created a national Progressive Party movement just for his run for the presidency in the 1924 election.⁴³ The now-chastened Mahoney and his Minnesota Farmer-Labor followers salvaged their relationship with La Follette in September, when they agreed to unite with him in a common statewide campaign strategy.⁴⁴ However, this rush to embrace La Follette's third party candidacy would not result in the hoped-for victory for either the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party or La Follette.

⁴²Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 85-87.

⁴³Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2008), 288-302.

⁴⁴"La Follette, State Central and F-L Federation Groups Unite on Minnesota Plans," *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, September 10, 1924.

Despite his setbacks in forming a national coalition, Mahoney's plan for the state party organization successfully moved forward. As the Farmer-Labor Federation became the dominant aspect of the party's infrastructure throughout 1924, the NPL and WPNPL groups were largely absorbed and the movement was unified and consolidated. Chapters were set up in every county in the state. Mahoney's goal of driving the farmer-labor movement towards a unified and separate third party course did indeed come to pass. Beginning in 1924, the party would run all of its own candidates in the general elections. Endorsements for allied (non-party member) candidates or any hint of "fusionist" deals were now off the table.

However, the successful implementation of the Mahoney Plan throughout 1924 was not achieved without dissent. At least some of this dissent came from dissatisfied NPL figures who either questioned the loss of NPL influence within the wider movement or challenged the party leadership headquartered in St. Paul. One of the most notable of these cases was that of the former editor of *The Minnesota Leader*, A. B. Gilbert. Gilbert clashed with the St. Paul leadership in July 1924, demanding that communists be removed from the party and claimed that the farmer wing would not stick with a movement which espoused "communist doctrines."⁴⁵ He was eventually removed from his position in October. Gilbert then denounced the farmer-labor movement in its entirety, and openly embraced the Republican slate of candidates in the general election. Gilbert proclaimed that farmers had been fooled by "conspirators" in the Farmer-Labor Party who had consolidated their control over the party since March, and further implied that farmer representation on the state-level committees was woefully insufficient. Gilbert's charges were refuted by other former NPL

⁴⁵Letter of A. B Gilbert to Farmer-Labor Candidates, July 10, 1924, Henry G. Tegan Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, Minnesota [hereafter Teigan Papers]; see also Gieske, 89.

leaders, but the accusations stung, and highlighted a lingering schism between the rural-agrarian wing of the party and the urban-labor wing.⁴⁶

In addition to Gilbert's attacks, the farmer-labor movement was still in retreat from the controversy of the national conference, and the scandal of association with the radicals of the June convention had to be addressed. This would not occur until after the 1924 election, however. In January 1925, William Mahoney (as President of the FLF) called an official conference with the overt intention of amending the federation's constitution.⁴⁷ As part of this re-structuring, the Farmer-Labor Federation was re-named the Farmer-Labor Association in early 1925.⁴⁸ After some months of negotiations and adjustments, the newly-constituted body was then put under the control of a new executive committee under the leadership of Magnus Johnson. Also present on this committee was Floyd B. Olson, a rising Farmer-Labor figure [see below]. William Mahoney also remained a member of the committee – still present but diminished in his leadership role – since he was now no longer president of the organization itself. The constitution of this new Farmer-Labor Association (or FLA) publicly proclaimed that membership in the organization was officially closed to communists at the same time.⁴⁹ Thus, the party's official position on rejecting radicals was now clearly outlined.

Over time, the Farmer-Labor Association (or FLA) would become the main grassroots branch of the party and would be responsible for representing the party platform to

⁴⁶“A. B. Gilbert Turns Traitor to F-L Cause,” *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, October 15, 1924 and “N.P.L. Executive Knocks Gilbert's Attack on Party,” *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, October 22, 1924.

⁴⁷“Buckler and Mahoney Call Farmer-Labor Conference Saturday, Jan. 17, 10 A.M.” *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, January 14, 1925.

⁴⁸The radical national Farmer-Labor group based in Chicago eventually billed itself as the “Federated Farmer-Labor Party” during the 1924 campaign; it is likely that the FLF's name change in 1925 was done to further disassociate it from the more radical national party; see also Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 47.

⁴⁹*Farmer-Labor Association: Constitution*, Adopted March 20, 1925, Article II, Section 1; see also Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 47.

its various constituents, conducting caucuses, and endorsing candidates for the primary elections. Since the 1912 election laws forbade a party central committee from dictating local party caucuses, the Farmer-Labor Association fulfilled this role by proxy instead. The association would also continue to recruit members, gather dues, and promote the Farmer-Labor Party agenda. The association leadership itself remained largely under the control of the state party leaders. However, by establishing itself as a separate entity, it gave the party much more control in determining endorsements than was typical. In this regard, the Farmer-Labor Association would prove to be successful, since Farmer-Labor-endorsed candidates typically had a consistent advantage in primary elections. Ernest Lundeen's successful primary challenges against endorsed candidates in 1928 (for the governor) and in 1930 (for the Senate) were two major exceptions to this trend [see Chapters Four and Five].⁵⁰

The Mahoney Plan organizational approach survived despite setbacks in the 1924 election and lingering associations with national radicals as a result of the 1924 conference. Yet, even as the FLA was developed and became the party's dominant arm, the movement itself started to face issues which sapped its strength and limited its growth. Beginning in 1925, enthusiasm within the ranks started to ebb. Many of the party's leaders had staked much of their efforts and fortunes on the creation of the party. By 1925, the party and its association structure had been firmly established. However, funds were now becoming more scarce. One early indication of this trend was the bankruptcy of the *Minnesota Daily Star* in 1924. The squabbles of 1924, La Follette's poor showing in the election, dwindling party

⁵⁰Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association," 302.

finances, rising crop prices, and a general decline in labor political activity in the Twin Cities all contributed to this Farmer-Labor ennui from 1925 to 1929.⁵¹

At the same time, divisions remained between the rural-agrarian and urban-labor wings of the party. Remnants of the Minnesota NPL continued to operate independently, even continuing the publication of their own newspaper, *The Minnesota Leader* throughout much of the 1920s. Efforts undertaken by the Farmer-Labor Party and FLA leadership to end this independent NPL activity were not successful.⁵² Worse, this NPL sector of the agrarian wing overtly contradicted the official Farmer-Labor Party line in 1927. In what can only be described as a bizarre turnabout, *The Minnesota Leader* – which had scathingly criticized Thomas Schall in the 1924 Senate election [see below] – held him up in September 1927 as being a brave lone defender of virtuous principles against a vast “conspiracy” of devious enemies that supposedly included Republican Governor Theodore Christianson and Magnus Johnson, among others. Although Schall was not up for re-election in 1928, the sympathy for him generated by this editorial stance may have played a role in suppressing the farm vote for other Farmer-Labor candidates in 1928 – and these accusations did nothing to raise the profile of the Farmer-Labor Party in general.⁵³

The Platform and Rhetoric of the Farmer-Labor Party in the 1920s

The platform of the Farmer-Labor Party was officially formulated and authored as a series of planks at its major conferences, which typically occurred every two years. Much of

⁵¹Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 46-49.

⁵²Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 100.

⁵³“Amazing Conspiracy To Oust Tom Schall From Senate Is Revealed,” *The Minnesota Leader*, November 1, 1927.

the foundation for this platform in the 1920s was drawn from earlier labor and agrarian movements (such as the NPL). The Farmer-Labor Party platform was adjusted according to the times and the rise of various sentiments and factions within the party, and it was articulated or accepted to varying degrees in the 1920s by its main political figures (such as Charles Lindbergh, Sr., Henrik Shipstead, Ole J. Kvale, Magnus Johnson, Knud Wefald and others). Since the party candidates were elected from their Minnesota base to both state and national offices, the party had an agenda at both levels of government – but with similar themes. This agenda was reflected in the party’s platform and often in the rhetoric of its main political figures. It was also largely supported by its official and semi-official news organs of the 1920s such as the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* (the newspaper most closely aligned with the Farmer-Labor Party from 1923 to 1927), *The Minnesota Leader* (the newspaper of the remnants of the Minnesota NPL), and the *Minnesota Daily Star* which – though founded and edited by Thomas Van Lear and Herbert Gaston – operated more as a multi-paged, mainstream newspaper. During the 1920s, these publications constantly struggled with financial issues. The *Minnesota Daily Star* folded in 1924, and the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* folded in early 1927.⁵⁴

Farmer-Labor domestic policy in the 1920s focused mainly on perceived issues of economic exploitation, both with an agrarian and a labor (and even a consumer) emphasis.

Although these issues were separate on the surface, there were connected themes of exploitation which had a long history within both the agrarian and the labor movement.

Much of the proposed Farmer-Labor policy was based on perceptions of economic injustice

⁵⁴Iric Nathanson “‘Newspaper with a soul’: The short-lived *Minnesota Daily Star* launched in 1920” *MinnPost*, March 23, 2015, <https://www.minnpost.com/media/2015/03/newspaper-soul-short-lived-minnesota-daily-star-launched-1920>, accessed July 14, 2015.

which both the party's leaders and its members saw being committed by entrenched corporate interests in league with a corrupted (or corruptible) government at the expense of the common farmer and laborer. The solutions often proposed in answer to this situation was government intervention into the economic sphere as an agent that would put common "producers" and "consumers" on even ground with the corporate giants, while turning state and federal government into guarantors of economic fairness and opportunity, chiefly through government intervention into the economic sphere. On the state level, this included support for tax reforms aimed at easing farmers' tax burdens due to large acreage or improvements. It also included plans for state ownership of agribusiness grain terminals, mills, warehouses, creameries and other storage and exchange facilities. Since these facilities were often the main point of contact between farmers and agribusiness, the goal was to create holding and transfer facilities under government regulation or control (which would in theory treat farmers more fairly). The platform also included a tonnage tax on the iron ore mined within Minnesota both as a means to shift tax burdens more towards big business, but also as a means to encourage further development in Minnesota through increased tax revenue. This tax proposal also emphasized a major concept of the platform that natural resources should be shared more equally. The party was also committed to increasing economic opportunity at the federal level. There were calls among the party's main figures for the construction of a navigable Great Lakes to the St. Lawrence Seaway connection – which would give farmers of the region better (and more direct) access to world agrarian markets.⁵⁵ In the 1920s, this

⁵⁵Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 74.

was a distant pipe dream, however, in the long-term the plan would eventually be realized as a grand engineering feat completed in the 1950s.⁵⁶

Some more specific planks from the 1924 Farmer-Labor Association platform draft included the call for “Equal economic, political and legal rights for all, irrespective of sex or color” and for the “abolition of the injunction in labor cases . . .” and of “labor’s right to organize and bargain collectively . . .” The platform further called for the “conservation of natural resources” including forests and mineral deposits. Electric power was identified as being “the power of the future” and as such, the party sought to enact legislation making it possible for the state to own and operate electric power plants, and set reasonable rates for consumers. The platform also “deplore[d] the present situation of the farmers” and condemned “the merciless deflation policy of the Federal Reserve Board.”⁵⁷

From about 1924 to 1928, the Farmer-Labor Party and its congressional allies supported a proposal that became known as the McNary-Haugen Plan. This was actually a series of bills passed several times by the House and the Senate in this period. The main aim of the plan was to enable the federal government the means to purchase excess grain or other agricultural stock and remove the excess supply from the national market for each commodity in order to drive up and stabilize prices. The excess held by the government would then be turned around and sold overseas. The amount of grain that would be stored would be varied in order to first raise and then stabilize the market.⁵⁸ One of the main

⁵⁶In 1959, this transportation route was finally completed, and Duluth became one of the largest interior ports in the world, see Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 561.

⁵⁷“Platform of the Farmer-Labor Federation,” typescript draft, March 25, 1924, Farmer-Labor Association Papers, Box 1.

⁵⁸John D. Black, “The McNary-Haugen Movement,” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (September 1928), 406-427; see also R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 59.

architects of this plan was George N. Peek, who tirelessly sought to promote the concept of the federal government as a sort of national merchant as a means to provide economic “equalization” for farmers.⁵⁹ This plan was praised by the Farmer-Laborites as suitable national agricultural policy. The plan also had significant support among farmers in other states and from a number of congressional figures such as Southern Democrats and some Western and Midwestern Republicans, who formed a “Farm Bloc” in Congress. Since corn prices experienced a price drop similar to wheat until 1924 (and continued at low prices for much of the 1920s), there was significant support for McNary-Haugenism in corn states such as Iowa as well.⁶⁰ Such broad support for the plan ensured its prominence. Although the bill was formulated and passed by Congress several times, it was vetoed twice by President Calvin Coolidge (first in 1927 and then again in 1928). Despite a serious attempt to override Coolidge’s veto in 1928, the bill was ultimately defeated and the plan was never implemented.⁶¹ The response from the Farmer-Labor congressional caucus was predictably negative on the failures between 1926 and 1928 to enact this major farm bill. Shipstead, Wefald and other Farmer-Labor figures denounced these congressional defeats and presidential vetoes as major setbacks to agrarian policy. Magnus Johnson responded to the defeat of an early draft of the bill in Congress in June 1926 by declaring that farmers had been “betrayed.”⁶²

⁵⁹Gilbert C. Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 38-150.

⁶⁰Kimberly Porter, “Embracing the Pluralist Perspective: The Iowa Farm Bureau Federation and the McNary-Haugen Movement,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Spring 2000), 381-392.

⁶¹David Greenberg, *Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 149; see also Amity Shlaes, *Coolidge* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 324, 354 and Fite, *George N. Peek*, 193-196.

⁶²“Congress False to Farm Cause: Agriculture Betrayed by Failure to Enact Haugen Bill,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 4, 1926.

The issues of the labor movement in this period were different, but similar in their patterns of demands for government-led reform. As noted earlier, the 1920s was a decade of retreat for organized labor due to several factors. These included Republican presidential politics under Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover that favored a laissez-faire economic policy. In addition, the taint of radicalism after 1919 also tinged the organized labor movement and made its leaders and goals less palatable to the political mainstream. Court injunctions were often used as a tool against organized labor protests or strikes, and both local and national governments were typically not sympathetic to the organized labor cause. Even so, labor continued to agitate for improvements, and the Farmer-Labor Party was consistent in its support for many of these aims. On the state level, the party had opposed efforts just after the war to create a permanent constabulary. The actions of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety and its deployment against organized labor efforts during the war were fresh in mind. The party also influenced the creation of the new State Highway Patrol division and the new Bureau of Criminal Apprehension in the early 1920s. Because of Farmer-Labor influence in crafting this legislation, both agencies were banned for use as tools against labor. The party also supported efforts to create jobs through public works projects beginning in the 1920s and would later expand this emphasis during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Direct government job creation in public works was seen as an avenue to reducing unemployment, and remained a long-term plank of the party as well. On the federal level, the party sought to remove the power of the federal courts in imposing injunctions against labor during disputes with management. These efforts would bear fruit starting in 1928, when a bill which supported this approach (authored by Henrik Shipstead)

was first introduced into the Senate. Shipstead's bill did not pass, however a later version of it – the Norris-LaGuardia Act – would pass in 1932.⁶³

On issues of foreign policy in the 1920s, the Farmer-Labor Party's stance and the sentiments of its political figures seemed to be shaped as much by the experience of the Great War as by their suspicion of a government with imperial powers and ambitions. The fledgling farmer-labor movement had suffered government persecution during the war and this experience was not forgotten. For the early party figures and the NPL in 1917-1918, American participation in the war had been a questionable policy at best. Figures such as Charles Lindbergh, Sr. and Robert La Follette had openly labeled the war unnecessary and empowering to corporate interests. These continuing Farmer-Labor suspicions of war, foreign entanglement, and the enhancement of government powers remained ensconced within the Farmer-Labor Party's ranks. As a result, isolationism was the norm for the party's figures throughout the 1920s. Such sentiments were typical for the political mainstream in this period of time. Thus, efforts by the federal government to pass treaties, engage in international arrangements, or undertake foreign military missions (especially in Latin America and the Caribbean) were often opposed and loudly criticized by Farmer-Labor figures. This included the American entry into the League of Nations, military conscription, and harsh Allied policies against Germany (all of which were seen as preludes to another war). Another related case in point was Senator Shipstead's denunciation of American participation in the World Court – an issue which reached a peak in 1926. Shipstead voted against American involvement with this plan, and the volume of letters in his personal papers

⁶³Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 80-81.

strongly express agreement with this position.⁶⁴ In essence, the Farmer-Labor figures saw interventionist foreign policy as a distraction and an excuse for the continued status quo of economic exploitation. This appeal would play well throughout the 1920s and even the years of the Great Depression in the early and mid-1930s, but would eventually lose its appeal as America edged closer to intervention against the Axis powers in the late 1930s.

The rhetorical messages employed by the Farmer-Labor Party and its associated figures had a number of common themes, and typically changed little in the 1920s in terms of issues and their proposed solutions. This rhetoric took many forms in this period. Much of it was campaign oratory, some of which survives in archival collections and other sources. Some of it can also be found in the many publications associated with the party, the Farmer-Labor Association, and the various individual candidates and leaders who ran under the party's banner. Much of this rhetoric centered on economic issues of importance to the main base of the party, namely the rural-agrarian and urban-labor wings. Many of these major themes had emerged from earlier trends, such as the Populist Party movement of the 1890s, the sentiments represented by at least some of the progressive reforms of the early 1900s, and more recently, the NPL movement. Arthur C. Townley himself had been a master orator and rhetorician – especially in terms of formulating visions of agrarian discontent and identifying a set of villains and solutions. In fact, many of Townley's NPL rhetorical messages would make a relatively easy transition into the farmer-labor movement after 1922.

⁶⁴Henrik Shipstead Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Henrik Shipstead Papers]; A number of blank form letters had been created and distributed to citizens by an unknown organization, urging them to sign the letters to protest American involvement with the World Court. Shipstead kept dozens of these letters, possibly as evidence of popular support for his position; see also Senator Shipstead quoted in the *Congressional Record*, Volume 67, 2658, 2676-2677, and 2820-2821.

The main themes of the Farmer-Labor rhetoric focused on economic injustice in the agrarian and labor realms, and proposed a wide array of solutions to be instituted by government on the state and federal level in order to alleviate these conditions. In general, the party purported to represent the needs of the “common man” in his struggle with big business. According to this view, the recent decades of change which had brought large-scale industrialization and had created national markets through the expansion of railroads, had led to farmers and laborers facing the threat of permanent economic decline and exploitation. Government intervention (under the control of a party or individuals sympathetic to the needs of common persons) was needed to regulate big business and its controls over the economy to allow individuals (often known as “producers” – i.e., those who actually produced the crops or goods) to be rewarded fairly for their efforts. At the same time, the aim was to ensure fair prices for the common buying public (or “consumers”) that depended on reasonable prices in order to maintain a decent standard of living. Farmer-Labor rhetoric thus assumed an important role in the movement, since it depicted a society in great need of significant economic reform. The main emphasis was to convince its members and sympathetic voters that they – the common producers and consumers – were being robbed of their fair share of proceeds of their own production. Because of this, much of the Farmer-Labor rhetoric cast a gloomy picture of the current state of the economy, and strongly implied that governmental action along the lines of the party’s platform was the only practical means of empowering the agrarian and laboring classes. This plan would then lead to the salvation of American democracy by denying excessive power (both political and economic) to the monied and corporate interests and empowering the common citizens.⁶⁵

⁶⁵Leslie Gene Rude, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement,” Ph.D. Dissertation,

In the agrarian sphere, the movement had a longer history and a well-established rhetorical pattern which explained both the dysfunction of the current system and proposed solutions. Much of this agrarian rhetorical heritage can be seen in the messages of Townley and the NPL movement which preceded the Farmer-Labor Party. In general, the messages charged that there was an agribusiness monopoly (or near monopoly) and a lack of fair access to markets for farmers. Railroads, banks, and agribusiness entities (which actually purchased and transported crops in the rural areas) were squeezing the farmers and were systematically exploiting them. The price of crops had risen during the boom years of World War I – but the price ceiling imposed by the government at that time had impinged on farmer prosperity – even during this time of great demand. Then, in the early 1920s, crop price deflation caused hardship after farmers had been encouraged to increase their production during the war but then faced a soft market afterwards. They were then often unable to recoup their investments (or even faced possible bankruptcy or foreclosure). The interest on loans to farmers was high and was influenced by the villainous Federal Reserve System – which often figured as a major culprit in Farmer-Labor rhetoric (especially for such figures as Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr. and Henrik Shipstead) since it was alleged to be behind the monetary policy which caused deflation and set interest rates.⁶⁶

In the sphere of labor, the themes were similar in some ways, but addressed a different type of exploitation and perceived economic injustice. The party's urban-labor wing had concerns after the war regarding ample job opportunities, sufficient wages, the right to

University of Illinois, 1962, 275.

⁶⁶Charles Lindbergh Sr., *The Economic Pinch* (Costa Mesa, CA: Noontide Press, 1923), 77-98; Arthur C. Townley, "What is the National Producers' Alliance," *Minnesota Farmer-Labor Convention Proceedings* (1923), 34; see also Arthur C. Townley, *The National Producers' Alliance* (1922) excerpts reprinted in James M. Youngdale (editor), *Third Party Footprints: An Anthology from Writings and Speeches of Midwest Radicals* (Minneapolis, MN: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1966), 122-123 and 182-185.

unionize, workmen's compensation, and a general concern over the cost of living. Although the 1920s represented a time of relatively low unemployment and slowly rising wages, there was a longstanding perception on the part of the labor sector that wages were not increasing sufficiently to keep up with the cost of living. Accusations of excessive corporate greed and exploitation were common, as were charges that these business interests had placed regular politicians under their influence. Like the agrarian-oriented rhetoric, the labor-oriented rhetoric targeted big business and corrupt government (as ruled by the two major parties). This system was portrayed as being beyond reform and under the constant influence of money from big business – who sought to protect their existing privileges. The Farmer-Laborites often labeled the major parties as being in cahoots with the businesses who sought to quell labor unrest and prevent organization that would benefit the common worker. More specifically on the local level, the Farmer-Labor rhetoric disdained the approach of using the National Guard or any other official constabulary as a means of suppressing labor during disputes. Since this approach had been used in Minnesota during World War I, the party leaders had had direct experience with this, as had their labor constituency. This particular Farmer-Labor plank was seen as being very friendly to labor – since it sought to prohibit the state from using coercion to end labor disputes.⁶⁷

Farmer-Labor rhetoric also espoused a number of recurring themes, which centered on the unfairness of the current economic situation and which perpetuated a system of continuing exploitation. These themes were also angry in tone and were meant to solidify farmer and laborer discontent, and feed a sense of economic injustice that would lead to electoral support for the party. Such rhetorical appeals of the party and its leaders allowed the

⁶⁷Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 77-80.

farmer-labor movement in Minnesota to effectively gain control of the mainstream “dissident” political discontent in the 1920s and become the main opposition party in the state.⁶⁸

Even so, such approaches necessitated a careful rhetorical balance between dissent and sedition – and between reform and radicalism. In its formative years during the war, the movement had been accused of harboring treasonous sentiments or of even advocating revolution. The Farmer-Labor rhetoric had a tone of outrage and called for decisive – even extreme – political action. Yet (as its leaders generally acknowledged), the movement’s rhetoric could not be so extreme as to confirm the charges of unfettered radicalism that were often leveled against them by their opponents. In the 1920s, such figures as Henrik Shipstead and Magnus Johnson were avid practitioners of this approach. As such, Farmer-Labor rhetoric was both offensive and defensive in nature. In its offensive vein, it sought to create or give voice to dissatisfaction and lead to government intervention and possibly even ownership of important means of economic exchanges and distribution. In its defensive vein, the Farmer-Labor rhetoric denied being communist or subversively radical. It also defended itself against frequent charges that socialism was its main influence or goal. Instead, its defensive rhetoric often posited that the movement was an assertion of true American democracy (i.e., equality, economic fairness, and Jeffersonian ideals of the agrarian republic, etc.), that it represented the compassionate and genuine nature of Christianity (i.e., the movement was not “godless” or excessively secular – trends often associated with socialism and communism), and that its planks were practical and achievable.⁶⁹

⁶⁸Rude, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement,” 276-277.

⁶⁹Rude, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement,” 198-205.

Some brief examples drawn from messages crafted by several leading Farmer-Labor figures in the 1920s illustrate these points. References have already been made to the views of Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr. and his denunciations of corporate powers, government corruption, and the exploitation of both farmers and laborers. Likewise, Townley's NPL rhetoric often articulated pro-agrarian themes emphasizing government intervention on behalf of farmers. Many of these sentiments and tropes continued in the 1920s. The decline in farm prices from 1920 to 1923 along with later efforts to establish a holding authority as a means for stabilizing grain prices (the McNary-Haugen Plan) also became a main focus for the Farmer-Laborites in the 1920s. Likewise, William Mahoney often echoed the themes of the unity of the common "producing classes" against the existing corporate-government elite. At the 1923 Farmer-Labor conference, Mahoney emphasized the concept of the creation of a broad coalition of farmers and workers as a means to address political changes which would "secure relief and protection" for these classes. Mahoney's efforts represented a concerted rhetorical effort to unite the two major segments of the fledgling party base in a quest to seek economic justice through united political action.⁷⁰

These rhetorical trends can also be seen reflected in the words of the party's initial champion and most prominent political figure of the 1920s, Henrik Shipstead. Much of Shipstead's 1920 and 1922 campaign rhetoric focused on farmers' causes, suspicion of financial institutions, and the power of government to redress economic unfairness. Many of these messages continued during Shipstead's Senate tenure in office. In 1924, in response to a surge in the stock market, Shipstead asked, "The New York Stock Exchange has been

⁷⁰William Mahoney, *Address to the Farmer-Labor Conference* (1923); reprinted in Youngdale, *Third Party Footprints*, 187-189.

enjoying the greatest orgy of stock sales in its history . . . aided by the Treasury and the Federal Reserve Board, the volume of stock sales has been doubled . . . what [will] the outcome . . . be when the orgy of stock inflation is over[?].”⁷¹ Five years later, Shipstead’s question would be definitively answered.

In 1925, when an early version of the McNary-Haugen program was being debated, Shipstead firmly came down on the side of the proposed legislation as a means of leveling the economic playing field: “I should not ask price fixing for the farmer. But the administration has seen fit to protect the prices of manufactured products by the tariff . . . as long as such policies are continued, I say that the farmer should have the same advantage as the manufacturer.”⁷² It should be noted that this concept of using government to ensure fairness in markets was a major theme of Farmer-Labor rhetoric, and was one way in which they differentiated their platform from conventional socialism or communism. In other words, the Farmer-Labor rhetoric often sought to alleviate the perceived existing imbalance in capitalism – but not the eradication of capitalism itself. Since the movement’s agrarian supporters often owned their own means of production (land, equipment, etc.), the Farmer-Laborites would have been on shaky ground suggesting that government ownership of all means of agricultural production would somehow benefit their farmer constituency.

Shipstead’s tenure as Senator – as well as his position on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – also made him the party’s most prominent spokesperson on foreign affairs. Shipstead tended to reflect the isolationist sentiments of his party consistently. He opposed the Dawes Plan, voiced criticism over the issue of continued German war guilt, and

⁷¹Martin Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota* (Chicago, IL: Packard and Company, 1940), 79.

⁷²Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota*, 83-84

voted against American involvement in the World Court (“we shall be surrendering a larger and larger proportion of our American independent sovereignty”) – even suggesting that such a move was a secret plan to entangle the United States with the League of Nations – a position which he also opposed. Shipstead was consistently critical of U.S. military intervention, disarmament conferences (which he cynically saw as a way to make wars “nice, humane and orderly” – and thus more likely), and military spending. He even proposed a bill to allow the President to eliminate mandatory military duty.⁷³

Magnus Johnson was also a major figure within the party in the 1920s. Although his Senate tenure would be brief, his position as a well-recognized and frequent candidate made him a highly visible person within the movement. After the defeat of an early version of the McNary-Haugen bill in 1926, Magnus Johnson (then the Farmer-Labor Party’s candidate for Governor) criticized the bill’s defeat:

(The farmers’) condition has been going from bad to worse. With their deflation, engineered by the Federal Reserve Board in 1920, the farmers were put to the bad. Since that time nothing has been done by our government to re-establish them. Thousands, and tens of thousands of them have been driven from their farms to the cities, there to become competitors of the workers and thus force down the wages of the latter.⁷⁴

In this case, Johnson depicted the bill’s defeat as being detrimental to both farmers and laborers – evidence of the party’s efforts to continually tie together the interests of both constituencies in their rhetoric. Representative Knud Wefald also went on record to condemn the bill’s defeat at the same time, charging then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover with

⁷³Barbara Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1968* (St. Paul, MN; Minnesota Historical Society, 1973), 82-83.

⁷⁴“Says Farmer Is Betrayed: Magnus Johnson Criticizes Congress for Failure of Haugen Bill,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1926, 2.

corruption: “Never . . . has the money power been so entrenched [sic] in the control of a Government as it is in our country today.” He continued, “The farmers want no more wildcat marketing schemes built from the top down.”⁷⁵ Later, in a speech given in 1927 in Iowa, Magnus Johnson addressed the new version of the McNary-Haugen legislation, and endorsed it as a means for farmers to escape a future in which corporations would own the farmland and turn farmers into “wage slaves.”⁷⁶

The rhetoric of Ole J. Kvale in the 1920s also gave the movement an appeal of moral righteousness and reform. In his 1920 campaign, Kvale echoed many of the themes of economic exploitation that were becoming standard within the movement. Kvale spoke of a government under the thumb of wealthy figures such as J. P. Morgan, Jr. and Daniel Guggenheim. He denounced war profiteering, Wall Street, and the general economic exploitation visited upon common producers by corporate middlemen. Kvale singled out the railroad, coal, and flour milling industries as obvious perpetrators of this economic injustice. Also, Kvale – long an author of persuasive religious tracts as part of his Lutheran ministry – often employed moral appeals in his public addresses. In his commencement address to the graduates of Luther College in 1925, he compared the righteous nature of political reform to biblical characters, even mentioning Jeremiah and Jesus Christ. Kvale’s contention was that significant reform had always been resisted, and that such agitation was often unpopular at

⁷⁵“Haugen Bill Defeat Charged to Hoover: Representative Wefald Accuses Administration of Aiding Food Gamblers Against Farmers,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1926, 20.

⁷⁶“Warns of Farm ‘Slavery’ – Magnus Johnson Pictures Land Ruled by ‘Gigantic Corporations,’” *New York Times*, September 21, 1927, 4.

the time it was introduced, but would later be solemnly appreciated by successive generations who benefitted from it.⁷⁷

These themes of anti-exploitation, economic justice, government intervention in the economic sphere, financial conspiracies (often engineered by large banks or the Federal Reserve) and a general disgust aimed at an existing cozy business-government relationship would remain staples of Farmer-Labor domestic policy rhetoric throughout the 1920s and '30s. In terms of foreign policy, isolationism, suspicion of military intervention overseas, financial entanglement with Europe, and criticism of military build-ups was the norm for the movement's figures throughout the 1920s and – for some of the party's figures – well into the 1930s as well.⁷⁸

The Election of 1924

The election of 1924 provided another test of the Farmer-Labor Party's staying power. There were factors at play in the 1924 election which supported the party's continued electoral success, but also made for significant new challenges. Supporting the movement was its emergence and establishment as a true third party: its central committee, its wide base, its appeal to large numbers of voters, its ability to fuse the farmer and labor constituencies, and the rhetorical appeal of many of its candidates. In addition, the growth of the Farmer-Labor Federation (soon to be renamed the Farmer-Labor Association) represented

⁷⁷Ole J. Kvale, Campaign Speech (1920) and Commencement Address at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, (June 1925) reprinted in Youngdale, *Third Party Footprints*, 218-230.

⁷⁸Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 106-110.

a unique grassroots recruitment and campaign support structure. All of these worked in the Farmer-Labor Party's favor.

However, there were also factors which worked against the party's success in the 1924 elections. The first was a shift in agricultural crop prices, which began to stabilize in 1924. The years of 1920 to 1923 had been particularly harsh in this regard and farmers in Minnesota had responded by voting for a third party alternative. However, with a degree of stabilization in the agriculture sector, the need for more radical politics was somewhat abated. Worse, the national Farmer-Labor activity (culminating with the conference in St. Paul in June 1924) tarnished the movement through its association with radicals, and concerns about the nature of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party had thus been raised in the public mind. The party later shifted course to openly denounce communism – however the damage had been done, and some electoral support had shifted over to the Republican side. Also, the party's standard bearer – Senator Henrik Shipstead – took little interest in the 1924 elections, and would continue this pattern of placing considerable distance between himself and the party that had launched his own Senate career.⁷⁹

At stake in 1924 was the Senate seat currently occupied by Magnus Johnson (the 1923 election had been called simply to fill out Knute Nelson's term), the governor's seat, the offices of the state government and legislature, and the federal House seats. The party's success in 1922 and 1923 now attracted many candidates for the party. This increased competition in the party's primaries that year, but also made for more in-fighting. The governor's race was especially competitive, with four major candidates initially running. The most prominent of these was Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr. Lindbergh had stated earlier that he

⁷⁹Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 47-48.

would not shirk his duty to accept a nomination for governor if the Farmer-Labor Party wanted him to run. He had been granted a prominent place at the September 1923 conference, authoring an article on economic exploitation.⁸⁰ His name was mentioned early at the March 1924 convention, and he eventually emerged as the party's endorsee.

Lindbergh's campaign had just barely started however, when in April 1924, he became seriously ill. A consult at the Mayo Clinic revealed that he had an advanced stage brain tumor, with just weeks to live. By the end of April, Lindbergh had been officially removed from the race. He was so ill by that time that he was unable to sign the affidavit for his own withdrawal. He died soon afterwards.⁸¹

Two of the other gubernatorial candidates were well known: Tom Davis and Dr. Louis Fritsche. Both had a long history of association with the NPL and farmer-labor movement, and both had sought political office before. The fourth candidate was the young, up-and-coming County Attorney of Hennepin County – Floyd Bjornstjerne Olson. Olson had recently risen to prominence in the Twin Cities area, earning a name for himself as a champion who often stood up to powerful entities. He had been raised in Minnesota and had dabbled with college before leaving the state to roam and work as a laborer in Alaska and in some of the fisheries of the Pacific Northwest. He had then returned to Minnesota, obtained his law degree, and started work as a prosecutor in Minneapolis. His flair for dramatic oratory swiftly made him successful and visible in the local press.⁸² In 1922, he had

⁸⁰Charles A. Lindbergh, "Man and The Eclipse of The Sun," *Farmer-Labor Convention Proceedings, 1923*, 36

⁸¹Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 279-280.

⁸²George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951), 7-16.

successfully run for County Attorney of Hennepin County (which included the City of Minneapolis).⁸³



Figure 16. Floyd B. Olson first rose to political prominence in 1924, when he ran for governor on the Farmer-Labor ticket. The ambitious Olson had made a name for himself as Hennepin County Attorney – often taking on controversial cases which had led to a high profile for him by the early 1920s. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

In 1923, Olson had vigorously prosecuted a case against members of the Citizens' Alliance (the Minneapolis anti-union business group). The case was significant not only because of the seriousness of the charges (members of the group were charged with attempting to hire an assassin to kill a local labor leader), but also because Olson's pursuit of the powerful group immediately aligned him with the left side of the political aisle, and made him an instant hero to the labor movement in the state. Although some had questioned his lack of experience and connection to the party during the 1924 campaign, Lindbergh himself endorsed Olson upon the former's withdrawal from the race. Olson won the primary in June 1924 and then ran as the party's gubernatorial candidate in the general election.⁸⁴

In turn, the Republicans choose strong candidates for the 1924 elections. Their two most prominent candidates also held special appeal. The first was the Senate candidate, Thomas D. Schall, an attorney who had been accidentally blinded some years earlier. He had made a name for himself as a product liability lawyer, and in 1914, he had been elected to the

⁸³“Thompson and Mallon Go on County Board – Voegili 10,000 Ahead of Van Lear – May Dills named Superintendent – Schaffer Defeats Terrell – Olson and Brown Outdistance Opponents,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 9, 1922, 11.

⁸⁴George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 30.

U.S. House from Minnesota's Tenth District. This base consisted of rural Hennepin County and many of the counties directly north of Minneapolis (an area not particularly strong for either agrarian or labor constituencies). He had served in that capacity until he won the Republican Senate nomination in 1924. Schall had achieved a reputation as a progressive within the party, had some ties to the NPL, and had even openly supported a Farmer-Labor candidate (Shipstead) in the 1922 election [see Chapter Three].⁸⁵

However, Schall's earlier flirtations with the NPL were not enough to garner any significant support from the agrarian wing of the Farmer-Labor Party in the 1924 election. He was strongly denounced by *The Minnesota Leader* in October 1924 as being a deceptive and decidedly unprogressive candidate. Schall was labeled "the bitterest, bluemass pill" who "did more wriggling and twisting than a tomato can full of fish worms." *The Leader* went on to endorse Magnus Johnson, whose "record of one hundred percent progressive" was the clear preferable choice for Minnesota farmers.⁸⁶ As mentioned earlier, *The Leader* would shift its position on Schall less than three years later – evidence of a continuing farmer-labor split in the party, and of the remnant NPL diverging – at least somewhat – from the Farmer-Labor Party's official line.



Figure 17. Thomas D. Schall was a practicing attorney when he was accidentally blinded by a faulty cigar lighter. Schall felt the effects of the blast immediately, but lost his sight gradually over a period of months. He continued his career as a lawyer and then a politician – often aided by his wife, who helped him to operate effectively. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

⁸⁵Francis G. Mattson, *Official Congressional Directory*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of Congressional Directory, 1921), 53.

⁸⁶"Tom Schall Makes Noise Like Regular on Stradling [sic] Record," *The Minnesota Leader*, October 10, 1924.

The defeat of Governor Preus in the 1923 special Senate election had sealed the incumbent governor's political future. Instead of running their current incumbent, the Republicans choose Theodore Christianson as their gubernatorial candidate in 1924. Christianson had a background as a state legislator and editor, and was an adept speaker as well. Christianson received the endorsement of U.S. Steel – a significant plus in an era when employment on the Iron Range was a primary issue. Floyd B. Olson had tried – but failed – to win this same endorsement by promising a public works project that would benefit the Iron Range. Although the miners' suspicions of that large company were genuine, they were also concerned about losing their jobs, and this may have been at least one factor in generating support for Christianson. Olson would later charge that laborers' fears of losing their jobs had affected their votes in the election – and implied that this had been used as a deliberate scare tactic by the Christianson campaign.⁸⁷

Figure 18. Theodore Christianson was one of the most able Republican gubernatorial figures in this period. Christianson was elected to the governor's office three times in the 1920s, often balancing the need for fiscal prudence against the demands of his Farmer-Labor opponents and conflicting views within his own party. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



The Republican campaign of 1924 focused strongly on the Farmer-Labor Party's associations with communists and other radical groups. Christianson especially made charges of communist influence within the Farmer-Labor Party, even going so far as to note that the communist party in Minnesota had chosen not to run its own candidate in the governor's race

⁸⁷Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 33.

(the implication being that Olson was more than acceptable to the communist constituency). These charges had been leveled before; however with the debacle of the June 1924 conference, these charges of radicalism hit harder. The fact that the Farmer-Labor Party ran a communist candidate (Julius Emme) for Congress in the Fourth District (in competition with their erstwhile ally, Oscar Keller) further eroded the movement's mainstream credentials. Keller swamped Emme in the general election, proving that radical associations were indeed detrimental to Farmer-Labor aspirations.⁸⁸

Likewise, the Farmer-Labor embrace of Senator Robert La Follette's ill-fated third party presidential run worked against their state campaigns as well. Although La Follette had taken pains to distance himself from the radicals of the 1924 national conference, his reputation had suffered, and an increasing number of mainstream voters viewed La Follette as something of a radical rabble-rouser by the autumn of 1924.⁸⁹ The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party gave La Follette its full support in his bid for the presidency, however, even hosting a major rally in Minneapolis with their candidates next to La Follette on stage. La Follette also received a ringing endorsement from the official Farmer-Labor organ, the *Farmer-Labor Advocate*.⁹⁰

In the Senate race, Magnus Johnson was defeated by Thomas Schall by a very close margin. Floyd B. Olson won 42% of the gubernatorial vote, but lost the governor's race to Theodore Christiansen, who won with a plurality of 47%. The House seats held by Ole J. Kvale and Knud Wefald were safe however, and both of these men were re-elected and returned to Congress in 1925. In addition, a former pro-labor Democratic convert to the

⁸⁸Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 45.

⁸⁹Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*, 63.

⁹⁰"Bob La Follette Wins Big Mill City Crowd in Addressing Exposing Cal and Corruption," *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, October 22, 1924.

Farmer-Labor Party, William Carrs, was also elected to Congress from the Eight District.⁹¹

On the national level, the incumbent Republican President, Calvin Coolidge, was elected, and would remain in office until early 1929. The Republicans also made gains in the House and the Senate.⁹²

Despite this loss of ground, the Farmer-Labor Party line remained officially optimistic. In fact, the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* framed the party's losses as a big overall gain in votes for the movement. Although they lost both the governor's and the Senate contest, the *Advocate* claimed that the number of votes for their candidates in these races had increased greatly from 1922 to 1924. The newspaper claimed that the Farmer-Labor Senate vote had increased from 690,829 to 818,789 votes, and that the Farmer-Labor gubernatorial vote had increased from 685,138 to 831,413 votes. Thus, the implication was that the movement was still gaining steam, and that the "threat" of the La Follette campaign had been the factor in driving up Republican votes – a factor that would not likely appear again (although such a claim was also an overt admission that backing La Follette had been a mistake).⁹³

The Farmer-Labor reaction to the loss of Johnson's Senate seat and the governor's office was far from graceful. In his concession speech, Olson refused to congratulate Christianson and instead suggested that a significant portion of the electorate had been put under unfair pressure to vote for the Republican side. Olson told stories of farmers being threatened with mortgage recalls or miners being told to stay home after Election Day if the Farmer-Labor side won. Olson was unable to offer hard evidence to back up his claims.

⁹¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 89-91.

⁹²Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy*, 211-212.

⁹³"Surprising Gains for Farmer-Labor Party Shown in 1924 Votes," *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, November 12, 1924; this pronouncement was also a strong indication that the state party was finished with associating itself with presidential campaigns.

However, an admission by a Republican figure soon after the election seemed to confirm that the Republicans had hired a number of “labor” figures to campaign door-to-door in Hennepin County spreading negative rumors about the effect of Olson being elected.⁹⁴

However, Olson’s charges were minor in comparison to the efforts of Magnus Johnson, who disputed the Senate election results almost immediately. To Johnson, the eight-thousand vote gap between him and Schall seemed to suggest fraud. He and his supporters (who spanned much of the political spectrum and consisted of loyal Farmer-Laborites, Democrats such as John Lind, and even some anti-Schall Republicans) officially contested the election results and set into motion a long press war. This lengthy and painful process eventually led to an investigation by the Senate Elections Committee. Charges of bribery, vote buying and illegal contributions were rife on both sides. The case eventually wound up on the floor of the Senate and was not formally concluded until June 1926, when the Senate Elections Committee unanimously rejected Johnson’s claim. It was only then that Schall was formally admitted to the Senate. Shipstead – in a display of party unity – had attempted to delay a committee vote by asking for the evidence in the investigation to be printed in multiple copies, but was refused in this request.⁹⁵ Even so, it took several days for the committee to act on the recommendation to drop Johnson’s appeal.⁹⁶ Schall’s official comments on the matter were scathing and unequivocal in their condemnation of Johnson

⁹⁴Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 36.

⁹⁵“Schall Flays Hughes After Contest Victory,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 7, 1926.

⁹⁶“Senate Given Schall Report; Will Act Today,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 9, 1926; see also “Senate Delays Vote on Schall Case 24 Hours,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 10, 1926.

and his supporters, whom Schall called “skunks” who should be shot, and also “rat-like” and “crooked.”⁹⁷

With their setback in the 1924 elections, the Farmer-Labor Party took steps to shore up its image and regain momentum. Serious efforts were undertaken to exclude or to ostracize known communist members. Many leading radical members were purged from the party or excluded, as the central committee sought to disassociate itself from a radical image and continue building the new party organization. In January 1925, communism was openly denounced and communists were officially forbidden from joining the party. A “Unity Conference” was held in March 1925 which officially re-organized the existing Farmer-Labor Federation into the Farmer-Labor Association. Floyd B. Olson – himself now a member of the FLA executive committee – largely oversaw this change, which included drafting a new constitution for the association. Olson carefully crafted the language of this document, emphasizing progressive social change and reform, while refraining from socialist rhetoric. This constitution specifically barred FLA membership to any group or person who advocated “political or economic change by means of force or by means of revolution or advocating any other than a representation form of government.”⁹⁸ William Mahoney – until 1924 the unquestionable leader of the early Farmer-Labor Party movement and the creator of the Farmer-Labor Federation – had now been eclipsed by Olson – the young Hennepin County Attorney and political upstart. Although it would be some time before Olson’s efforts bore political fruit, his actions in re-organizing the FLA would prove to be decisive.

⁹⁷“Schall Denounces Magnus Johnson,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1926, 5; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 96-97.

⁹⁸*Constitution of the Farmer-Labor Association*, adopted March 20, 1925, Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota Papers, Box 3.

The Election of 1926

As Magnus Johnson delayed the seating of Schall in the Senate in 1925, farm prices continued to stabilize, and the “business of the American people” continued in its laissez-faire vein under the Coolidge administration. On the state level, the new governor, Theodore Christianson, undertook a major re-organization of the state government, setting up a three-person Commission of Administration and Finance, which became known as “The Big Three.” Christianson had run on a platform of cutting taxes (his campaign slogan had been “More Ted, less taxes”) and he enjoyed projecting the image of “Tightwad Ted.” The purpose of the Big Three was to increase executive power (all three members were appointed by the governor), chiefly for the purpose of cutting government spending. Christianson was successful in this regard, and did manage to reduce state government spending. In this period of relative prosperity, the voters rewarded him by re-electing him in 1926 and in 1928. However, Christianson’s creation of the commission would also allow subsequent governors greater executive power. When the torch was finally passed to the opposition party, it gave the governor’s office powers that Republicans would not find desirable.⁹⁹

The Farmer-Labor Party poured itself into the 1926 elections hoping that the setbacks of 1924 were an aberration. Although Floyd B. Olson had exerted his influence within the association and the party considerably since 1924, he deliberately choose to focus on his re-election as County Attorney and the pursuit of a high profile case of corruption in city government in 1926.¹⁰⁰ The Farmer-Labor convention held in March 1926 almost gave Magnus Johnson – still involved in his dispute with Schall over the contested Senate seat –

⁹⁹Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 479.

¹⁰⁰Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 39.

the governor's nomination outright. Instead, his rival Tom Davis earned enough support to force a primary campaign. Johnson won this primary race with a 53% majority and became the party's candidate for governor. However, the number of total voters in the Farmer-Labor primary had dropped 50,000 votes from 1924, while the Republican primary vote totals had climbed significantly – a statistic which did not bode well for the coming election.¹⁰¹ Davis' bitterness at losing the primary race would surface just before the election with a call for voters to abandon the party [see below]. No Senate seats were open during the 1926 election, so the focus was on state offices – both executive and legislative, as well as the congressional House seats. Johnson remained a popular leading figure within the party during this period, despite his loss to Schall in the 1924 Senate race. Party regulars seemed to admire his outspoken qualities and commitment to the Farmer-Labor cause. He was often depicted as one of the party's leading candidates in the *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, and was officially endorsed in the primary by the publication as well, which labeled him “the MOST ABLE MAN IN THE STATE.”¹⁰²

The 1926 elections saw the renewal of discussions of fusion with the Democrats – although it was not the Farmer-Laborites who initiated this dialogue. In what became known as the “Round Robin” strategy (led by Walter Quigley, a supporter of Tom Davis), a serious secret initiative began in September 1926 to encourage Farmer-Labor voters to abandon their party and instead embrace the Democrats in the 1926 election. In theory, this was to be done as a prelude to an official merger in 1928, which the movement's advocates claimed was inevitable (since the third party option was supposedly waning in its support). Quigley

¹⁰¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 102.

¹⁰²“Magnus Johnson Stands as Most Representative Farm-Labor Candidate,” *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, June 16, 1926.

outlined his plan to several Farmer-Labor figures, and they initially approved it. The movement became public at the end of September, and the reaction from the Farmer-Labor leadership was vehement. The Farmer-Labor Party and the Farmer-Labor Association quickly denounced the plan, denied any rumors of fusion, and proclaimed Quigley to be a liar and a despicable character (despite the fact that he had been a longtime NPL figure). The end result of this bizarre exchange was that the Farmer-Labor Party and the Democrats continued their distrust of each other, and for the time being any serious talk of cooperation or fusion between them was off the table.¹⁰³ Even so, this aborted plan seemed to affect the 1926 election at least somewhat, especially in some outstate districts. As late as mid-October, some NPL figures were still openly calling for Farmer-Labor candidates to withdraw in favor of Democratic candidates. However, such calls were met with vigorous refusals from such figures as Magnus Johnson, who replied to such pleas with a simple “nothing doing.”¹⁰⁴

Johnson’s campaign against Governor Christianson focused on the supposed folly of the governor’s “thriftiness.” Johnson attacked Christianson for cutting state funding for programs aimed at empowering the farm and labor sector. This included Johnson’s (and the party’s) stance in favor of increasing state funding for education. Johnson criticized Christianson’s recent veto of a public school finance bill as evidence of the governor’s unwillingness to allocate sufficient funds for average school children. Johnson further claimed that Christianson’s thrifty approach to government was “attempting to pull the wool over the eyes of the people with its false claims of economy,” and thus the governor’s tax-

¹⁰³Letter of Walter Quigley to Thomas Jackson, September 10, 1926, Farmer-Labor Association Papers, Box 2; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 103-104.

¹⁰⁴“F-L Candidates Ignore Demand That They Quit,” *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 8, 1926; see also Gieske, 103-104.

cutting was penny-wise and pound-foolish.¹⁰⁵ All three of the major gubernatorial candidates also made efforts to cultivate the female vote by attending a women's voting conference in Duluth as well.¹⁰⁶

The 1926 election results again brought disappointment to the Farmer Labor Party. Totals for the Farmer-Labor candidates for most of the major offices polled just below 37% and ranged down to about 30%. The Republicans polled about 47% to 60% for their candidates, depending on the specific race in question. The Democrats once again did poorly, polling only single digits in most races. However, even though the Farmer-Labor Party made no significant gains in the 1926 elections, it further cemented its position as the leading opposition party, and had demonstrated that the Democrats were to remain on the fringes of Minnesota's political scene for the time being. Floyd B. Olson's triumphal re-election as County Attorney as a non-affiliated candidate did more to raise his profile rather than the party's. The House races results also demonstrated stagnation in the Farmer-Labor momentum. Ole J. Kvale won re-election to his House seat with 59% of the vote – the best showing of any Farmer-Labor candidate in the 1926 election. However, his colleague, Knud Wefald, was defeated by a mere 972 votes – a crushing disappointment for the Farmer-Laborites. William Carrs kept his seat in the Eighth District, winning 55% of the vote. On the state level, the Republicans took every state executive office and retained a solid majority in the legislature. The main opposition party on the state level remained the Farmer-Labor Party, however.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵“Magnus Fights Thrift Record of Christianson,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 5, 1926.

¹⁰⁶“Women Voters Open Session in Duluth Today,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 7, 1926.

¹⁰⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 105-106.

Despite these defeats, the official Farmer-Labor Party line remained one of determination. But even so, it was obvious that the heady days of 1922 and 1923 were starting to look more exceptional rather than a continuing pattern of growing success. In the wake of the party's electoral setbacks in the 1926 election, The *Farmer-Labor Advocate* did its best to portray events in a positive manner, claiming that a continuing large voter base proved the "vitality" of the movement, and that "many progressive legislators [had indeed been] elected." Furthermore, the defeated candidate Magnus Johnson issued an appeal "to continue battle" stating that: "The problems before us . . . are still unresolved. Our program is economic. It provides for a solution of the problems of the farmer, the wage earner, and the small business and professional man."¹⁰⁸ A month later, the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* (in the words of Henry G. Teigan) declared that the "Farmer-Labor Party . . . is permanent in structure and purpose" implying that – despite its recent setbacks – the party leaders intended to keep the party alive.¹⁰⁹ However, this assertion was not manifested in the continuation of the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* newspaper itself, which published its last issue on February 1, 1927 – a sign of the party's declining influence and worsening financial situation.¹¹⁰

One unforeseen outcome of the 1926 election was the composition of the U.S. Senate. The Democrats had made gains in the 1926 election and as a result, the Senate became almost evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. After the 1926 election, the totals were: 48 Republican Senators, 47 Democratic Senators – and 1 Farmer-Labor Senator (Henrik Shipstead). Both sides invited Shipstead to join their caucus in order to tip the

¹⁰⁸"Magnus Issues Appeal to All F.-L. Adherents to Continue Battle," *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, November 16, 1926.

¹⁰⁹H. G. Teigan, "Farmer-Labor Party of State is Permanent in Structure and Purpose," *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, December 16, 1926.

¹¹⁰*Farmer-Labor Advocate*, February 1, 1927.

balance of power. This situation greatly enhanced Shipstead's position as national attention was turned to his decision. Shipstead came to the conclusion in December 1926 that he would caucus with the Republicans – provided that they would vote for some form of farm relief and use restraint in ordering federal injunctions in labor disputes. This was the first open association in his Senate career that Shipstead would make with the Republicans, but it was not to be the last. Indeed, from this point on, rumors of his official defection to the Republican Party would surround every one of his re-election campaigns.¹¹¹

The Election of 1928

Continued general prosperity from 1927 through the end of 1928 did not bode well for the Farmer-Labor party in the coming election. The movement had faced two consecutive elections in which its share of the vote in general had been diminished, and it had lost some prized seats. The conditions in 1928 did not seem to be very different from 1926. Worse, much of the party's leadership – as well as its finances – had become increasingly tired and strained, and the promise of upset electoral wins and the possibility of implementing significant reform seemed distant. The Farmer-Labor Association's budget had been reduced to the point in 1927 that it was unable to publish the *Farmer-Labor Advocate*.¹¹² The party's two brightest stars – Floyd B. Olson and Henrik Shipstead – were uncertain in their intentions. Olson was the clear choice of party leaders and the Farmer-Labor Association to run for governor. The association had remembered Olson's leadership in re-structuring the organization in 1925, and both their members and party leaders had been duly impressed

¹¹¹Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota*, 95-96.

¹¹²Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association," 304.

with Olson's large margin of victory in 1926 County Attorney election (as well as his continuing reputation as a legal crusader for justice). Olson was offered the gubernatorial endorsement of the FLA in March 1928. He considered the decision for three weeks before finally declining to accept, citing his busy caseload as County Attorney. Olson may have been testing the political winds however, and came to the conclusion that a Farmer-Labor gubernatorial victory was unlikely in 1928, and that it would be better for him to wait for a better opportunity. As it turned out, he was correct in this assessment.¹¹³

Senator Shipstead was up for re-election in 1928, and like Floyd B. Olson, his intentions were far from certain. By this time, Shipstead had earned a strong reputation as an independent and had served six years in the Senate. Although he was outspoken and publicly sympathetic to farmer and labor interests, he remained unbound by party ideology and the state party leadership. He also often caucused with the Republican coalition in Congress (as he had promised to in the wake of the 1926 election). During his years in Washington, he had not cultivated a lot of personal contacts within the local state party or the FLA. In fact, it could be claimed that the party as it was in 1928 was largely formed after his initial election to the Senate in 1922, and that his victory in that election was due largely to his own abilities. For their part, many of the Farmer-Labor Party leaders and members of the Association viewed Shipstead in mixed terms. While he was the most prominent member of their movement, he was also the most independent and unpredictable. Shipstead had made few efforts to campaign for other Farmer-Labor candidates in 1924 and 1926, and there were rumors that he would jump ship and abandon the party for the Republicans in 1928. There was also some question whether or not he would immerse himself in state party politics

¹¹³Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 39-40.

sufficiently to win enough support to receive the party's nomination, and party leaders pressured him to commit himself more fully to the state Farmer-Labor cause.¹¹⁴

With these uncertainties hanging over the farmer-labor movement, the association held its official convention in March 1928. The party's platform was notably moderate and included no overt socialist planks. It did embrace the latest version of the McNary-Haugen plan for a national granary as a means to stabilize grain prices, and contained the standard boiler-plate rhetoric sympathetic to the farmer and labor constituencies. As mentioned earlier, Olson initially mulled over the party's endorsement offer, and then finally rejected it. In the wake of Olson's rejection, a race emerged between Dr. Louis Fritsche and Ernest Lundeen for the governor's nomination. Lundeen had an earlier career as both a state and federal Representative, and had been a Republican until 1926. Lundeen had also been endorsed for his pro-agrarian views earlier by Charles Lindbergh, Sr. Lundeen won the primary election in June 1928 – however the close vote combined with the paltry number of Farmer-Laborite primary votes cast signaled disinterest and a lack of strong enthusiasm within the party base.¹¹⁵



Figure 19. Ernest Lundeen had served in Congress as a Republican Representative when he suddenly changed parties in 1926. He became the Farmer-Labor candidate for governor in 1928. Lundeen would continue to run as a candidate within the party in the 1930s. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

¹¹⁴“Farmer-Laborite Chiefs Build Fire Under Shipstead,” *The Minneapolis Journal*, March 20, 1928 and “Shipstead Keeps Silence Despite Direct Question,” *The Minneapolis Journal*, March 23, 1928.

¹¹⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 115; see also Letter of Charles Lindbergh, Sr. to C. A. Knutson [undated], Lindbergh Family Papers, Box 16, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Lindbergh Papers].

True to his independent reputation, Shipstead avoided the Farmer-Labor convention altogether. Instead, Shipstead's strategy in 1928 was to use his party affiliation as a base of voter support but avoid becoming too entangled within either the party or the FLA. Many party leaders and operatives considered Shipstead to be arrogant and above the influence of the party because of this stance.¹¹⁶ However, Shipstead had always claimed to be a strong independent that used party affiliation as an indication of platform – but not a precise definition of his own views. Neither side was eager to confront the other: the party needed a star candidate whose popularity might bring Farmer-Labor votes to the polls, and Shipstead needed a party base. In the end, Shipstead's strategy paid off and he was able to keep the party and the FLA at arm's length while retaining the support of its voter base. He was re-elected in the 1928 general election with 62% of the vote and his victory became the party's greatest victory in the election. Again – as before – the Republicans easily maintained their hold on the major state offices, including the governor's office. Christianson trounced Lundeen 51% to 21%. Worse, the Farmer-Labor candidates running in the statewide races had declined significantly in their percentage of the vote from 1926 (receiving only about between 19% and 24% overall). At the same time, the share of the Democratic vote increased markedly from 1926, with their statewide candidates taking anywhere from 15% to 20% of the vote, including 20% for their gubernatorial candidate.¹¹⁷ The Farmer-Laborites' position as the main opposition party was starting to slip.

This arc of decline did not bode well for the party, and the general Farmer-Labor reaction to the results in 1928 were understandably pessimistic. The party itself seemed like

¹¹⁶Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 166-167.

¹¹⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 112, 120.

it had passed its high point and had been in a period of decline since 1924. Only the figures of Henrik Shipstead and Ole J. Kvale provided any luster for the movement on the congressional level. The Farmer-Labor Party and its FLA remained the main opposition political entity within the state. However, this opposition had been significantly reduced in its influence from its glory years of the early 1920s. Worse, the Farmer-Laborites' rivals for the title of opposition party – the Democrats – were showing signs of growth at Farmer-Labor expense. Meanwhile, the Republican Party seemed to relax its fear of losing ground to the Farmer-Labor group, and the state government itself remained solidly in Republican hands. The Republican-led legislature under Governor Theodore Christiansen in the late 1920s pursued few significant pieces of legislation which the Farmer-Laborites had deemed necessary for their cause. Thus, between the election of 1928 and late 1929, Farmer-Labor prospects generally appeared to be both slim and dwindling.¹¹⁸

The Death of Ole Kvale and the 1929 Special Election

One of the party's few victors in the 1928 election – Representative Ole J. Kvale from the Seventh District – had kept the party's hopes alive since his initial election to Congress in 1922. However, in early September of 1929, Kvale's political career – and his life – came to an abrupt and unexpected end.

Kvale had been vacationing in a cottage that he owned near the shores of Battle Lake, Minnesota, not far from the town of Fergus Falls. On the evening of Tuesday, September 10, Kvale's cabin burst into flames and burned to the ground. Kvale's body was discovered inside the smoldering remains of the cabin the next day. Initially, there was talk of arson and

¹¹⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 122-124.

murder, and local officials took depositions. However, after quickly conducting these interviews, Kvale's death was officially declared an accident and that he had simply died in the fire. No inquest was held. Officials proclaimed that the circumstances were not suspicious enough to warrant further investigation (although some questions remained about a recent dispute Kvale had had with a tenant on the property). Congress was adjourned for part of the day on September 12, 1929, in honor of Kvale, and Senator Schall gave a brief eulogy on the Senate floor. Almost immediately, there was discussion of who would succeed Kvale. Minnesota law required the governor to call a special election within ten days of a congressional seat vacancy. Kvale's former Republican opponent, Andrew Volstead, quickly expressed an interest in running for Kvale's open seat on the Republican ticket.¹¹⁹

Although the Farmer-Laborites were shocked and dismayed by Kvale's untimely death, they understood the necessity of applying their energies towards retaining Kvale's seat and halting the slide of the party into further decline. Fortunately, an able and experienced candidate – Paul Kvale, the former Representative's son – was a ready and able choice. Paul Kvale had worked closely with his father during the elder Kvale's tenure in Washington, D.C., having served as a secretary to his father and was quite familiar both with the business of the House and with the platform of his father (which he himself no doubt largely shared). A nominating convention was quickly called, and – as predicted – the Farmer-Labor Party endorsed Paul Kvale for the special election. In the meantime, the Republicans nominated Volstead. The general election for the seat was held on October 16, 1929. Kvale beat Volstead, winning a stunning margin of victory (73%) – which was wider than even his

¹¹⁹“Kvale's Death Investigated,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, September 12, 1929; see also “Rule Against Inquest Into Death of Kvale: Minnesota Officials End Investigation – Volstead May Seek Seat in Congress,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1929.

father had earned in the 1928 election about a year earlier.¹²⁰ Thus, for the moment, the Farmer-Labor Party had been spared a further slide into political obscurity.

From 1922 to 1924, the fledgling Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party had emerged as a long-term third party movement, and the main opposition political party in the state. The main architects of the party – William Mahoney and Thomas Van Lear – had agreed on a strategy from 1919 to 1923 in the formation of the party itself, and were unquestionably the main figures to organize and push for an actual political party strategy – refuting once and for all Townley’s “nonpartisan” approach. However, Mahoney and Van Lear eventually disagreed about the structure of Mahoney’s proposed new grassroots Farmer-Labor Federation, and this would lead to Van Lear’s exit from the farmer-labor movement. From the creation of the Federation in 1923 throughout 1924, Mahoney was the most influential person in the Minnesota farmer-labor movement, and largely achieved his goal of unifying the party within his proposed new structure. However, his attempts to create a nationwide third party movement and join forces with Robert La Follette’s presidential campaign in 1924 ended in disaster and eventually weakened his own leadership status. Mahoney’s Federation would eventually be transformed into the Farmer-Labor Association under the guidance of the rising Floyd B. Olson in 1925, and the party’s overt alliance with radicalism was ended. But even with this unified association structure and commitment to the avoidance of radical politics, tensions between rural-agrarian constituents and the urban-labor Twin Cities party leadership often surfaced, highlighting a split between the rural-agrarian and urban-labor wings of the party. Even though Floyd B. Olson had emerged as an alternative

¹²⁰“Farmer-Laborites Elect Kvale To House: Son of Former Incumbent From Seventh Minnesota District Defeats Republican,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1929.

state-level leader to Mahoney within the movement by 1925, Olson was unwilling to risk his political capital until after the 1928 election, and he did little to raise the party's hopes during its difficult years of the late 1920s. Olson was also part of the party's urban-labor leadership. Thus, even when he did jump back into the political arena, the urban-labor domination of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party would continue unabated.

With Paul Kvale's election in October 1929, the party had proven that it still had appeal and could still win major elections. Those who had proclaimed the party's demise in 1928 had been proven wrong. Even so, the movement in 1929 remained weaker than it had been since its heady days of the early 1920s, and the circumstances for improving the party's lot did not seem apparent even in the wake of Paul Kvale's victory. However, just days after the special October 1929 election, a momentous event would drastically change the American political landscape within just a year, and the fortunes of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota would change drastically with it.

CHAPTER V

THE OLSON YEARS: 1930-1936

October 1929 was a catastrophic month for the American economy when – after rumors of credit overextensions and falling prices – the stock market suffered a series of major drops. The worst and final drop occurred on October 29, 1929 (“Black Tuesday”), when the New York Stock Exchange suffered its worst single day loss in history. The result of this “stock market crash” (and a number of inter-related downward economic trends) would eventually be the Great Depression of the 1930s – the most serious economic situation ever experienced by the American republic.¹ The Great Depression would be long-lasting, severe, and would affect wide segments of the nation’s economy until America’s entry into World War II. At first, the sustained and serious nature of the onset of the Great Depression was not widely recognized. Many believed that the stock market crash was a retrenchment or correction that would eventually right itself and the economy would soon again proceed at a humming pace. Between late 1929 and 1930, a number of prominent politicians and business figures appealed for calm and for the public to remain faithful to market economics as a means to alleviate the situation. Chief among these figures was President Herbert Hoover,

¹Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 25-50; although there is no consensus on the precise cause of the Great Depression, the crash of October 1929 is generally regarded to be an obvious harbinger of the Great Depression, if not the main cause itself.

who continued to encourage individualistic striving for prosperity within a relatively unregulated free market system.²

However, as the months after October 1929 dragged on with continued economic contraction, it became apparent that the situation was far more serious than initially appraised. The onset of the Great Depression was a gradual chain-reaction economic slump in which the failures of banks, companies, and individuals started to spread out to affect the wider business and economic sector. This in turn caused the decline of markets, which in turn further continued to exacerbate the economic slump. Eventually, the results would become catastrophic and wide-ranging. These would include: massive unemployment (at times ranging as high as about 30%), deflation, a significant number of business failures, the tight constriction of credit, bank failures (which also often led to individuals' loss of deposits), significant reduced productivity in manufacturing, and many other types of economic hardship and dislocation. Between late 1929 and 1933, the situation continued to spiral downward. Towards the end of his term, President Hoover would take increasing steps to intervene in the economy, however these efforts would not be enough to reverse or even halt the effects of the Great Depression. Eventually, it would be major federal efforts at economic intervention that would yield better results, and it was only after the implementation of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies starting in 1933 that the economy began to slowly turn around.³

²Contrary to popular belief, Hoover's philosophy was far more complex than simple *laissez-faire*. Hoover had long believed in public-private "volunteerism" but not a system of welfare under the direction or control of the federal government. See Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (New York: Doubleday & Page, 1922), passim; see also McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 56-57.

³McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 122-123, 134-169; see also D. Jerome Tweton, *Depression Minnesota in the Thirties* (Fargo, ND: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1981), 23-25.

The Great Depression in Minnesota

In Minnesota – as in many other regions of the country – the initial stock market crash in October 1929 was greeted with curiosity but not panic. Indeed, Minnesota newspapers widely reflected a mood of optimism in the aftermath of October 1929, in denial of what would become the state’s greatest economic challenge. Over time, that attitude would change however, as it became apparent that the Great Depression was long-term, would directly affect the state and its residents, and was only getting worse between 1929 and 1933.⁴

Like other states and regions in the 1930s, Minnesota would suffer high unemployment, deflation, business failures and personal bankruptcies, labor unrest, and a sustained general economic decline. In the farm sector, this was reflected by the drop in wheat prices from the late 1920s to the early 1930s. The 1920s had not been particularly prosperous for American farmers, and farm mortgages had increased substantially even before 1929.⁵ The onset of the Great Depression made things worse, however. Wheat prices had fluctuated between about 97 cents and \$1.20 a bushel in the late 1920s. However, during the early 1930s, the price of wheat plummeted down to a mere 36 cents a bushel, and remained there until after intervention by the federal government in 1934 brought the price back up to 70 cents a bushel. The price of many other crops followed a similar trajectory. Overall, the average gross farm income in the United States fell by about 50% from 1929 to 1932. Although the demand for food remained high in the 1930s, the profitability of producing it and transporting it to market was so low that it reduced the overall supply.

⁴Theodore Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1975), 521-522.

⁵Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression: 1929-1939* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 97.

Farmers in Iowa and the Dakotas likewise suffered from similar economic challenges. As a result, the region eventually became host to a unique farmer's movement born of economic anxiety. In 1932, a number of farmers formed the "Farmer's Holiday Association" (or FHA) under the leadership of John Bosch. The aim of the association was to organize farmers to take a "holiday" in selling their agricultural products in a desperate bid to drive up prices. Such tactics were not universally supported – even by farmers – and in 1932-1933 there were episodes of violent confrontations between farm holiday enforcers and independent farmers, the police, and other figures.⁶

Likewise, the labor sector faced great challenges in the 1930s. However, labor's challenges in this period spurred a much greater response from its constituents than it had in the previous decade. Despite the fact that unemployment was high in the 1930s, labor was organized more intensely, usually fought more for their demands *vis-à-vis* management, and often became more militant in their tactics (which included frequent strike activity). In Minnesota, there were many strikes in the 1930s, and several that were notable not only for their significance in empowering organized labor, but also for the actions (or inactions) taken by the ruling Farmer-Labor governors. These included the Hormel Strike of 1933 (Austin), The Minneapolis Truck Driver's Strike (1934), and the 1937 American Gas Company Strike (Albert Lea). Such strike activity would become an established pattern during this period nationwide and would also coincide with efforts in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal administration to reverse the anti-union labor trends which had heretofore been typically practiced by the federal, local and state governments. These strikes in Minnesota would

⁶Tweton, *Depression Minnesota*, 9; see also Lester V. Chandler, *America's Greatest Depression: 1929-1941* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 57.

signal the eventual shift of the state government towards a position of neutrality in labor disputes and the decline of the power of the Minneapolis-based anti-union Citizens' Alliance and their supporters. In turn, these changed conditions would open the door to an era of unprecedented growth in organized labor beginning in the mid-1930s (in Minnesota and throughout the nation), which would last for decades, tempered only by such later legislation as the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947.⁷

The onset of the Great Depression led to changing patterns in the electorate, and the state's population underwent a significant shift in its attitudes about government intervention in the economy after late 1929. Until the early 1930s, relief for the unemployed or destitute had been largely administered by state and local governments in conjunction with private charitable groups such as churches. However, by the early 1930s, the sheer number of the unemployed and needy had increased to such a significant degree that traditional systems of local government and volunteer groups were simply unable to meet the increased demand for services. This was true even though coordinated volunteerism had reached new heights in Minnesota by 1932, including the appropriation of unused building space, the implementation of local systems of barter, organized work assignments, and even the use of non-monetary "scrip" as a means of exchange. Later, federal dollars would support these programs and also implement vast new programs outside of the traditional relief structure.⁸

Although it would not be until about 1932-1933 that the worst of the Great Depression would become manifest within Minnesota, the trend from late 1929 to late 1930 was not favorable for the ruling Republican Party. Demands for change and action led to a

⁷William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 363; see also John Rublowsky, *After the Crash: America in the Great Depression* (London: Crowell-Collier Press, 1970), 136.

⁸Tweton, *Depression Minnesota*, 15-17.

renewed interest in alternative politics. In Minnesota, this would mean increased support for the Farmer-Labor Party.⁹

The Election of 1930

The onset of the Great Depression is often perceived by historians to be the most critical factor that revived the Farmer-Labor Party's prospects beginning in 1930. The Great Depression hit small farmers hard and there was also significant unemployment in many industries that depended on labor. The result would be a significant electoral shift towards the Farmer-Labor Party on the state level as the economy became increasingly dysfunctional. The party and its emerging leader – Floyd B. Olson – would be ready for this opportunity. After recovering from its shortage of funds, the party began publishing the *Farmer-Labor Leader* again in January 1930. However, the publication of the *Farmer-Labor Leader* depended on party members' dues and these funds were usually insufficient. As a result, the paper was at first published only intermittently, and often Farmer-Labor candidates had to make major contributions to keep the newspaper afloat. Nevertheless, the party was publishing again and increasing its media influence – emerging from the public relations nadir that it had reached in the late 1920s.¹⁰

From 1925 to 1930, the charismatic Floyd B. Olson had taken all of the necessary steps to position himself to run again for governor under the Farmer-Labor banner. Olson had experienced a stinging defeat in the governor's race in 1924. But since then, he had won a stunning victory as County Attorney in 1926, and had also strengthened the party structure

⁹William E. Lass, *Minnesota: A History* Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 223.

¹⁰George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951), 47-48.

by re-organizing the Farmer-Labor Association (or FLA) in 1925. In the late 1920s, Olson had further raised his profile by pursuing cases of corruption in Minneapolis, which at the time was dominated by a Republican mayor and city council. This legal crusade often landed his name in the public media and made him a potentially popular candidate for a future run for political office. Olson had also become a leading organizer of the party in Hennepin County, and had promoted FLA membership in unions and clubs, giving him a strong base of support in the Minneapolis area.¹¹

Olson had considered the chance to run again as governor in 1928, but had wisely turned it down. However by early 1930, the situation had changed, and Olson with his burnished reputation was the prime state-level figure within the party. He had achieved this position not as a party boss but rather as an eloquent speaker, an able public servant, and a well-connected figure. Olson also controlled much of the party's platform in 1930, moderating it and authoring it in a way to avoid inflammatory or radical rhetoric that might scare off potential voters.¹² Moreover, Olson's approach seemed to have earned the support of the party's main publication, the *Farmer-Labor Leader*, which not only endorsed his 1930 platform – devoid as it was of calls for public ownership – but even suggested that such left-of-center moderation was a key tactic to electoral success in the upcoming election.¹³ Olson's electoral loss in 1924 had been a valuable learning experience, and he sought to apply it to his 1930 campaign. His campaign in 1924 had been rushed and premature. Olson used the

¹¹Steven D. Jansen, "Floyd Olson: The Years Prior to His Governorship, 1891-1930," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1984, 202.

¹²Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 44.

¹³Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 129-130.

time between 1925 and 1930 to cultivate contacts within the party and successfully raise his public profile.¹⁴

Olson himself was a gifted speaker with a dynamic persona – and he used this skill as a major tactic to communicate with – and persuade – audiences both during his 1930 campaign and during his subsequent years in office. Olson averaged eight public speeches a day during his campaigns and maintained an average of four speeches a week during his terms as governor.¹⁵ Although many of these speeches were given in small halls in front of social and civic groups, others were delivered in large auditoriums and gathering spaces, with crowds often numbering into the thousands (such as an assembly in St. Cloud in 1934, which saw an audience of over three-thousand in a junior high school auditorium).¹⁶ Olson's personality and style (serious and dramatic) was forcefully projected in his rhetorical approach. His ability as a campaigner to connect with audiences – even hostile ones, often by doing quick research on demographics and learning about local issues or using ethnic phrases, etc. – made him one of the strongest political speakers in Minnesota political history. Like Shipstead before him, Olson tapped into a vein of discontent and populism without crossing into the territory of radicalism – a tricky balance necessary to both shore up his base and attract a critical mass of centrist voters. His humble origins growing up on Minneapolis' North Side and his time spent as a youthful laborer gave him a genuine connection with the common person, and he projected this connection with ease. Though Olson spoke with a voice of reform, he practiced political moderation and diplomacy – even

¹⁴G. Theodore Mitau, *Politics in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960), 14.

¹⁵Kenneth L. Berger, "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Public Speaking of Floyd B. Olson," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1955, 33.

¹⁶"People Pack All Auditoriums To Hear Olson And To Applaud F-L," *Farmer-Labor Leader*, October 30, 1934.

to the point of being intentionally gracious to his opponents. He even once personally thanked a *Minneapolis Journal* editor for the editor's "fairness" during a campaign – even though the newspaper and its editorial slant had been highly critical of Olson.¹⁷ Olson also exhibited an extensive knowledge of Minnesota history – a knowledge which he often used to connect with audiences and build up their sense of local civic pride.¹⁸

Although the Farmer-Labor gubernatorial race was dominated by Olson's appeal and rhetorical skill, the Senate race in 1930 saw significant intra-party conflict. Part of this was due to the strong voter interest in the Republican Senate race and a large migration of primary voters toward that contest. With Farmer-Labor primary votes effectively reduced, the ability of the Farmer-Labor endorsed Senate candidate – former Congressional Representative Knud Wefald – met resistance from the Farmer-Labor newcomer, Ernest Lundeen. Lundeen had tried to crash the Farmer-Labor Party earlier (during the governor's race in 1928). Then, he had won the primary, but had been trounced in the general election. This time, Lundeen had enough support not only to challenge and beat the endorsed candidate, but to also run a determined campaign in the general election. Unfortunately, Lundeen's earnest campaign contradicted a quiet agreement that had been reached earlier between the Farmer-Labor Party and the Democrats: Olson had agreed not to publicly oppose the Democratic Senate candidate in return for Democratic support for his own gubernatorial race. However, with Lundeen intent on winning the general election, Olson and the rest of the Farmer-Labor Party leadership was unable to deliver on their part of this bargain. Olson

¹⁷Leslie Gene Rude, "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1962, 117; although, in a radio speech in November 1933, Olson specifically accused the *Minneapolis Journal* of biased sensationalism in its coverage of the Hormel Strike; see also James M. Youngdale, (editor). *Third Party Footprints: An Anthology From Writings and Speeches of Midwest Radicals* (Minneapolis, MN: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1966), 263.

¹⁸Floyd B. Olson, "The Heritage of Minnesota," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June, 1933), 165-171.

and the Farmer-Labor Party leadership were thus put in the awkward position of accepting *de facto* Democratic support for Olson's run without being able to reciprocate such support in the Senate race. Such maneuvers would sow distrust between the parties and keep them apart in the short term.¹⁹

On the Republican side there was considerable disarray in the race for the Senate seat. Theodore Christiansen had served three terms as governor, but had decided that the recent shift in the economy was not favorable for a sitting executive. He instead announced his intention to run for the Senate in 1930. The Republican incumbent, the mercurial Thomas D. Schall, faced an intense primary opposition campaign from Christianson (who was supported by many of the party regulars). Schall made multiple allegations of misconduct by persons in Christianson's administration, while Christianson and his regular party supporters pushed their candidate as a better alternative to Schall. In a primary vote that garnered almost half a million Minnesota voters, Schall managed to stave off the former governor and hang onto the Republican nomination for the Senate. However, the intense primary laid bare deep divisions within the Republican Party and underlined Schall's lack of support among party regulars.²⁰

The general election held more surprises. In the last days of the campaign, the Republicans charged that Henrik Shipstead did not support Olson's candidacy. This was an attempt to drive a wedge between the two popular Farmer-Labor figures and increase the likelihood that Farmer-Labor leaning voters might reject Olson as a candidate if Shipstead's approval was not manifested. Indeed, Shipstead – as in earlier elections – gave little support to his fellow Farmer-Labor candidates in the 1930 campaign. It is possible that Shipstead

¹⁹Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 49.

²⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 134-136.

may have not wanted to see the emergence of a strong rival leader figure within the party, or that he preferred the role of a detached, above-the-fray elder statesman. In any case, the accusation stung, and the party leaders quickly prevailed on Shipstead to counter this impression. Shipstead's endorsement of Olson was finally granted, however it was weak in tone, and a rivalry between these two figures emerged from that point on.²¹

Olson's campaign was also helped by a subtle but notable shift in the mainstream press. Many of the major newspapers in Minnesota began to drop their charges of radicalism against the Farmer Labor Party early in the 1930 campaign. An excellent example of this can be seen in an editorial run in May 1930 in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. The editorial recognized and acknowledged the emergence of moderate leadership within the Farmer-Labor Party and its legitimacy as an opposition force. Interestingly enough, they also noted that the "conservative" farmers represented by the movement were a kind of modern day extension of Thomas Jefferson's 19th-century yeomanry – a statement which echoed assertions from the Populist era and would later be asserted by other observers and historians such as Richard Hofstadter in the 1950s.²²

During the 1930 general election campaign, Olson honed his public image as a man of humble roots from the north side of Minneapolis. He decried poverty, injustice and corruption, and called for government action to address economic problems. He was adept at public speaking to a wide variety of audiences. His campaign was organized directly by himself and was fairly independent from the Farmer-Labor Party and the FLA. Thus, Olson

²¹Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 54-55.

²²*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 31, 1930, 6; see also Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 28-29.

benefitted from the party's broad base and its endorsement, but was not weighed down by the party's machinery.²³

Olson's strategy paid off handsomely. In November, he won the governor's race with a strong majority of 57% of the votes cast. However, the Republicans held onto their majority in the state legislature and carried seven of the nine statewide executive offices. They also won nine of Minnesota's ten congressional districts (the Farmer-Laborite Paul Kvale was re-elected with a whopping 81% of the vote in the seventh district). Thus, the overall nature of the vote in 1930 was more equivocal for the Farmer-Laborites than Olson's margin of victory might suggest. Many of the winners in the other races – both Republicans and Farmer-Laborites – won with pluralities of only about 35-40% of the vote. Worse, Lundeen's Senate race ended in crushing defeat (he received only 21% of the vote), leaving him in a distant third place behind the Democrat, Elnar Hoidale (who in turn barely lost to the controversial Republican figure, Thomas Schall). Although Olson had decisively won the Governor's office, the success of the party as a whole was still mixed and the voters were continuing to shift in their patterns. Nevertheless, the Farmer-Labor Party had won the governor's office, and in early 1931 saw 65 of its members seated in the state legislature (or about one third of the total) – cementing their position as main opposition party.²⁴ The Republicans maintained a majority in the legislature after the 1930 election and would prove to be a formidable opposition to Olson as governor during his first term.²⁵

The Farmer-Labor success in the 1930 campaign had been due to two major shifts. The first was the onset of the Great Depression and the public perception that this had been

²³John S. McGrath and James J. Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson: Minnesota's Greatest Liberal Governor* (St. Paul: McGrath and Delmont, 1937), 29.

²⁴Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 138-141.

²⁵Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 60.

caused by a reckless speculation of moneyed interests such as stock brokers and big businesses. The second was the Republican Party's long-standing reputation both on the state and the national level as being the pro-business or laissez-faire party, which largely refrained from government intervention in the economy. With the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, fears over unemployment and deflation were beginning to take hold of Minnesota voters. That factor – combined with the fact that the Republicans typically refused to consider a more interventionist economic policy - convinced a critical mass of centrist voters that an alternative approach was needed. The election of Floyd B. Olson as governor (the first third-party candidate to ever achieve this distinction in Minnesota) was an indication of impending political changes to come on the state level – and the national level as well. These national changes would become evident in 1932 with the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency and a Democratic sweep of both houses of Congress.²⁶

Figure 20. Floyd B. Olson in 1931, shortly after he was first elected to the governor's office. Olson had made great gains in his political abilities between his first run for office in 1924 and the 1930 campaign. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



Olson's First Term

In anticipation for his upcoming term of office, Olson prepared his administration for the tasks ahead. In the weeks after the election, both the Republicans and the Farmer-Laborites angled for influence among the newly elected legislators – some of whom were

²⁶Mitau, *Politics in Minnesota*, 14-15.

“independents” and could theoretically join either side.²⁷ In the state House of Representatives, offers of prime committee positions were used to coax members to either side. In the Senate, the rules provided for the newly elected lieutenant governor, Henry Arens (a Farmer-Laborite), to preside over committee organization. But the Republican majority voted to deprive Arens of this power, and thus both chambers became controlled by the Republican opposition. Olson was frustrated with these results but refused to dirty his hands with political maneuvering before he had even taken office. Instead, he sought to use his political capital to leverage what reforms he could indeed manage. In this vein, Olson's inaugural address was moderate in tone and focused on specific issues, but avoided confronting the opposition too directly.²⁸

Vincent Alpheus Day, a lawyer and active party figure, was asked by Olson himself to be the new governor's secretary and chief advisor. Day would become Olson's “go to” man for much of Olson's tenure in office. Day would prove to be an excellent choice, since he was not only loyal and efficient, but was also apparently lacking in personal political ambition (a rare combination within the Farmer-Labor Party leadership). Day himself was surprised at the offer, since he had apparently not worked with Olson closely up until that point. Day would become the second most important person in Olson's administration and one of the most influential members of the farmer-labor movement in the 1930s. Day was

²⁷In this period of time, Minnesota's legislature was “non-partisan” – meaning that official declarations of party affiliation within the legislative bodies themselves were not allowed.

²⁸Floyd B. Olson, *First Inaugural Speech*, reprinted in John S. McGrath and James J. Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson*, 50, 177-183; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 60-61.

later appointed to a judge's seat in 1935. In 1936, Olson tried to appoint Day to serve out the remainder of Senator Schall's Senate term, but Day refused to do so [see below].²⁹

Figure 21. Vince Day (left) with Governor **Floyd B. Olson** in 1934 as Olson signs a bill allowing for \$5 million in relief funds to be funneled into Minnesota. The Olson-Day partnership was effective chiefly because Day preferred to advise, manage and administer rather than become a political figure himself. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



Once Olson had officially been inaugurated into office, a serious rift soon emerged between his administration and the FLA over the issue of party patronage. Many activists within the party and the association wanted state jobs and thought that Olson's tenure would make this a reality (and that such rewards were due to them for their support and loyalty). The rising unemployment due to the growth of the Great Depression only heightened this debate. However, Olson was cautious about stuffing state offices full of party members – at first. He typically resisted calls for the stronger use of patronage as a means to control the state government in his early years in office. However, over time Olson saw the advantage of dominating state bureaucracies with party loyalists who would not only enforce Farmer-Labor policies but who would also increase numbers in the FLA (whose membership surged dramatically after 1931). After May 1933, a significant number of offices would be filled in a patronage system which used the county chapters of the FLA as a “clearinghouse” for state jobs. Interestingly enough, Day appears to have shifted his stance on patronage by February 1935, going so far as to meet with Farmer-Labor heads and “suggest” that they not

²⁹“Nearly Fell Off Chair When Asked To Be Olson's Aid,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 7, 1931, 2; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 58, 287.

“discriminate” against Farmer-Labor candidates for state jobs. At about the same time, the Republican opposition had begun to launch investigations into alleged Farmer-Labor patronage abuse, but it would not be until after Olson’s tenure that the Republicans would be able to use the patronage issue to their political advantage.³⁰

In early 1931, Olson himself threw himself into the task of governing and exhibited an extraordinary degree of energy, discipline, and task-orientation. He gave speeches on a regular basis to groups small and large – frequently tailoring his speeches with specific references to the occasion or the audience. He met face to face with individuals constantly and frequently. His work day would run from about 9:30 AM to 5:30 PM, with a break for dinner and then often a public appearance in the evening. Typically, he would meet with over 30 persons daily in private conferences.³¹ He also gave speeches over the radio on a regular basis and had a column in the *St. Paul Daily News*.³²

All during Olson’s first term, the Republican legislature was hostile to the governor and his plans. Although Olson had been elected on a platform of reform, the state legislature was largely in opposition hands, and efforts at radical change would have been politically difficult. Thus, Olson set moderate and limited objectives in his 1931 legislative program. But despite this tentative – even conciliatory – approach, the state legislature as a whole

³⁰“Memorandum – Governor” August 22/23, 1933, Vince A. Day Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Vince Day Papers]; Day encouraged sufficient patronage as a means of placating party ranks and preventing the Republican Party from accusing the Farmer-Labor Party’s leadership of failing to deliver to its members; another memo in the Vince Day Papers (Box 1) dated December 15, 1932, details a long list of recent appointments made by the governor and requests by job seekers for appointments; see also Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, February 11, 1935, Vince Day Papers, Box 1; see also Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 60-64 and Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 142-144.

³¹“Schedule of Governor Olson’s Day” (memo dated October 9, 1931), Vincent Day Papers, Box 1.

³²Douglas H. Holden, “Floyd B. Olson: His Social Philosophy.” M.A. Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1993, 81.

rejected his initiatives. Olson thus faced considerable opposition in his first term, and his early reforms were chosen mainly for their political feasibility and not necessarily for their ideological purity.³³

This political struggle was occurring even as the economic situation grew visibly worse in Minnesota. Unemployment accelerated significantly in 1931, reaching 21.4% in the state by the end of the year. Crop prices also dropped considerably. Luckily, Olson found a “smoking gun” of Republican incompetence during his first term, and he used it to his advantage. The Rural Credits Bureau had been created in 1923. It provided low-cost loans to farmers and was a popular tool the Republicans had used to earn the farm vote. However by 1930, farmers had defaulted on many of these loans and the government funds for it had become insolvent. An investigation under Olson’s auspices seemed to prove Republican mismanagement of the bureau. Olson pointed to this failure, publicly blamed it on the Republicans, and then managed to reinvigorate the Rural Credit Bureau with an infusion of new funding. Olson also presided over an expansion of public works projects, including a \$15 million bond for highway construction.³⁴ Furthermore, Olson created a works program and was able to pass a minimum wage law in the state.³⁵

Governor Olson also used his executive power to veto some Republican initiatives as well. The most important of these was Olson’s veto of the Republican re-districting plan in 1931. This plan had been crafted in response to the reduction in congressional districts in Minnesota mandated by the 1930 Census. The Republican re-districting plan that followed reduced the state’s congressional districts from nine to ten (as required), but did so in a way

³³Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 145.

³⁴“Farmer-Labor Probe of Rural Credits Bureau Justified By Results,” *Farmer-Labor Leader*, April 30, 1931; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 77-78; 66-67.

³⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 147-148.

that gerrymandered the districts to the point where Republican victories seemed assured in the coming election. Olson's veto of the plan meant that Minnesota would have no congressional districts for the 1932 election, and that all congressional races in 1932 would instead be run "at large." This would give the advantage to candidates doing well in a state-wide popular vote, and would negate the Republican-drawn gerrymandering attempt.³⁶

Even with these victories against the Republicans, Olson continued to be dogged by the political left. In addition to critical leftist figures within the party and the association, Olson also faced the ghost of the NPL past. Arthur C. Townley returned to Minnesota from North Dakota in 1931 and began openly criticizing Olson's commitment to reform, even proposing an immediate moratorium on interest payments for farmer debts. Though Townley possessed a mere shadow of his former influence by this time, his criticism stung Olson. Townley continued to loudly push for a five-year moratorium on mortgage interest payments for farmers and criticized the Olson administration for not acting on this initiative. Townley also pushed for refinancing the Rural Credits Bureau (which Olson was indeed able to do) and for subsidizing low interest car loans. Townley's proposals were popular with some, but impractical – since they required significant new taxation.³⁷ Instead of acting on Townley's agenda, Olson turned his attention to relief for unemployed workers in the labor segment, seeing it as a more pressing issue. In 1931, Olson proposed a new voluntary and private system of welfare relief – much to the chagrin of the left wing of his party, who strongly wanted a state government program instead.³⁸

³⁶Rhoda R. Gilman. *Stand Up! The Story of Minnesota's Protest Tradition* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 77.

³⁷"A. C. Townley Advocates Moratorium on Interest Payments, Foreclosures," *Farmer-Labor Leader*, May 14, 1931, 2; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 84-85.

³⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 149-150.

However, even though Townley had become an open critic of Olson, he was still useful to the party. Vince Day and some other Farmer-Labor leaders met with Townley in private at the Frederic Hotel in Minneapolis in December 1931. During the meeting, Townley expressed pessimism about the party's election chances in the next election (1932), and was critical in general of Olson and his policies. Interestingly enough, two of the Farmer-Labor figures present – Henry G. Teigan and William Mahoney – supported Townley's call for a special session to increase income taxes on the wealthy to aid the unemployed. Day reported on the meeting to Olson in a memo dated December 16, 1931. Day noted that Townley was troublesome and unsupportive of the administration's current approach, but that he remained a visible figure capable of gaining subscriptions for the party association and its publication, and as such still had a role to play in the movement. Townley would remain an unsettling thorn in Olson's side throughout much of Olson's term in office, and Teigan's and Mahoney's support for Townley's stance in December 1931 may have highlighted the beginning of a rift between the Olson-Day leadership and other leading urban-labor figures in the party.³⁹

Despite his delicate political balancing act between reform and moderation, Olson managed to create a favorable impression as governor with the electorate at large. His constant public appearances and dynamic speeches were no doubt effective tools at achieving this. He was also able to convincingly project empathy for those suffering from the effects of the Great Depression. Although he was careful not to confront the opposition too openly in his first term, he did take action to weaken his opponents in other ways. For example, Olson withheld money from the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Tidewater Association – a Republican

³⁹Memo of Vince Day to Governor Olson, December 16, 1931, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

entity that had received government money to advocate for the St. Lawrence waterway project in Congress. Olson also used his executive power to block legislation unfavorable to the Farmer-Labor cause. He vetoed three major bills passed by the legislature during his first term. The first was the gerrymander redistricting bill. The second was a Metropolitan sewage disposal bill, and the third was a bill designed to regulate truck transportation, but which in reality put trucking under control of the railroad industry – a policy wholly incompatible with the Farmer-Labor agenda.⁴⁰

During Olson’s first term, Farmer-Labor rhetoric in general continued to reflect the idea that the Farmer-Labor third party choice was the Minnesota voters’ most viable electoral option. The assertion was made that the other two major parties had proven themselves to be ineffective and unsympathetic towards “common people and merchants.” Such appeals were effective in the early years of the Great Depression and helped to increase Farmer-Labor membership in the wake of Olson’s 1930 gubernatorial victory.⁴¹

During his first year in office, Olson made little attempt to mobilize state resources to directly counteract the effects of the Great Depression. The exceptions to this were bills that authorized highway construction and the construction of new state buildings. Both were touted as public works projects. However, the scope of these initiatives was too small to have any significant effect on the state’s unemployment rate. In an effort to maintain his moderate stance – and perhaps to mollify the conservative opposition – Olson refused to authorize direct government funds for relief efforts. He faced criticism from the left wing of his party for taking this stance, however. As the agricultural situation worsened, Olson continued to

⁴⁰Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 64, 70, 73, 154.

⁴¹Knud Wefald “Old Political Parties Are Unfit to Govern, Is Opinion of Knud Wefald,” *Farmer-Labor Leader*, July 16, 1931.

face additional criticism from the farm sector for not doing enough to aid farmers. Worse, the tax burden on Minnesota farmers had become unbearable due to the lack of farm prosperity. Seeking to take action, on October 26, 1931, Olson convened an agricultural conference and formulated a farm program consisting of four main points: government regulation of commodity prices, a federal loan of \$37 million to refinance rural credit bureau loans, national legislation similar to the McNary-Haugen legislation, and a one-third reduction of the assessed value of farms and city homes for tax purposes. This program cemented his reputation as an agricultural reform figure. However, since much of the proposed program's success required federal authorization, most of it did not come to pass, and it would not be enough to stave off a growing and militant agrarian opposition group arising outside of the party.⁴²

As mentioned earlier, the Farm Holiday Association (or FHA) was formed in 1932. The main issue of the group centered on the fluctuation and deflation of crop prices and the hardship which this economic trend caused to small farmers. The FHA called for farmer "holidays" (the withholding of crops from the market) and/or the voluntary destruction of crops as a means to limit supply and thus raise crop prices. The FHA also called for direct government intervention to alleviate the situation. The FHA had emerged in Iowa but quickly spread to Minnesota as well. The group attempted to prevent farm foreclosures through shows of intimidation and organized road blocks and demonstrations to prevent other farmers from taking their own goods to market. Some of these incidents turned violent – or at least threatened to become violent (FHA activists in Iowa had even placed a noose around the head of a judge who had refused to stop approving farm foreclosures). The FHA also sought

⁴²Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 76, 90, 88.

minimum prices for agricultural goods, a moratorium on all farm mortgage foreclosures, and the enactment of a bill to refinance farm loans at lower interest rates.⁴³

Initially (during the summer of 1932), Governor Olson appeared to endorse these views and in exchange for his verbal support, Olson asked the FHA for a commitment to nonviolence in Minnesota. In August 1932, Olson was outspoken in his support of an impending farm holiday: "I am in sympathy with the strikers" he stated – and he was quoted in notable newspapers as saying so. He even suggested that he might invoke martial law to help enforce the farmer's strike.⁴⁴ Olson was quickly reined in on this position by Vince Day, however. In a memo dated August 26, Day chided Olson and criticized the governor's earlier outspoken statements in support of the FHA. Day further reminded Olson that the administration's goals were to push for a statewide effort to create a single cooperative marketing association "in a peaceful and legal way."⁴⁵ Olson then backed away from publicly supporting the FHA. Violent actions by FHA supporters against the transport of farm products occurred in several places in September and October 1932. Olson – with Day's guidance – had managed to distance himself from the movement just in time.



Figure 22. The **Farmers' Holiday Association** sought to raise farm prices by withholding agricultural goods from the market. Members of the association often formed road blocks to deter other farmers from bringing their goods to market as well. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

⁴³John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: the Farmers' Holiday Association* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 52-53; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 103-105; 167.

⁴⁴Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 51.

⁴⁵Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, August 26, 1932, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

In the end, the excesses of the FHA were contained by official (and unofficial) force. In 1933, federal agricultural policy under the Roosevelt Administration would take a drastic turn towards aiding farmers, and the FHA movement eventually subsided – although it would continue agitating throughout much of the 1930s. The FHA movement as a whole would decline beginning in 1934.⁴⁶ However, it held protests at the Minnesota state capitol as late as 1937.⁴⁷

Farmer-Labor Figures on the National Level: 1930-1936

Minnesota Farmer-Labor figures in Congress continued to have influence on national policy and made headlines throughout the 1930s. Henrik Shipstead was the most enduring of these figures and remained a potent force in national politics in this period. Congress passed the Shipstead-Nolan Act in 1930, which protected a significant area of federally-owned land in the northern part of the state and prevented its use by private entities. The act also prevented the expansion of a damming system on the Rainy River which would have flooded much of the present-day Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA).⁴⁸ Shortly after the election in November 1930, Senator Shipstead took center stage, making a nationally-broadcast radio address in which he enumerated a number of points the government should take in order to counteract the effects of the Great Depression. This address was widely covered and given great credence by the national media. Interestingly enough, at about the same time, Shipstead had developed an appreciation for the thoughts of the economist John Maynard Keynes, after reviewing Keynes' book *A Treatise on Money* for the *Washington Herald*. This was at least

⁴⁶Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 172.

⁴⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 241.

⁴⁸Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 526.

one indication of the Farmer-Laborites' willingness to embrace a more interventionist federal economic policy, and would serve to align them in the near future – at least to a certain degree – with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.⁴⁹ Shipstead would not face his next Senate election until 1934.

The Farmer-Labor figure Francis H. Shoemaker was also making headlines in the early mid-1930s. Shoemaker was an outspoken writer and party figure whose rhetoric – and public behavior – veered to the most extreme end of the spectrum. Shoemaker targeted Republican opponents with charges and labels so severe that he was brought up on charges of slander during his 1930 campaign for Minnesota's Third Congressional district seat (a race which he lost). The case centered on a letter that Shoemaker had sent earlier to a local banker, Robert W. Putnam, whom Shoemaker had called a "Robber of Widows and Orphans." Shoemaker had also labeled Putnam's address as being "Red Wing, Minn, in care of Temple of Greed and Chicanery." Although Shoemaker was initially let off with just a fine and a suspended sentence, an article he later published ridiculing the judge in the case led the judge to revoke the suspension, and Shoemaker served time in the federal prison at Leavenworth for almost a year. In 1932, Shoemaker ran for Congress again. The worsening economic conditions favored his angry and aggressive rhetoric, and he was elected to Congress in 1932 as a Farmer-Labor candidate. Once in office, Shoemaker's controversies continued. Although he was officially granted a pardon by President Franklin Roosevelt for his earlier slander conviction, Shoemaker openly criticized the Republicans, the President, and even members of his own party. Specifically, Shoemaker targeted Senator Henrik Shipstead, and Shoemaker officially challenged Shipstead in the 1934 Farmer-Labor Senate

⁴⁹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 141-142.

primary. At the 1934 party convention, Shoemaker made a blistering speech against Shipstead, accusing him of being a quiet Republican and of being disloyal to the Farmer-Labor cause. Shoemaker's accusation had some credence given the fact that Shipstead had always distanced himself from the state party, typically caucused with the Republicans in the Senate, and did very little to help other state party members in their campaigns. Shoemaker's challenge was Shipstead's most serious opposition within the party yet, and the experience no doubt contributed to Shipstead's growing alienation with the farmer-labor movement. In the end however, Shipstead prevailed in the primary. Shoemaker – who had been continuously getting into public physical fights even as a Representative in Washington, D.C., and suffering from a messy public divorce – saw his political career end with his loss in the Senate primary in 1934. His later attempts to run as an outspoken candidate gained little traction. Even so, his brief time in the spotlight exposed rifts within the party and did nothing to burnish its overall reputation.⁵⁰



Figure 23. Francis Henry Shoemaker in 1934. Shoemaker was pugnacious and uncompromising – traits which made him popular with the party's left wing. In the end it was his own aggressive nature which ended his political career. *Photo courtesy of congress.gov*

Ernest Lundeen also emerged as a successful Farmer-Labor candidate in the early 1930s. Lundeen had tried to run as a candidate within the Farmer-Labor Party on two earlier occasions, but had been unsuccessful. In 1932, he successfully ran as one of the Farmer-

⁵⁰Frederick L. Johnson, "From Leavenworth to Congress: The Improbable Journey of Francis H. Shoemaker," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (Spring, 1989), 166-177.

Labor candidates in the “at large” congressional representative races. He was then later elected to Congress from the Third District in 1934 (replacing the volatile Francis Shoemaker). Finally, in 1936, Lundeen would be chosen to run as the party’s Senate candidate during a re-shuffling of the party’s leadership [see Chapter Six]. In Congress, Lundeen became well-known for his uncompromising isolationist views – an extension of the isolationism expressed by him and so many in the farmer-labor movement which had its origins in the years of World War I. Earlier, as a Republican member of Congress in 1917, Lundeen had voted against America’s entry into the war, and he carried these isolationist sentiments forward even in the face of the growing fascist threat in the late 1930s.⁵¹

Paul Kvale (sometimes referred to as “J. P. Kvale”) continued in his role as a Farmer-Labor congressional Representative, largely inheriting the mantle of his father’s leadership. Kvale was one of the party’s most reliable congressional candidates during this period and was re-elected every two years until his defeat in 1938. One of Kvale’s most notable actions during the 1930s was when the Bonus Army (veterans who sought their unpaid wartime bonus) had encamped in Washington, D.C., and Kvale (himself a World War I veteran) was asked to help defuse the situation in May 1932. He expressed support for the idea of paying the bonus itself, but publicly asked the Bonus Army members to return home in order to prevent a confrontation. In this, his appeals were unsuccessful and the Bonus Army was later routed by armed forces under the command of General Douglas McArthur – an action which

⁵¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 24, 169.

many considered a *coup de grace* to President Herbert Hoover's chances of winning re-election.⁵²

In national domestic policy, the congressional Farmer-Laborites were often sympathetic to – and in alliance with – Roosevelt's New Deal, especially in terms of agricultural and labor policies. Like the New Deal Democrats, the Farmer-Laborites had urged greater federal government intervention in the economic sphere, along with the empowerment of the farmer and labor sectors in general. Even so, there were major differences between the Farmer-Labor agenda and the New Deal initiatives. In the critical early months of Roosevelt's first term (March to May 1933), the Farmer-Labor congressional delegates pressed for a "cost-of-production" scheme for agriculture (a somewhat revised version of McNary-Haugenism). This approach was flatly rejected by President Roosevelt and his economic advisors, who sought to raise farm prices by cutting overproduction (known as "production control"). The Farmer-Labor delegation in Congress opposed Roosevelt's plan initially, but in the end, almost all of them voted for the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) in May 1933 when it became clear that their cost-of-production plan had little support. A second attempt to resurrect the cost-of-production approach in late 1933 by the Farmer-Laborites (which included support from Governor Olson) came to naught. After that time, federal funds for agriculture were increasingly shifted to Minnesota's state government (largely under Farmer-Labor control) for distribution within the state. This arrangement benefitted the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota – at least initially – since the state under the control of Farmer-Labor governors from early 1931 through early 1939 meant

⁵²Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic* (New York: Walker & Company, 2006), 77.

that they could claim success in aiding the farm sector. In the long-term however, such federal agricultural programs made the importance of a state-level agrarian reform third party less necessary. Likewise, New Deal labor reforms contained within the NRA and later the NLRB and the Wagner Act were supported by the Farmer-Labor congressional caucus. But again, the passage of these federal labor reforms in the mid-1930s lessened the need for a state-level labor reform third party.⁵³

On foreign policy, members of the Farmer-Labor caucus in Congress consistently supported isolationism and favored a reduction of America's military emphasis – both as a foreign policy goal and as economic policy.⁵⁴ Farmer-Labor figures such as Shipstead, Lundeen, Magnus Johnson, Shoemaker, and others openly criticized the munitions industries, denounced war as a distraction from domestic issues, and openly embraced isolationist policies. These sentiments were also present on the state level as well. Knud Wefald – a former congressional representative appointed to state government leadership after Olson's election in 1930 – wrote a blistering anti-war piece in August 1931 in which he criticized the U.S. government's large and unnecessary military budget, and ended his tract with: "let us admit that we are also a stupid and warlike nation."⁵⁵ Floyd B. Olson himself was outspoken in his anti-militarism, since he viewed it as a distraction from economic injustice at home and an evil that consumed the youth of nations: "With few exceptions all wars of history were motivated by greed – a greed for increased territory on the part of nations, or a greed for profit on the part of individuals."⁵⁶ Such anti-war/isolationist sentiments would be popular in

⁵³Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 94-96, 130.

⁵⁴George W. Garlid, "The Antiwar Dilemma of the Farmer-Labor Party," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 40, No. 8 (Winter, 1967), 366-367.

⁵⁵Knud Wefald quoted in Youngdale, *Third Party Footprints*, 233-236.

⁵⁶Floyd B. Olson quoted in Holden, "Floyd B. Olson: His Social Philosophy," 81.

the United States throughout much of the 1930s and were at least somewhat representative of the Midwestern voter demographic. However, after 1936, the shadow of impending war overseas would start to make such positions more difficult to defend. Also, leftist ideologues within the party faced a dilemma starting in the mid-1930s to either support “popular fronts” against encroaching fascism, or continue to embrace the nativist isolationism whose natural outcome was antithetical to the international socialist cause.⁵⁷ This debate would eventually become a major demarcation line between the urban-labor wing of the party and the rural-agrarian wing, and would highlight ideological divisions between the two. The debate would fester throughout the late 1930s and would become more important over time. One Farmer-Labor figure, Ernest Lundeen, would take isolationism to its extreme. As late as 1940, Lundeen emphatically denied the international fascist threat as well as the need for American involvement in an overseas war [see Chapter Six].

On the local level, it should be noted that longtime Farmer-Labor leader William Mahoney – one of main architects of the party – also finally attained political office himself. Mahoney was elected Mayor of St. Paul in 1932 as a Farmer-Labor candidate. Although he only served one term, Mahoney made serious efforts to combat St. Paul’s reputation for harboring criminal fugitives and pursued an ambitious plan to municipalize Northern States Power Company (part of Mahoney’s long interest in making utilities public entities). This effort was blocked both by the company itself and the city’s banking community, which

⁵⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 248-249.

viewed the initiative in very unfavorable terms. Mahoney was defeated in the 1934 election [see below], and never held political office again.⁵⁸

The Election of 1932

At the 1932 Farmer-Labor Party convention, Floyd B. Olson and the liberal-moderates prevailed again in the selection of candidates and the crafting of the party platform – although not without some difficulty. The Great Depression was reaching its peak and the political left was increasingly emboldened by the worsening economic situation. Olson triumphed chiefly by retaining as much loyalty within (and control over) his party as possible, while satiating the left-wing with his soaring (but rather unspecific) rhetoric. Although Olson’s political promises were often vague, there was little doubt that he cast himself as being on the side of the common man. This was – once again – a delicate balancing act, since embracing specific extremist planks at the convention would play into the hands of his opponents in the general election. At the same time, failing to seek significant reforms would alienate the party base. The deepening depression had continued to cause significant problems. By 1932, insurance and mortgage companies had further reduced agricultural credit, and a grasshopper plague had invaded the northwestern counties of Minnesota. Drought and grasshopper infestations would continue to plague the western and southwestern counties of the state for several years. These factors contributed to make the agricultural economic sector even worse in those regions.⁵⁹ The frequency of bank failures

⁵⁸Dave Riehle, “William Mahoney,” Saint Paul Historical, <http://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/178>, accessed June 30, 2015.

⁵⁹Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 159, 102.

and farm foreclosures also began to increase ominously. In the realm of labor, unemployment remained high in Minnesota, and relief for unemployed workers remained inadequate.⁶⁰

The 1932 election also opened – once again – the question of fusion with the Democrats – at least in support of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidential campaign. Olson himself preferred to be silent on the issue. Many Farmer-Labor leftists decried the idea of any type of fusion, since for them the Democratic Party was a party that defended the capitalist status quo, and support for an existing major party was anathema to their third party purpose. However, there was no major third party presidential alternative in 1932, and Franklin Roosevelt was an attractive candidate for many of the Farmer-Labor leaders. Roosevelt (then Governor of New York) visited Minnesota in April 1932 as part of his campaign and attended a function with Governor Olson. Neither candidate took a bold stance towards fusion or openly supported the other. It was one of the rare public occasions when Olson did not make a speech. The two had met at a governor’s conference the year before in Indiana, and by all accounts they had struck up a working friendship based on their similar political views. During his visit, Roosevelt referred to “my colleague and friend, Governor Olson,” but Roosevelt avoided direct talk of collaboration and instead emphasized the serious economic conditions of the country. Thus, any “understanding” between the two men (and their parties) remained secret. Even so, it was apparent to many that Roosevelt’s national Democratic campaign and the state-level Olson Farmer-Laborites were in quiet alliance.⁶¹

As the Great Depression entered its worst phase in 1932, some incumbent politicians moved to the political left to meet a perceived shift in voter attitudes. Olson was one of those

⁶⁰Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 521-526.

⁶¹Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 97-98.

who shifted to left as well, even as he strove to maintain his relatively moderate appeal. He spent a considerable portion of the year giving speeches proposing the idea of government intervention in the economic sector, specifically as a means to provide economic relief. Olson had been cautious in his first year in office. However, by 1932 he was signaling a desire to ramp up his reforms. Olson presided over the 1932 party convention himself and guided the party's platform towards a slight leftward shift, but still avoided openly radical or socialist rhetoric. Some commissioners were even appointed to study the feasibility of creating a Farmer-Labor presidential ticket. However, in the end, the Farmer-Labor leaders in Minnesota abandoned talk of a third-party national ticket, preferring to favor Franklin Roosevelt as a Democratic candidate in 1932 instead. It is likely that Olson's "understanding" with Roosevelt played a role in squelching such ideas – although the concept of a third party presidential run would reappear later.⁶²

Olson's Republican gubernatorial opponent in 1932 was Earl Brown. Brown was a wealthy farmer and businessman connected to the Minnesota business community. Brown lacked Olson's political appeal as well as his campaign ability. There were also rumors that Brown had associations with the Ku Klux Klan (an organization that had reached its peak membership in Minnesota in the 1920s). Brown was also associated with the Minnesota Highway Patrol, whose use of force to break up some strikes (which was technically illegal) damaged his credibility with the labor and farm sectors. The Democrats ran John Regan, a political "loose cannon" who often lashed out against his critics – including members of his own party. Roosevelt loyalists within the Minnesota Democratic Party were very quiet in their support of Regan, and it is probably accurate to state that many Minnesota Democrats

⁶²Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 93, 96-98.

secretly supported Olson as a more able and reform-minded politician. Olson's unspoken understanding with Franklin Roosevelt robbed Regan of significant support even within his own party. Once again, Senator Henrik Shipstead was little help to the Farmer-Laborites, refusing to even mention the Farmer-Labor Party by name during the campaign.⁶³

Even so, Olson's moderate reform approach and skillful campaigning was once again vindicated in the 1932 general election. The Farmer-Labor Party made significant gains on the state and national level, and Olson himself won re-election. The Farmer-Labor Party also won control of most of the other state-level executive positions, including the state Attorney General's office and the Railroad Warehouse Commission. On the national level, the party captured more congressional seats in the state as well.⁶⁴ The Farmer-Laborites won four congressional seats in addition to the seat already held by Paul Kvale: Magnus Johnson, Ernest Lundeen, Henry Arens, and Francis Shoemaker were all elected to Congress in 1932. The Farmer-Labor Party would reach its peak representation in the U.S. House at this time. It should be noted however, that these congressional Farmer-Labor candidates usually won through plurality, and did so by running "at large" (i.e., not within a district). Even so, the plurality percentage was often high. For example in 1932, Olson won with a plurality of 49.6% (down from his win in 1930). The Democrats also made some gains despite Regan's awkward campaign presence and his loss in the governor's race. At the same time, a few Republicans were beginning to defect to the Farmer-Labor Party – a signal of the party's growing strength.⁶⁵ On the state level, the party increased its showing in the legislature. In 1933 the Farmer-Labor members did not hold an outright majority. However, they were now

⁶³Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 109-116; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 168.

⁶⁴"Farmer-Labor Party Gains: Extends Power in Minnesota, Winning All but One State Office," *New York Times*, Nov 11, 1932, 8.

⁶⁵Mitau, *Politics in Minnesota*, 14.

the largest faction within the legislature. The state House was more responsive to Olson's leadership, while the state Senate remained controlled by the Republican opposition. Even so, the Farmer-Laborites often worked in conjunction with progressive Republicans and Democrats to form a working majority for many initiatives.⁶⁶ This factor would benefit Governor Olson during his second term. Despite these limitations, the election was widely considered a success, and the *Farmer-Labor Leader* proudly proclaimed that the voters had given their unflinching continuing support to Olson and other Farmer-Labor candidates.⁶⁷



Figure 24. Governor Floyd B. Olson in 1932. Olson was well known for his dramatic and dynamic speaking ability. Olson remained an active public speaker during his years as governor. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Olson's Second Term

Olson began his second term in early 1933 with considerable challenges. This was the worst year of the Great Depression and the state (as well as the nation) faced what many considered to be the hardest economic situation ever. Olson began his term with a biennial address. His new proposals were more daring than they had been in the previous term. He seemed to hint that “lawlessness and possible revolution” could only be avoided through significant legislation aimed at alleviating social problems. He called for a cancellation of some mortgage debts and delays in the repayment of other debts. He also called for non-eviction legislation for those who had defaulted (or were about to default) on their

⁶⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 169.

⁶⁷“Minnesota Indorses F-L Principles in Mammoth State-Wide Victory,” *Farmer-Labor Leader*, November 13, 1932.

mortgages. These efforts were specifically aimed at the state's farmers. He also called for an income tax, compulsorily unemployment insurance, and increased taxes on the state's utilities. He further called for powers to grant emergency aid to those in the greatest need and the creation of an old-age pension within the state.⁶⁸ In addition, Olson called for an extension of state relief and the prohibition of injunctions against labor activities. Finally, he proposed higher taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals, and made suggestions that extending public ownership of some major entities might become a future priority.⁶⁹

These proposals were significantly left-of-center politically and were a foreshadowing of at least some of the themes of Franklin Roosevelt's forthcoming New Deal. Although there were no immediate calls for public ownership of major entities, the leftward shift was noticeable. Olson challenged the state legislature to enact these programs, and he himself pursued these aims more aggressively than he had in his first term. His leadership was paramount in these sessions of 1933, and he often appeared at the legislative chambers in person.⁷⁰ His style in influencing legislators was a combination of threats (at one point stating he might use martial law to redistribute wealth) and friendly persuasion. Olson's efforts could not come soon enough. Early 1933 saw a wave of mortgage foreclosures and bank failures, both within the state and on the national level. The Great Depression was reaching its worst point. FHA activists frequently blocked foreclosure auctions by intimidating serious bidders (most often in the western counties of the state). In public, Olson remained upbeat, but publicly concerned and sympathetic. He continued to make personal

⁶⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 172-175.

⁶⁹Floyd B Olson, *Second Inaugural Speech*, reprinted in McGrath and Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson*, 80-81, 217-231.

⁷⁰Since the governor's office and both houses of the state legislature were (are) located in the state capitol building, this was an easy duty for Olson to undertake.

contacts with the masses and the unemployed – sometimes even buying them lunch or personally loaning them small amounts of money. On February 23, 1933, Olson issued a proclamation halting all mortgage sales until May 1. This was initially an executive order instructing county sheriffs not to evict persons or enforce mortgage defaults. However, this proclamation had little legal basis, and was not always followed by all of the counties in the state. Nevertheless, the action did have a strong impact. Later, Olson would submit this plan to the legislature where it would pass the House, but stall in the Senate. Olson then made appeals in favor of the initiative directly to the voters, and this put enough pressure on the Senate to eventually pass the measure as well. The state legislature then passed an official mortgage foreclosure moratorium bill.⁷¹

It is interesting to note that Olson was not unique in taking this approach. In 1928, William Langer (the former North Dakota NPL figure and scathing critic of Arthur C. Townley – see Chapter Three) had rejoined the League and had largely re-shaped it after his break with Townley, making it a formidable force once again in North Dakota politics by the early 1930s. In 1932, Langer won the governor's office with strong NPL support, and shortly after undertook a number of radical pro-agrarian measures which included a moratorium on all debts on March 4, 1933, just days after Floyd B. Olson had issued his moratorium proclamation in Minnesota.⁷²

These political struggles took their toll on Olson's physical health – although in truth this had been an issue ever since he had first ascended to the governor's office. Olson had been suffering from documented physical ailments as early as 1931, when he had

⁷¹Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 117-127.

⁷²Daniel Rylance, "William Langer and the Themes of North Dakota History," *South Dakota History* 3 (Winter 1972): 50-51.

experienced a seizure. He also suffered from appendicitis, and then thereafter suffered from a series of (what was diagnosed as) stomach ulcers. He finally had his appendix removed in May of 1933.⁷³ Interestingly enough, the governor's own papers make reference to a medical exam in 1931 in which Olson's physician, Dr. Arthur Hoaglund stated: "The Governor's general physical condition is excellent. He has a duodenal ulcer . . ."⁷⁴ Thus, Olson's abdominal difficulties had a long history. This situation would become serious by 1935. Furthermore, there were rumors of Olson's heavy drinking (along with accusations of marital infidelity), and these rumors were often repeated by his critics and enemies. However, there is no archival evidence to either support or refute such accusations.

It was during Olson's second term that the administration began to practice patronage much more extensively. A number of Republican state officeholders were fired from their posts during Olson's second term and many Farmer-Labor Party and FLA members were appointed to these offices instead. It was also at this time that these newly-appointed state employees were "asked to contribute" 3% of their salary to sustain the *Farmer-Labor Leader* newspaper. This was an apparent case of simony and a violation of ethics, yet at the time, there were no state laws that forbade this approach. Olson and the Farmer-Laborites embraced it both as a means of ensuring loyalty within the state bureaucracy and as a way to enhance the party's finances.⁷⁵

Starting in late April and running through May 12, the legislature received and passed a number of relevant initiatives pushed by Olson. These included increased relief for the

⁷³McGrath and Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson*, 56; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 143.

⁷⁴Statement of Dr. Arthur W. Hoaglund, Floyd B. Olson Papers, Box 2, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN. [hereafter Floyd B. Olson Papers].

⁷⁵Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 148.

unemployed, weekly hourly limits for women workers in industry, a bill that stemmed court injunctions against labor, and the designation of the State Board of Control as being the primary relief agency in the state. More importantly, Olson managed to pass a number of measures that directly helped small farmers, including the moratorium on mortgage foreclosure sales of farms, direct aid to foreclosed farm properties, and efforts to exempt certain farm properties from taxation. These initiatives may have been Olson's most significant efforts to stem the worst of the Great Depression in Minnesota, and many were grateful for his actions. Olson himself was satisfied with the results and commented, "I think that despite all the chatter and the newspaper editorials, the Legislature did a good job."⁷⁶

In the meantime, the national political situation began to change as well. With Roosevelt's inauguration, the administration's "Hundred Days" began in March 1933 and electrified Congress. Roosevelt's efforts were intended to direct government action against the ill effects of the Great Depression. Many historians have praised the "Hundred Days" period and Roosevelt's productivity from March to July of 1933. President Roosevelt and the New Deal Democrats in Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) in May of 1933. However, the act was slow to be implemented and in the meantime crop prices began to fall once again. The FHA had temporarily pledged to stop strike activities. However, the continuing agrarian difficulties and Olson's inability to come up with some kind of state-based plan to aid farmers' markets pushed them back into radical activity by the autumn of 1933. Olson had better luck closing ranks with the labor sector, however. He openly

⁷⁶McGrath and Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson*, 86.

endorsed Roosevelt's NRA initiative and publicly stated that his office would do its best to implement NRA policies in Minnesota.⁷⁷

For many persons living through the worst of the Great Depression in 1933, the effects of this new legislation and federal policy were slow to have an effect. In the meantime, resentments continued to fester. Even after the "Hundred Days" campaign had reached its peak of activity, improvements were slow in coming to Minnesota and bitterness largely consumed the electorate. Vince Day commented on this in a memo he sent to Olson in October 1933:

Farmers are more radical than their leaders. They have lost all confidence in the Roosevelt administration and its proposals. A feeling of bitterness and resentment is rapidly developing among farmers and workers against the administration. I doubt that Roosevelt could carry the State if an election were held at this time.⁷⁸

After mid-1933, Governor Olson continued to move to the left politically. He once again expressed greater sympathy for the FHA and its agenda, and again broached the possibility of public ownership of major entities. Olson also sent contradictory public messages about the nature of capitalism, claiming that the party's reforms would both save it and yet change it so much that it might become unrecognizable from its current form.⁷⁹ Even so, Olson continued to adhere to his approach of supporting reasonable reform while tempering his proposals with a working relationship with the state's business community – a delicate balancing act that sometimes maintained a broad base of support, but at other times alienated both ends of the political spectrum.

⁷⁷Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 151, 156, 158.

⁷⁸Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, October 20, 1933, Vince Day Papers, Box 2.

⁷⁹Floyd B. Olson, *Speech to the Junior Association of Commerce*, January 22, 1934, Floyd B. Olson Papers, Box 3; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 185.

One of Olson's more radical ideas in these desperate days concerned the state seizure of property from tax delinquent persons and entities. If made into law, the bill would have allowed the state to own and operate such properties, specifically "large [commercial] interests" in urban Hennepin and Ramsey counties. The initiative was forwarded as a bill in the state legislature in December 1933, and had Olson's approval.⁸⁰ Although the bill was not passed, it seemed to underscore Olson's earlier claims that more efficient tax collection was needed in order to increase the state's revenue – and possibly to encourage timely tax payments from persons or entities who might be opposed to the administration's policies.⁸¹

Two examples of Olson's deft political balancing act can be seen in his handling of two major labor strikes: the Hormel Strike in 1933 (in Austin) and the Minneapolis Truck Drivers' Strike in 1934. Both of these strikes were polarized, complex, and politically charged events. Each also had a long history which consisted of phases of confrontations, negotiations, breakdowns, protests, and violence – or at least the threat thereof. In Austin, workers at the Hormel meat packing facility went on strike in November 1933 and occupied the factory floor through a "sit down" strike – one of the first sit down protests in history. Hormel employed almost 20% of the town's residents and the company's importance there cannot be overstated. Because the workers occupied the factory, the threat of violence was palpable, and the Sheriff of Mower County pleaded to the governor's office for assistance. Olson responded by mobilizing the National Guard, but kept the troops stationed about 30 miles away, in the town of Owatonna. Olson defended his actions of not ordering troops to break up the strike, preferring instead to use persuasion instead. He then ventured down to

⁸⁰“State May Seize Big Tax-Due Properties,” *Farmer-Labor Leader*, December 15, 1933.

⁸¹“Governor Olson Discusses Taxes in First of a Series of Radio Talks,” *Farmer-Labor Leader*, February 11, 1932.

Austin himself, met with representatives of both labor and management, and forced a compromise agreement. Critics on both political extremes criticized his meddling, but he was able to forge a working solution that in the end was accepted by all. In response to criticism by what he termed “the reactionary press,” Olson refuted the concept of the “sacred cow property” in a radio address, bluntly stating that the alternative (enforcing property rights over labor rights) would have meant ordering “the machine guns of the state upon some 2700 citizens of the state and creat[ing] some widows and orphans.”⁸² Olson's balanced approach and ability to avoid the use of force brought him national attention.⁸³

The Minneapolis Truck Drivers’ Strike (also known as the Teamsters Strike) in 1934 was far more serious than the Austin strike, involved larger numbers, and had a wider potential for violence. Both labor and management had significant resources to call upon and showed greater intractability than the participants had in the Austin strike the year before. The main issue was over recognition of the right of the truck drivers to unionize. The labor side was organized by number of hardened radical union leaders, including Carl Skoglund and the Dunne Brothers, who had been active in the Farmer-Labor Association until they had been expelled in 1926 for their communist associations (Skoglund in particular regarded himself as a revolutionary).⁸⁴ The companies resisting the strike were backed by the Citizens’ Alliance group, and they also had the sympathy of the Minneapolis Police Department. The strike went through several phases of intermittent pickets, negotiations, and tentative deals. In May, violent skirmishes resulted in the deaths of two persons and dozens injured. Talks

⁸²Tweton, *Depression Minnesota*, 27; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 160-162.

⁸³“Governor as Arbiter: Olson of Minnesota Tries to Settle Packing Plant Strike,” *New York Times* (November 13, 1933), 6.

⁸⁴Kristoffer Smemo, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis, 1934-1938,” Masters’ Thesis, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2011, 17.

were resumed under pressure from Olson and the National Labor Board. Olson held the National Guard in reserve in plain sight and rumors of its deployment no doubt provided an incentive for further negotiations. Talks did continue, however, by July the situation had again broken down, and both sides had recruited large numbers to either enforce or break a strike. Many of these persons were armed with clubs or other handheld weapons. The police also stood nearby, ready to fire live ammunition (which they occasionally did). Olson was sandwiched between the unrelenting demands of radical labor activists and the reactionary stand of management backed by the Citizens' Alliance. More than once, Olson sought to intervene and broker a compromise, as he had before in Austin. Initially, an arrangement was reached with encouragement by Olson in which the union was theoretically recognized. However, after the agreement had been reached, the employers often excluded union activists from re-employment and labor agitations increased once more.⁸⁵

The strike started up again in earnest on July 16, and violence erupted on July 20. Olson faced opposition and criticism from all sides. The Citizens' Alliance and conservatives denounced his unwillingness to use state power to quell the strike, while those on the left (including some party figures, communists, and labor leaders) demanded that he firmly support labor rights in the strike. Olson pledged to maintain peace, but refused to take sides (later raiding the offices of both the Citizens' Alliance and the union leaders).⁸⁶ But he also encouraged mediation and condemned the Citizens' Alliance as being trouble-makers.⁸⁷ Olson declared martial law in Minneapolis shortly thereafter, but even in taking this step, he was determined not to abandon his labor constituency. On July 30, Olson clarified the use of

⁸⁵Millikan, *A Union Against Unions*, 270-280.

⁸⁶Millikan, *A Union Against Unions*, 280-284; see also Valley, *Radicalism in the States*, 110-114.

⁸⁷"Strike Ultimatum in Minneapolis: Governor Olson Sets Noon Today as Deadline for Agreement or Martial Law," *New York Times*, July 26, 1934, 8.

the National Guard troops. He claimed that their chief use was to maintain law and order, prevent outbreaks of violence and the destruction of property, and guarantee the free flow of traffic. He further asserted that the National Guard units had not been deployed to take orders from the companies or to be used as a coercive force to break the strike. On July 30, the strike headquarters were raided and the union leaders were briefly imprisoned. However, on August 3, Olson authorized a raid on the Citizens' Alliance headquarters as well. He then fought an injunction brought by the employers in favor of extending martial law. The court agreed with Olson's views, and he was able to finally remove the troops from the streets. When violence erupted again, Olson directly blamed the Minneapolis police.⁸⁸ Again, neither side was happy with Olson's approach, but his tactic of enforcing the peace without favoring either side created a cooling off period which eventually resulted in talks that led to a lasting agreement by mid-August.⁸⁹

The final pressure on the employers to accede to union demands came through a settlement intermediary (Father Francis J. Haas) who had been in contact with figures in the Roosevelt Administration. Haas had been instructed to inform the Citizens' Alliance group in mid-August that government loans covering their businesses would be in jeopardy if the strike continued much longer. Faced with a lack of government backing, management finally gave in to labor demands. The strike ended August 21 with an overwhelming victory for the union.⁹⁰ This settlement may have come as something of a surprise to the Olson

⁸⁸“Gov. Olson Blames Police in Strike: 'Deliberate Trap' Set to Incite Truckers When Two Were Killed, He Tells Court,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1934, 2.

⁸⁹Tweton, *Depression Minnesota*, 29-33.

⁹⁰Thomas E. Blantz, “Father Haas and the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring, 1970), 13-14.

Administration however, since as late as August 14, Vince Day was convinced that the strike was a “prolonged deadlock” which the employers sought to draw out until the next election.⁹¹

In the meantime, agriculture also remained a central issue for the governor. In the late spring of 1934, the drought situation was becoming worse on the Great Plains and in western Minnesota. On June 1, 1934, in response to reports of cattle being trucked into the state for grazing purposes, Olson issued an executive injunction barring all livestock from outside the state’s borders from entering the state for grazing purposes. Olson also ordered the National Guard to patrol the borders of the state to enforce this injunction.⁹² It was a heavy-handed and provincial ploy, however statistics in the governor’s office attest to the desperate state of livestock farmers in the state, 40% of whom were on relief by August 1934.⁹³ Drought would continue in the western and northwestern counties of the state through 1936 and grasshopper plagues at the same time made matters even worse.⁹⁴

As governor, Olson typically did his best to present himself as a strong executive above the political fray. It was rare when he would use his office and rhetorical talents to single out and denounce personal enemies. However, in the case of the Republican state Senator A. J. Rockne, he made a notable exception. Throughout 1933, Rockne had become Olson’s main foil in the Senate, questioning, refuting, and ultimately delaying legislation pushed by Olson which was designed to provide direct government relief. Rockne himself apparently did not perceive the seriousness of the Great Depression, and was highly

⁹¹Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, August 14, 1934, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

⁹²McGrath and Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson*, 95.

⁹³Perry Petersen, "Emergency Relief in Minnesota," August 31, 1934, unpublished manuscript in Floyd B. Olson Papers, Box 1.

⁹⁴Oral history interview with Carol Darg, Grand Forks resident, 1935-1936, who claimed that the grasshoppers were so numerous in episodes during this period that her mother had to sweep them out of the house in clumps using a broom – and that was the situation on the *inside* of the house; see also Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 526.

suspicious of government intrusion into the economic sphere (and unmoved by appeals for aid to farmers and workers). On several occasions, Rockne had initially pushed back against the Olson agenda, but had then eventually backed down. Finally, in December 1933, Rockne dug in his heels and claimed that state relief for the poor – as well as some other programs – were a violation of the Constitution and that he intended to oppose them. Olson visited the Senate and confronted Rockne, who refused to yield. On December 19, Olson released a statement to the press naming Senator Rockne as the main obstructionist of impending relief programs. Rockne – greatly limited in his public speaking and argumentative abilities – took the bait and responded to Olson in a live radio broadcast on December 26. Rockne ineloquently claimed that Olson’s programs were too expensive and that there were no tax dollars to pay for them.⁹⁵ Rockne’s constitutional façade had thus been laid bare, and his true positions were revealed – and they were revealed in a weak and unconvincing manner.

The next day, Olson pounced on his political prey. He spoke over the same radio station (WCCO) and refuted, ridiculed and countered Rockne’s arguments point by point using logic, humor, and sarcasm. Public opinion was electrified and Olson received many congratulatory letters for his address. Rockne – embarrassed by his own ineptitude – quietly retreated, and in early January 1934, most of Olson’s programs were passed in the Senate. The episode would be Olson’s most direct – and most public – legislative victory over a political opponent.⁹⁶

Despite continuing difficulties in the farming and labor sectors, Olson reached new heights of popularity in early 1934. In addition to his Farmer-Labor base, which included

⁹⁵Text of Rockne’s Dec. 26, 1933 radio address, Floyd B. Olson Papers, Box 4.

⁹⁶Text of Olson’s radio speech in response to Rockne, Dec. 27, 1933, Floyd B. Olson Papers, Box 4; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 63-164.

much of the rural and urban masses, Olson also began to win some grudging support from the business community in Minneapolis and St. Paul for his moderation and effectiveness as governor. At the same time, Olson continued to face challenges from the radical left. Arthur C. Townley – still unsatisfied by Olson’s efforts – returned to the public spotlight and once again agitated for more direct government action starting in late February 1934. Townley also supported a campaign centered in the western counties of the state which was designed to get 100,000 farmers to march on the state capital and force the Minnesota Senate to pass measures friendly to the farm lobby. As a means to force realignment and also to quiet the protests, Governor Olson decreed that new legislation on mortgage moratoriums would not be taken up until May 1. This allowed his conservative opponents time to consider the situation, but also blunted the growing agitation on the left. Governor Olson's victories in his second term were thus extensive. These included the mortgage moratorium actions, the introduction of a state income tax, the levying of additional taxes on stores, and successful efforts to take farmland out of production (which in theory raised crop prices). He had also successfully led efforts to contain child labor and limit working hours for women in industry. In addition, he had successfully ended the Hormel Strike and – less adroitly – the Minneapolis Truck Drivers’ Strike. Although his critics were vocal and numerous, his political setbacks during his second term were few: he failed to authorize the creation of state-owned hydroelectric plants, and his proposals for unemployment compensation were defeated in the legislature.⁹⁷

⁹⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 176-177.

The 1934 Election

The patronage issue had become prominent starting in 1933. As mentioned earlier, Farmer-Labor Party members increasingly demanded state jobs in exchange for their support of the party, and beginning in mid-1933, the party under the Olson administration had terminated a number of non-party state employees (many of whom had seniority and significant years of experience) and replaced them with party loyalists. At the time, these actions were legal under state law and such practices had sometimes been used in the past as well – although never quite so brazenly. Typically, to gain or retain state employment during this period of time, persons often had to either be party or association members, or know someone within the Farmer-Labor Party who would recommend or “sponsor” them for employment. Potential employees were often labeled by local FLA chapters as being either sympathetic to – or members of – the Association itself. These efforts at categorizing job seekers and running the patronage machine were extensive and wide-ranging.⁹⁸

The 1934 internal Farmer-Labor struggles were contentious, and considerable attention was placed on Senator Shipstead’s position within the party. There was some question as to whether or not Olson would make a bid for the Senate that year, perhaps even challenging Shipstead in the primary. However, in a press statement on February 26, 1934, Olson declared that he was – once again – running for the governor’s office, and would not run against Shipstead. Olson claimed that he had arrived at this position since Shipstead had pledged to “campaign . . . for the other candidates of the Farmer-Labor Party for state and

⁹⁸Records and memos in the Vince Day Papers attest to the importance and degree of effort that was attached to promoting Farmer-Labor patronage during Olson’s tenure at this time; see also citation #30.

national office[s]” in the general election.⁹⁹ It is unclear if this pledge had been made directly to Olson by Shipstead, or if Olson’s statement was intended as a warning message to Shipstead to either publicly support the other party candidates or risk a primary challenge.

The Farmer-Laborites generated additional controversy during their March 1934 convention. This related to the party’s more open shift towards the left end of the political spectrum. At the convention, the leftist wing of the party was more determined than ever to push its agenda. The country had just endured the worst period of the Great Depression, and there was serious talk about socializing major elements of the economy. The platform committee was dominated by militant labor figures and leftist ideologues such as Howard Y. Williams, a long-time leftist critic of Olson with significant connections to like-minded ideologues nationwide. The preamble of the platform even included the ominous claim that “capitalism has failed and immediate steps must be taken by the people to abolish capitalism.” Olson once again tried to balance left-of-center moderation with these radical demands. However, his keynote convention speech in 1934 seemed to indicate a further drift leftward. He proposed a series of initiatives that would eventually lead to public ownership of many entities – including communications and transportation – and the creation of a “cooperative commonwealth” under state control which would “stifle as much as possible the greed and avarice of the private profit system . . . and bring more equitable distribution of the wealth.”¹⁰⁰

It was also at the 1934 convention that Olson publicly – and famously – proclaimed “I am not a liberal . . . I am frank to say I am what I want to be. I am a radical.” He went on to

⁹⁹Floyd B. Olson, Statement to the Press, February 26, 1934, Floyd B. Olson Papers, Box 2.

¹⁰⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 190-191; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 169-173.

explain that he would not be satisfied to tinker with reform, but instead sought significant and lasting political changes designed to empower the farmer and labor constituencies once and for all.¹⁰¹

Although Olson and his allies managed to stave off leftist challenges to party candidate endorsements, they were unable to stop the leftward shift of the official 1934 party platform, which turned out to be the most radical one yet. It included calls for the public ownership of mines, utilities, transportation networks, and even insurance companies, banks, and factories.¹⁰² This party platform represented the highpoint of Farmer-Labor socialism, and for the party's leftist ideologues, it was a dream finally come true. For the party's liberals and moderates, it represented a nightmare. While this hardline approach worked well at the convention in satisfying the left-wing, it would later create significant difficulties for Olson – and the rest of the party – in the general election.

As mentioned earlier, the convention also witnessed a significant movement led by Henry Shoemaker to deny Farmer-Labor Senator Henrik Shipstead the party's Senatorial endorsement. Shoemaker's challenge to Shipstead was unsuccessful. However, Shoemaker's attacks were intense and heated, and seemed to generate significant support. Shipstead's grueling experience in this ordeal no doubt soured him on Farmer-Labor Party state politics, and as a result, it would be Shipstead's last Farmer-Labor Party convention.¹⁰³

Once the convention was over, the discord over the radical nature of the platform began. After almost four years of unchallenged leadership, Olson was beginning to lose some

¹⁰¹Herbert Lefkowitz, "Farmer-Laborites Now Openly 'Red': Dominant Party in Minnesota Wants Immediate Abolition of Capitalism," *New York Times*, April 8, 1934, E1; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 171.

¹⁰²"Two-Day F-L Convention Adopts a Far-Reaching Platform and Program," *Farmer-Labor Leader*, March 30, 1934.

¹⁰³Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 187-189; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 169.

of his influence within the party as his delicate balancing act between radicalism and liberal reform was unraveling. Olson reacted by “explaining” the party’s platform in a statewide series of radio broadcasts starting on April 12. He boldly claimed that the party’s position was not actual public ownership, but was instead a platform which sought to redress the worst excesses of capitalism and build a “cooperative commonwealth” (a term he now used in a broader sense). In an effort to placate centrist voters and play to religious sympathies, Olson claimed that a moderate vision of liberal reform was consistent with Christian religion (a clear attempt to lessen the severity of the party’s platform and refute opposition charges of godless secularism). He suggested that public ownership was to apply only to those facilities which were currently idle. Olson also contended that the federal government had already taken significant control in key industries under President Roosevelt's New Deal, and as such, such ideas were not radical. This was perhaps Olson’s most creative interpretation of the party’s positions yet, and in these efforts he was not entirely successful. On April 24, 1934, the St. Paul Mayor's election became an early indication that the new Farmer-Labor platform was making the party unelectable. The Farmer-Laborite incumbent, William Mahoney, lost the election and the Republican candidate, Mark Gehen, was elected mayor instead.¹⁰⁴

It is clear from communications routed through Vince Day’s office that many Farmer-Labor leaders were confused by – or in disagreement with – the nature of the official platform. After several weeks of gathering opinions from Farmer-Laborites around the state, Day formulated a specific plea to Olson to officially amend the platform. Vince Day sent a detailed memo to Olson on May 2, complaining about the problematic nature of the

¹⁰⁴Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 190-193.

convention draft and outlining specifics that needed to be addressed or changed. Day also suggested that the platform be divided into “Federal planks, state planks, constitutional planks” and more.¹⁰⁵ Eventually, Olson – already in the midst of trying to “explain” the platform to a wider audience – was persuaded by Day’s arguments. In May 1934, Olson and a small committee (which included prominent Farmer-Labor legislator and lieutenant gubernatorial candidate, Hjalmar Petersen) worked furiously to create a number of written “explanations” for the party’s 1934 platform, effectively moderating most of the party’s planks. Efforts were also made to remove the original party convention platform texts from circulation.¹⁰⁶

Once the platform had been amended, it was reprinted in the *Farmer-Labor Leader* on May 15, and many of Day’s assertions were reflected in this final draft – including the division of the platform into state, national and constitutional amendment categories. This newly amended platform also included a specific statement which officially opposed the state ownership and operation of small business – a deliberate attempt to alleviate the anxiety of small business supporters of the party. Even so, the suggestion of state ownership of utilities, mines, and many other major entities remained in place.¹⁰⁷

In addition to the threat of the party being labeled extreme, another challenge emerged in 1934 as well. The state primaries in June seemed to indicate a growing support for the Democratic Party within the state. No doubt, at least some of this was due to the prominence of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and his efforts in 1933 and 1934 to undertake reform and enact significant federal economic intervention. Although Olson's slate of

¹⁰⁵Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, May 2, 1934, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

¹⁰⁶Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 178-179.

¹⁰⁷“F-L Legislative Program: Platform in Three Parts; State, Constitutional Amendment, and National,” *Farmer-Labor Leader*, May 15, 1934; see also Mayer, 176-179.

moderate candidates were largely chosen in the Farmer-Labor primary races, an increasing number of Minnesota voters were now looking to the Democratic Party as an instrument of reform. Olson thus faced another great rhetorical test: to project himself and his party as being the instrument of reform, while shoring up the more radical party base – but to do so without alienating centrist voters or those who might abandon the Farmer-Labor Party and embrace the Democrats instead. His party’s earlier open movement towards the left had aroused considerable public criticism and the original party platform had been widely criticized by newspapers including the *Minneapolis Journal* and even the *New York Times*. It was also not forgotten by the party’s political opponents, who purported that it revealed the true nature of the Farmer-Labor Party.¹⁰⁸ Vince Day himself had communicated the serious electoral implications of the party’s platform blunder to Olson directly as well.¹⁰⁹ Despite the efforts in April and May to “explain” and then officially moderate the platform, it would remain an issue in 1934.

During the general election campaign in the fall of 1934, Olson once again took his signature rhetorical approach of balancing reform and moderation. His supporters made sure that his interpretations of the party platform were distributed extensively. His speeches continued to refer to building a “cooperative commonwealth” and largely implied his intended continued efforts at state intervention in economic affairs. Yet at the same time, Olson often gave assurances in private to business owners that he had no intention of taking control of their enterprises. His campaign proposals specifically reassured the insurance industry, which had been singled out in the party’s platform as being a service industry ripe

¹⁰⁸Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 171-173.

¹⁰⁹Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, April 4, 1934, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

for government takeover. His goal was to sway as many centrist or Democratic-leaning votes as possible to maintain his winning coalition. However, this was not easy. The more that Olson aligned himself with Roosevelt and praised the President and the New Deal policies, the more attractive he made the Democratic Party look to voters. Instead, he had to embrace the principles of the New Deal while making himself and the Farmer-Labor Party appear to be the true instrument of choice for reform-minded Minnesota voters. One of his best weapons in this sense was his passionate speaking ability.¹¹⁰

Even so, the party's left flank was not so easy to ignore, and challenges arose from more than one figure. In August, Arthur C. Townley – apparently unsatisfied with Olson's policies and limited use of patronage – began a sub-organization within the party ranks to promote Farmer-Labor patronage as a means to controlling the state bureaucracy.¹¹¹ Townley then announced his intention to become an independent candidate for governor in the 1934 election, and Townley's "revolt" (or entry into the race) initially caused some alarm within the Olson administration.¹¹² Olson himself however, refused to publicly react to Townley's candidacy. Instead, he reached out directly to Townley's initial supporters who in turn quickly deserted the quixotic campaign. Townley's candidacy was thus finished shortly after it began. Olson also faced a lack of support from the Farmer-Labor Party's elder statesman, Henrik Shipstead (a pattern which by this time had become quite predictable). As in earlier elections, Shipstead once again refused to campaign for Olson or any other Farmer-Labor candidates, and instead concentrated purely on his own campaign.¹¹³

¹¹⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 195-196, 198.

¹¹¹Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, August 14, 1934, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

¹¹²Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, August 17, 1934, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

¹¹³Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 247-249.

Despite the positive shift of support indicated during the primary for their party, the Democrats were not helped by their association with the Roosevelt Administration during the 1934 general campaign in Minnesota. The Democratic candidate for governor, John Regan, refused to recognize Olson as being in line with Roosevelt's New Deal, and ran another ineffective and confrontational campaign. As in 1932, many Democrats seemed to prefer Olson as a more able and proven political reform figure, and Franklin Roosevelt was apparently in agreement with this assessment: when Roosevelt made a campaign stop in Minnesota during the 1934 campaign, he failed to endorse Regan for governor.¹¹⁴

The Farmer-Labor Party was further beset by what appeared to be a growing distance between the urban-labor leadership of the party, and the rural-agrarian wing. This was a division which fell along some specific ethnic/religious lines as well. As early as July 18, Vince Day had concluded that “the Party is weak in German Catholic centers. A German would be ideal for campaign manager.” This would not be the only reference during the 1934 campaign that Day would make to the party’s slipping support within that constituency.¹¹⁵ While the original farmer-labor coalition of the early 1920s had been able to count strongly on rural German support (manifested in such leading party figures as Dr. Louis Fritsche), by the mid-1930s this demographic was ebbing in its backing for the movement. This would be reflected in the 1934 general election results, and was at least one sign that the urban-labor leadership of the party was increasingly unable to hold onto rural agrarian support for the movement.

¹¹⁴Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 240-247.

¹¹⁵Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, July 18, 1934, Vince Day Papers, Box 1; there are also several similar references throughout various other memos sent at about this time.

The results of the 1934 general election once again favored the Farmer-Labor candidates – although not as clearly as in 1932. Thus, even with the Farmer-Labor Party’s supposed shift towards the left, it maintained much of its hold on power. Olson was re-elected governor. Shipstead was easily re-elected to the Senate. The Farmer-Labor Party also elected congressional representatives in three of Minnesota’s nine districts.¹¹⁶ However, all of these victories were pluralities, not majorities. Even though Olson was re-elected over Democrat John Regan and the Republican candidate (Martin Nelson), he had lost a significant degree of support from the rural zones (with the exception of the Red River Valley region). Instead, much of Olson’s voting strength in the 1934 race came from urban areas. Olson’s gubernatorial plurality dropped to its lowest point ever (44%) and it would be his lowest margin of victory as a governor.¹¹⁷ Olson’s best showing was in Hennepin, Ramsey and St. Louis counties (the metro areas of Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth).¹¹⁸ Day’s concerns about the loss of rural German support had been warranted. Also concerning to the party was their loss of overall seats in both houses of the state legislature. The final tally there put the Farmer-Labor Party members in a clear minority position.¹¹⁹

Interestingly enough, just after the election, Governor Olson seemed to rediscover his radical side. He was quoted in the *Farmer-Labor Leader* as stating: “I believe the government should devote its efforts in the building of consumers’ and producers’ cooperatives instead of attempting to patch the failing Capitalist structure.” Criticizing Washington politicians, he further claimed that current national efforts were faulty since they

¹¹⁶Reduced from ten districts to nine due to a contraction mandated by the 1930 Census.

¹¹⁷“Minnesota Victory Conceded to Olson: Press Estimates the Governor’s Majority at 75,000 – Shipstead Also Far Ahead,” *New York Times*, Nov 7, 1934, 3; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 199-200 and Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 528.

¹¹⁸Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 250, 257.

¹¹⁹“Conservatives in Legislature Piling Up Lead,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 9, 1934.

were “based on the Capitalistic philosophy of production for profit instead of production for use.”¹²⁰ Whether or not Olson’s words were intended to assuage his party’s left wing, they were hardly a ringing endorsement for Roosevelt’s New Deal, and seemed to provide evidence that there were indeed significant political differences between the Minnesota Farmer-Laborite vision and the New Deal approach.

Olson’s Third Term

Governor Olson undertook a threefold legislative program beginning in early 1935. First, he proposed a broad “state new deal” which included old-age pensions, an extension of the mortgage moratorium, an initiative to electrify rural areas, and authorization for the Rural Credit Bureau to accept payment in crops instead of money. Second, Olson proposed tax reform designed to reduce taxes on homesteads and farm property, but increase taxation on chain stores, utilities, and large private entities. He pushed for a greater reliance on the state income tax, increasing rates in the highest income brackets using a graduated income tax approach (farm cooperatives were to be exempt from these increases in taxation). Third, Olson proposed that public ownership of major entities be authorized by a constitutional amendment which would authorize the state to own and operate electrical production plants, public utilities, packing facilities and “other key industries.” Olson also proposed a central state bank and implied that iron mining might eventually come under state control as well. These were Olson’s most radical set of proposals yet, and as such, they were doomed to failure. These proposals were especially unrealistic considering the ground that the Farmer-

¹²⁰“No Patching of the Capitalist System Declares Governor Olson,” *Farmer-Labor Leader*, November 15, 1934.

Labor Party had lost in the state legislature in the last election. Olson may have been seeking to prove that he was an ambitious reformer or continue to shore up his left flank. In any case, with the exception of extending the mortgage moratorium, the legislature refused to approve these programs. Little was accomplished in the state legislature that year and instead Olson set his sights on his next political objective – the U.S. Senate. It's unclear whether his radical proposals in 1935 were meant to be taken seriously or were simply a way of burnishing his credentials with the left wing of his own party and the electorate.¹²¹ In any case, his effectiveness as governor was now in decline.

At the same time, Olson began to question the Farmer-Labor patronage system in Minnesota. As early as July 1934, Vince Day had called local Farmer-Labor groups who had sought political jobs “spoilsmen” and had identified them as being problematic. Of course, this was after a sustained period (1933-1934) in which Day and Olson had actively sought to use patronage to strengthen their position within the state bureaucracy. By 1935 however, the issue had become a red flag for Republican opponents, and the granting of patronage throughout the Farmer-Labor ranks had not seemed to satisfy party member demands anyway. At least some of the trouble and negative publicity associated with patronage was driven by the competition within the Farmer-Labor ranks for these state offices. Patronage would remain a delicate issue even within the party, and both Olson’s and Day’s indecisiveness on the issue after 1934 did not alleviate the situation.¹²²

Labor continued to agitate in Minnesota during Olson’s third term. Between 1935 and 1936, a series of organizational strikes (efforts to unionize non-union workers) occurred.

¹²¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 203.

¹²²Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, July 17, 1934, Vince Day Papers, Box 1; see also Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 278-279.

These were centered mainly in Minneapolis and St. Paul. At least some of these efforts to unionize were led by communist activists. In May 1935, the Communist Party USA dropped its ban on its members joining other left-of-center parties, specifically, the Farmer-Labor Party. Thus, the Farmer-Labor Party's ranks absorbed a number of bona fide communists at this time, and this trend would contribute to the party's factionalism and make their reputation more questionable for mainstream voters. The Communist Party USA undertook this new policy of encouraging its followers to penetrate existing left-of-center parties both in an effort to influence these groups, and in order to present a broader coalition against the political right-wing as part of its "popular front" strategy.¹²³ Communist leaders also undertook a campaign in Minnesota in 1935 to unite Socialists and Farmer-Laborites into a broader front, and Vince Day (and presumably Governor Olson) was aware of this intermingling of communist figures and FLA/party members.¹²⁴

The state's politics in 1935-1936 were highly partisan in nature, and Olson was hard pressed to make any progress on his proposed legislation. Polarization occurred between the governor's office and the Republican-majority legislature – and both seemed to want to use confrontation as a means to create conflict which could be used as fodder in the next election. This represented a significant change from Olson's previous term, where he had achieved so much with at least some degree of cooperation from the legislature. The Republican majority introduced bills to curb party patronage, to re-assign state departments out from under the governor's control, and to eliminate the infamous 3% "donation" that state employees were "asked" to contribute to the Farmer-Labor Party. Both houses of the legislature also set up

¹²³Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 208-211.

¹²⁴Vince Day Papers, Box 1; a letter from "Bob" to Vince Day describes in detail a meeting in which Earl Browder (then a national leader in the Communist Party) addressed an assemblage of about 1,300 persons – many of them Farmer-Laborites – in Minneapolis, October 18, 1935.

standing investigative committees which often met in secret and had broad powers to look into any issue which might embarrass the Olson Administration.¹²⁵ Olson now played a different political game. He had cautiously pursued moderate reforms during his first term of office. In his second term, he had become more aggressive in pursuit of reform and economic relief. But in his third term, he laid out positions so extreme that they were doomed to failure – and then spent much of the rest of his third term on the defensive against the opposition-led state legislature. When the Republican-majority rejected his tax plan and instead proposed a state sales tax, Olson openly opposed it and eventually vetoed it.¹²⁶



Figure 25. Governor Floyd B. Olson in 1935. Olson faced greater opposition as Governor of Minnesota after the 1934 election when his party took a decided turn to the left and the state legislature swung back into opposition hands. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Other events in late 1935 further complicated Olson’s political situation. These included Vince Day’s exit from the governor’s office, the murder of journalist Walter Liggett, the sudden death of Minnesota Senator Thomas D. Schall, and further health problems. After Olson’s governorship had stalled in 1935, Vince Day began to look for an exit from his role as Olson’s right-hand man, seeking a quiet political appointment instead. On November 8, 1935, Day was appointed to a judge’s seat on the Minneapolis municipal

¹²⁵Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 260-262.

¹²⁶Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 270.

court. It was Day's reward for years of loyal service to Olson, but it also meant that the governor was losing his most trusted and effective political operative.¹²⁷

It was the Walter Liggett case, however, that would raise serious questions. Liggett was a journalist with a reputation for cutting edge exposés, and had worked at such major newspapers as *The New York Times* before permanently relocating to Minnesota. Liggett was an early supporter of the farmer-labor movement and had worked with the party to establish small publications supportive of the cause. While working on such an operation in Austin in 1934, he had a dispute with the publishers of the *Austin American*. Liggett claimed that he was owed about \$2,600 in funds that he had lent to the publishers, but had never received repayment. Liggett eventually sued the publishers, a local union and – in a bizarre twist – Governor Olson himself. Documents in the Vince Day Papers show that the governor's office was in regular contact with Liggett and the publishers of the *Austin American* in this period, and there are even letters from the publishers which requested \$1,000 in funds from the governor. In August 1934, Liggett's case was settled out of court, and he quietly received \$490.¹²⁸

However, the experience embittered Liggett's view of Olson so much that he spent the rest of his life on a journalistic crusade against the governor, publishing a series of highly critical articles in the *Midwest American*, a small newspaper which he published in Minneapolis. Liggett portrayed a city dominated by criminal interests cozy with the police and city government. Liggett accused Olson of corruption and made personal attacks against his character, suggesting that Olson was using the Farmer-Labor Party simply as a means to

¹²⁷Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 285.

¹²⁸Vince Day Papers, Box 1; there are a number of letters and memos in the Vince Day Papers which paint a vivid picture of the deterioration of Liggett's relationship with Day and Olson in 1934.

advance his own national political career. Liggett also accused Olson of marital infidelity. On December 9, 1935 Walter Liggett was shot to death in the alley behind his Minneapolis apartment in front of his wife and his daughter, Marda. Liggett had also been exposing graft in connection with the Minneapolis liquor industry and it was generally assumed at the time that he was killed by the mob. However, Liggett's criticisms of Olson also cast suspicion on the governor and his followers. Olson – mindful of Liggett's criticisms of him – immediately publicly called for an investigation in Liggett's death.¹²⁹ The gangster "Kid Cann" was eventually identified as the assailant and put on trial, but was found not guilty due to lack of evidence.¹³⁰

No direct connection of Liggett's death to Olson was ever discovered; however, it would be erroneous to claim that Olson and Day were completely disassociated from Liggett – even after their rift occurred. In fact, Day had referred to Liggett in a message to Olson as early as 1933, when he noted that Walter Liggett "is starting a newspaper in Bemidji" – presumably one of the local publications supportive of the Farmer-Labor cause and the Olson administration.¹³¹ Thus, the Austin episode in 1934 was not the first time that Liggett had extended himself on behalf of the party. After the bitter exchange in 1934, Liggett had become a scathing critic of Olson and his supposed connection to organized crime in the Twin Cities. By April 1935, Liggett's accusations had drawn the close attention of Day and Olson, and Day publicly thanked the New York journalist, Selden Rodman (a writer for *Common Sense*), for helping to refute Liggett's accusations against the Olson administration

¹²⁹"Olson Urges U.S. to Act on Liggett," *New York Times*, December 13, 1935, 13.

¹³⁰Marda Liggett Woodbury, *Stopping the Presses: the Murder of Walter W. Liggett* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 177-195.

¹³¹Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, August 5, 1933, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

(many of which were demonstrably inaccurate).¹³² By mid-1935, Liggett had also become the target of organized crime, and was even beaten and then later falsely accused of kidnapping (a ridiculous fabricated charge which nonetheless went to trial in August 1935). Liggett's trial in 1935 also attracted the attention of Day and Olson, however the specific issue of concern was not mentioned in writing.¹³³ Liggett's trial fell apart when evidence of perjury emerged among the key witnesses. After that, Liggett had escalated his attacks against Governor Olson, even listing reasons for Olson's possible impeachment on the front page of the *Midwest American*.¹³⁴

It is also interesting to note that this was not the first – nor even the most prominent criminal accusation that had been alleged against Floyd B. Olson. Earlier, when he was the Hennepin County Attorney in the 1920s, Olson was named in a high profile case that eventually wound up before the U.S Supreme Court. In 1925, the Reverend K. B. Birkeland was found dead in a Minneapolis whorehouse. Birkeland's son Harold accused the Minneapolis Chief of Police Frank W. Brunskill and Olson of kidnapping his father, murdering him, and then planting the body to make their crime seem like an embarrassing accident. Birkeland's cause was later championed by Jay M. Near, editor of a scandal sheet known as the *Saturday Press*, which made outrageous accusations against Olson and racist allegations against Jewish gangs in Minneapolis (and their supposed connivance with Minneapolis and Hennepin County officials). A local judge had issued a gag order against the *Saturday Press*, banning it from printing such stories – an action that was ignored by Near. Olson and Brunskill later brought libel charges against Near in 1930 (just as Olson's

¹³²Letter of Vince Day to Selden Rodman, April 18, 1935, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

¹³³Memo of Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, August 9, 1935, Vince Day Papers, Box 1.

¹³⁴Liggett, *Stopping the Presses*, 81-117.

gubernatorial campaign was getting underway). A jury acquitted Near of libel (even though there was no evidence to support Birkeland's claims). The case continued to work its way up through the courts until Near was heard at the U.S. Supreme Court, where the decision (*Near vs. Minnesota*) firmly supported Near's right to run the stories (although the court did not substantiate the veracity of his allegations against Olson). This was a landmark case in the establishment of the "no prior restraint" principle – now considered an essential aspect of First Amendment rights.¹³⁵

Interestingly enough, Near and Liggett had associated with each other in the years before Liggett's death. They had apparently been brought together by their dislike of Olson. Later, in 1934, Harold Birkeland was encouraged by Republican activists to publish and distribute his accusations against Olson in a pamphlet entitled *Floyd B. Olson in the First Kidnapping Murder in "gangster Ridden Minnesota."* The pamphlet was distributed widely throughout northern rural Minnesota in 1934, and may have been a factor in Olson's slipping support in those regions during the election.¹³⁶

Later in the same month as Liggett's murder, Olson's would-be Republican rival for the 1936 Senate election also died under mysterious circumstances. Minnesota Senator Thomas D. Schall was killed in an automobile accident in Washington, D.C., on December 19 (he was hit by a car while crossing a street and died from injuries three days later without ever regaining consciousness). Schall's death immediately set off a firestorm of speculation. However, most of this suspicion was aimed towards the Roosevelt Administration, since Schall had been an outspoken critic of New Deal policies. The driver of the car in question

¹³⁵Fred W. Friendly, *Minnesota Rag: The Dramatic Story of the Supreme Court Landmark Case That Gave New Meaning to Freedom of the Press* (New York: Random House, 1981), 80-81, 147-155, 165-166.

¹³⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 212.

was apprehended but was found to have had no connection to organized crime. The incident was subsequently ruled to be accidental homicide (Schall was severely vision impaired – essentially blind – and had been crossing a busy street) and the driver of the vehicle in question (Lester G. Humphries) was later arraigned for manslaughter.¹³⁷ Even so, the nature and timing of Schall's death led to questions and speculation among Farmer-Labor critics in Minnesota.

Governor Olson was obligated to fill Schall's open Senate seat in a timely fashion. Wisely, he quickly ruled out appointing himself to the office (even though his goal was to run for the seat in 1936).¹³⁸ Hjalmar Petersen, now Olson's lieutenant governor, emerged as a potential candidate for the open Senate seat. Elmer A. Benson – an esteemed party regular and the state banking commissioner – also emerged as a potential candidate. Benson was considered to be a compromise figure disliked by few and popular with party regulars – especially on the left-wing. Olson secretly attempted to appoint his old confidant Vince Day to the Senate office instead, but Day was not interested in accepting the position, stating that he preferred to remain a judge instead.¹³⁹ Seeing few attractive options, Olson then appointed Benson to temporarily occupy the seat until the next election in 1936, and apparently did so without consulting Petersen on the issue.¹⁴⁰ Petersen would not forget this slight.

¹³⁷“Sen. Schall Dies After Accident,” *The Edwardsville Intelligencer*, Dec. 23, 1935, 2.

¹³⁸Wisdom later proven by the political case of Minnesota Governor Wendell Anderson, who appointed himself to the open Senate seat caused by the death of Hubert Humphrey in 1977. Anderson was defeated in the election the following year and never returned to politics.

¹³⁹Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 281-282, 286.

¹⁴⁰“E. A. Benson Named to Succeed Schall,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1935, 3.

Figure 26. Elmer Benson in 1937. Benson was elevated to the U.S. Senate by the sudden death of Republican Senator Thomas D. Schall in December 1935. Benson would later return to Minnesota to seek the governor's office in 1936. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



The month of December 1935 ended with even more trouble for Olson. On December 31, he underwent stomach surgery for what had now been diagnosed as a tumor. During the operation, he was found to have inoperable cancer. The operation itself was made public, but Olson's cancer diagnosis (which would eventually prove to be terminal) was kept secret.¹⁴¹ From that point on, Olson struggled with his encroaching illness – even as he made plans for his political future and doggedly looked ahead to the election of 1936, when he planned to make the transition to the Senate. Olson's ambition for the Senate seat meant that there would be an opening in the party leadership for his governor's seat. This encouraged other party leaders to emerge as potential successors for the governor's office starting in early 1936.¹⁴²

The Last Campaign: 1936

Floyd B. Olson's last campaign would be the Senate race of 1936, although it would be a race he would not finish. After December 1935, Olson's health would deteriorate substantially. His diagnosis of terminal cancer was kept from the public almost until the moment of his death. Olson spent much of 1936 either resting at home or at vacation locations, or under the care of doctors. By early 1936, Olson's abdominal cancer was

¹⁴¹Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 289.

¹⁴²McGrath and Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson*, 124-128.

becoming advanced and he had lost considerable weight. He also cut back significantly on his workload and public appearances. Despite all this, he still intended to run as the Farmer-Labor Party's candidate for the Senate in the November election. Even most of the members of his own party were unaware of the seriousness of his condition.¹⁴³

Throughout 1936, other ambitious Farmer-Labor figures – long in the shadow of Olson – positioned themselves to ascend to the governor's office. Although Elmer Benson had been appointed Senator, his real ambition was to become governor – and the state party's new leader. Likewise, Olson's lieutenant governor, Hjalmar Petersen, wanted to run for governor as well. An intense and negative competition between Benson and Petersen had emerged since Benson's appointment to the Senate in December 1935. Olson's Senate ambitions in 1936 only exacerbated this rivalry. According to some, Petersen's opposition to Benson was both ideological and ethnic. The historian Hyman Berman alleged that Petersen was anti-Semitic and resented both Olson's reliance on Jewish leaders within the party (such as Abe Harris, Olson's speech writer and an editor of the *Farmer-Labor Leader*) and Benson's extensive associations with "Mexican generals" – a slur meant to refer to leading Jewish figures within the party.¹⁴⁴



Figure 27. Hjalmar Petersen in 1936. Petersen was a long-time Farmer-Labor figure and loyalist to Governor Olson, but he clashed markedly with Benson and his supporters within the party. Petersen's rise to the governor's office in August 1936 practically guaranteed that the party would experience considerable factionalism. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

¹⁴³Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 213-214.

¹⁴⁴Hyman Berman, "Political Antisemitism in Minnesota During the Great Depression," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3/4, American Bicentennial: I (Summer - Autumn, 1976), 247-264.

Even so, the race for the Farmer-Labor nomination for governor would not remain just a competition between these two figures. In fact, it was the old party stalwart, Magnus Johnson, who first jumped into the race for governor in early 1936 as soon as Olson had announced that he would be seeking the Senate seat instead.¹⁴⁵ Undeterred by Johnson's declaration, Benson made his official announcement a short time later.¹⁴⁶

Olson was able to attend the Farmer-Labor convention in March 1936 and he spoke there for almost two hours. This would be Olson's last major party appearance. By this time, he had lost about fifty pounds due to his chronic illness. Nevertheless, he gave a stirring performance, reaffirming the achievements of his earlier years as governor, and consistently attacked the political right-wing, the economic status quo, and even the U.S. Supreme Court for holding up progress and reform. In terms of foreign-policy, Olson – who had increasingly commented on national issues since February – expressed continued support of American isolationism. And, in a bid to make his political roots clear, he greeted his assembled audience as “Ladies and Gentlemen and Fellow-Jeffersonians” and commented that – if alive today – Thomas Jefferson himself might have switched from the Democratic Party to the Farmer-Labor Party. His audience cheered with enthusiasm.¹⁴⁷

After the convention, Olson spent much of his time during the 1936 campaign dealing with his encroaching disease. By July 1936, it was apparent to his confidants that he was close to death – however the dire nature of his condition was still not shared with the media. Olson spent the last weeks of his life away from the governor's office at a vacation spot on

¹⁴⁵“Magnus Johnson Seeks Office,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1936, 8.

¹⁴⁶“Benson Out For Governor: Gov. Olson of Minnesota Is Expected to Seek Senate Seat,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1936, 6.

¹⁴⁷McGrath and Delmont, *Floyd Bjornsterne Olson*, 132; 297-317 [full text of Olson's 1936 convention speech].

Gull Lake. When his illness became unbearable, he was flown down to Rochester Mayo Clinic.¹⁴⁸

In his last days, Olson was able to conduct a final meeting with the journalist, Charles R. Walker, who later excerpted their discussion in an article for *The Nation*. In his final interview, Olson boasted of his performance at the March 1936 convention: “A lot of people thought I had bellowed my last bellow and had me already in the dust. I spoke for an hour and a half.” Olson further emphasized the need for political “maneuvering” and the necessity of political alliances. He also rejected the idea of a national third party presidential movement – at least until more popularity for a third party approach had been achieved in other states, criticizing “the ritualists and leftists” who wanted to elect a third party President in 1936 “before they even have one Labor alderman in New York!” Olson also summed up both his political accomplishments and the way in which he achieved them:

I tell you, capitalism could not stand a production-for-use economy. It would be killed off, and we'd get what we want. The trouble with these leftists and ritualists – they want to ride on a white horse with a pennant flying hell bent for the barricades. My method is a different one. ‘Boring from within,’ which I learned from the old Wobblies . . . We haven't accomplished much in legislation. Something, of course: relief appropriations, mortgage moratoriums, and the like. More important, the party has been an educational force in inculcating certain principles – collective bargaining . . . Then the principle of the government . . . caring for the unemployed and appropriating public money for relief. There are other principles the party has popularized – I am naming only a few. One of the most important is that the National Guard must not be used to smash strikes . . .¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 300-301.

¹⁴⁹Charles R. Walker, “The Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota: Governor Olson’s Last Interview,” *The Nation*, March 20 1937, 318-320.

On August 22, 1936, Olson died of abdominal cancer at the Mayo Clinic.¹⁵⁰ One of his last acts was to endorse President Roosevelt for re-election. Official reports were in denial of the seriousness of his condition until the very end.¹⁵¹

Olson's death came as a sudden shock – both to the party at large which he had led since 1930 and for the population of the state. His funeral was attended by 150,000 mourners, and the outpouring of grief was real and unprecedented for a public figure in Minnesota. Eulogies were delivered by a Lutheran minister, a Jewish Rabbi, and Philip La Follette, son of Robert La Follette and the Governor of Wisconsin and – like Olson – an ardent reform politician. Olson's widow declared that her husband “belongs to the people of the state.”¹⁵²

There is no question that Floyd B. Olson was one of the major figures of the Minnesota farmer-labor movement. His rise to the governor's office after the 1930 election represented new statewide influence for the party, and his political leadership was a critical factor in how the state responded to the crisis of the Great Depression. Despite his high office and significant degree of popularity however, Olson never reigned as the unchallenged leader of the party. Indeed, the party remained a wide coalition with a number of leading figures (Olson, Mahoney, Shipstead, Shoemaker, etc.) – many of whom conflicted with each other, and fell roughly along urban-labor and rural-agrarian lines. Olson's administration was another chapter in the continuing urban-labor leadership of the party. Townley's unsuccessful attempts to influence the Olson Administration – and later challenge it – demonstrated that the old NPL-inspired sector of the party had difficulty asserting its leadership against the

¹⁵⁰Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 298-300.

¹⁵¹“Olson, From Bed, Backs Roosevelt: He Dictates Statement in Hospital Between Intense Periods of Pain,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1936, 14.

¹⁵²“150,000 In Streets at Olson Funeral: Leaders of Nation Join With Common Folk in Tribute to Minnesota Governor,” *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1936, 21.

Minneapolis-St. Paul party leadership base. Such conflicts could also be seen in Ernest Lundeen's insurgency in the 1930 Senate race and the Shipstead-Shoemaker contest of 1934. These trends highlighted what had become by the mid-1930s a widening split within the party's base in which the rural-agrarian wing (represented by such figures as Townley, Lundeen, Petersen and Shipstead) struggled to retain a degree of influence in the party's leadership. There was also an ethnic line of backing for such figures as Shipstead, whose support within the party was strong among rural Minnesotans of German and Scandinavian heritage.¹⁵³

Despite these intra-party conflicts, Olson had filled such a large leadership role within the party for so many years that the question of the Farmer-Labor Party's future after his death was now in serious doubt. In the short term, the party would benefit from the sympathy generated by Olson's untimely death. However, in the long-term, his absence would be one of the main factors which led to the party's demise.

¹⁵³Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 166.

CHAPTER VI

OPPORTUNITY-CRISIS: 1936-1940

The death of Floyd B. Olson in August 1936 left a leadership vacuum within the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, and its long-term future was now uncertain. In the short term however, the outpouring of grief and sympathy for the suddenly deceased governor helped to support the party's electoral ambitions for the upcoming election. Some Farmer-Labor figures who had worked for years in Olson's shadow now emerged in competition with each other to claim the mantle of his leadership. However, the various groups within the party base that Olson had held together through his forceful personality and persuasive rhetoric started to increasingly move towards factionalism. The opportunities for the party's success still remained. However, the movement as a whole was facing increasing centrifugal forces and a changing political landscape that would ultimately lead to its decline in the long-term.

Transitions: 1936

Immediately, upon the death of Floyd B. Olson, the lieutenant governor, Hjalmar Petersen, became the new Farmer-Labor Governor of Minnesota. Petersen was the son of Danish immigrants (a child immigrant himself) who had spent his formative years in east-central Minnesota near the town of Askov. After completing his secondary education and spending some time in Milwaukee, Petersen had returned to his home town and had become the editor of a local newspaper, *The Askov American*. During World War I, Petersen had been

exempted from the draft because of his newspaper profession (such persons were often exempted because of the perceived importance of the news media as a means to support the war effort). During the war, Petersen had taken no public stands against the activities of the Commission of Public Safety (although some other local editors in his region had). Petersen also publicly denounced Lindbergh's 1918 gubernatorial campaign for the Republican primary, lamenting the few votes that Lindbergh did receive in his township. Petersen continued in his role as newspaper editor and gradually developed an interest in politics. Though he remained Republican in his views until his first run for office in 1926, he had been thoroughly impressed by Floyd B. Olson's campaign stop in Askov in 1924 and had even predicted that Olson would someday become governor. Petersen ran for state Representative in 1926 and 1928 on the Farmer-Labor ticket – largely due to his sympathies towards those constituencies but also because he had been discouraged from running as a Republican within his own county. In 1928, Petersen was one of the few Farmer-Labor candidates who had successfully enlisted Henrik Shipstead to appear on his behalf (Petersen would remain a friend to Shipstead until the end of Shipstead's political career). Petersen lost his race in 1926 and again in 1928, but in 1930, the Great Depression and demands for change led by gubernatorial candidate, Floyd B. Olson, enabled him to win his legislative race and from that point on, Petersen was a leading figure in the state legislature. He voted along party lines 92% of the time through 1933, and his leadership within the Farmer-Labor Party caucus was apparent. In 1934 he was asked to run as Olson's lieutenant governor.¹

¹Steven J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), 51-52, 61, 79-80, 103.

At the time that Petersen ascended to the governor's office (late August 1936), the gubernatorial election was just more than two months away, and the winner of that election would become the next governor. Elmer Benson had already been chosen as the party's gubernatorial candidate back in March 1936 and had later been confirmed in the primary. Thus, Petersen would only occupy the governor's office until early 1937. But that would not be the end of Petersen's political ambitions, nor would it be the end of the Petersen-Benson rivalry. Petersen himself had not helped the situation by sending mixed messages from 1934 to 1936 about his political ambitions, going so far at one point as even ruling out running for governor.² Instead, he had initially eyed the congressional seat of the Sixth District. In the end however, he had concluded that unseating the Republican incumbent there would be too difficult a task. In the meantime, support for Benson within the party to succeed Olson had grown, and the *Minnesota Leader* (then under the direction of Benson's ally, Henry Teigan) had begun to publish a series of articles complimentary to Benson in late 1935.³ When Senator Thomas Schall's vacant seat needed to be filled in December 1935, Benson's supporters had pushed their man to the forefront – going so far as to announce his appointment even before Olson had made up his mind. Petersen had regarded this as an unacceptable power move by the Benson wing and it immediately propelled him to announce that he was seeking the party's endorsement for governor in the upcoming 1936 election. However, in early 1936, Olson had decided to run for the Senate, so instead Benson eyed the governor's office that Olson would vacate – even though Benson had just been appointed to the Senate. Petersen had then hoped that the party would endorse both him and Benson for

²Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 115.

³This newspaper was a new version of the *Farmer-Labor Leader* (which had ceased publication in 1934), and which (starting in 1935) was under the control of the FLA and no longer associated with the old NPL organization (whose earlier version of the *Minnesota Leader* had ceased publication in 1932).

governor at the March 1936 convention, and that the race would be decided in the party primary in June. However, the convention rejected this approach and awarded Benson the gubernatorial endorsement outright. At the time, Petersen was disappointed, but did not dispute these results, and he did not run against Benson in the 1936 primary.⁴

However, Petersen was becoming increasingly isolated within the Farmer-Labor Party leadership in the late days of the Olson administration, and – even though he was apparently aware that Olson was dying – he choose to send Olson what can only be described as a sullen letter on August 12, 1936. In the letter, Petersen essentially complained that he had been repeatedly slighted by Olson and further suggested that the governor use his influence within the party to re-assign the party endorsements so that Benson would run for Senate (assuming that Olson himself was unfit – an assumption which was true but which no doubt angered Olson) and that the governor’s endorsement then be assigned to him (Petersen) instead. Olson and his inner circle reacted with understandable outrage – and although Olson would die two weeks later – confidants within the inner circle such as Abe Harris would never forget the letter. Shortly after that point, they impugned Petersen and his actions as being almost treasonous to the Farmer-Labor cause. In the days after Olson’s death, Petersen again attempted to switch roles – this time by appealing directly to Benson. However, Benson refused to accept Petersen’s suggestion. By this time, Petersen had succeeded Olson as governor, and his appeal was not without merit, since – according to Petersen’s proposal – both he and Benson would be running for the seats in November that they currently occupied. However, there was to be no re-assignment, and Petersen was

⁴Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 115-130.

instead endorsed for Railroad and Warehouse Commissioner – a considerable demotion from the governor’s office – but a race which he would nevertheless win in the 1936 election.⁵

Olson’s untimely death also necessitated a suitable replacement for his Senate candidacy. On August 30, the party announced that Ernest Lundeen – currently the Farmer-Labor congressional representative from Minnesota’s Third District – would take Olson’s place on the Farmer-Labor ballot and run for the Senate as its endorsed candidate. This decision was made by the party central committee, since there was no time for another primary race. The only condition that the party stipulated was that Lundeen openly endorse Roosevelt for re-election. This was in response to the party’s understanding with the Democrats and to Lundeen’s earlier flirtation with the idea of backing a third party challenger to Franklin Roosevelt [see below]. Lundeen accepted this stipulation and became the party’s endorsee.⁶

The 1936 Election

The 1936 party platform – which had been crafted at the March 1936 convention – had shifted the party’s stance back towards the political center, with one major exception. The 1936 platform placed an emphasis on initiatives to expand *national* ownership or administration of major facilities and industries, and moved away from the concept of *state* ownership. This had now become a more plausible position given the direction of Roosevelt’s

⁵Letter of Hjalmar Petersen to Floyd B. Olson, August 12, 1936, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 9, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Hjalmar Petersen Papers]; see also Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 132-133, 136; see also James Shields, *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson* (Minneapolis, MN: T. S. Denison & Company, 1971), 344-345 [shows the photocopied letter].

⁶“Lundeen to Replace Olson on the Ballot: Farmer-Labor Senate Candidate in Minnesota is Pledged to Support Roosevelt,” *New York Times*, Aug 30, 1936, 3; Lundeen had called for the creation of a national third party in his work *A Farmer-Labor Party for the Nation* and he had been in negotiations with some other like-minded figures to field a third party candidate to run against Roosevelt in 1936.

New Deal and was a convenient way for the party to embrace leftist ideals without having to specify any state-level initiatives or take a leadership position on such issues within the state.⁷

Elmer Benson – the appointed Senator and endorsed Farmer-Labor candidate for governor – seemed on the verge of an easy victory in the autumn of 1936. His struggle with Petersen had proven his strong degree of support within the party. Olson’s death had also served to generate sympathy for the deceased leader’s successor. Although the Farmer-Labor Party was becoming increasingly beset by factionalism (especially over patronage, which had been one of Petersen’s main objections to Benson’s leadership), their political opposition was unable to take advantage of the issue. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats could field attractive candidates for the governor’s office. Also, the indicators from the primary vote in 1936 were misleading. In the primaries, 39% of the voters voted in the Republican primary races, versus less than 37% for the Farmer-Labor races. On the face of it, it seemed to be an indication that more voters as a whole were leaning Republican. However, as it turned out, this trend was not indicative of a Republican surge in November. It should be noted that these primaries were held in June – two months before Olson’s death – and that voter sympathies may have shifted significantly as the result of Olson’s demise.⁸

Benson himself had established a strong persona at the March 1936 Farmer-Labor convention. His speech had been significant in length, and had openly embraced pursuing further reform on the left end of the political spectrum, pushing for a wider, nationwide effort to do so:

⁷Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 218.

⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 223-225.

We believe that more reforms in our economic structure are futile; we believe in fundamental changes to bring about an equitable distribution of wealth . . . we may claim that the Farmer-Labor Party is a purely state affair, but such is not actually the case. We always fought for national, as well as state legislation . . . our crusade is thus a national one . . .⁹

Seeing their poll numbers sink in September, the unnerved Democrats once again arranged an electoral bargain with the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. The Farmer-Labor Party was to publicly endorse Franklin Roosevelt for president, and in exchange the Democrats would cede the state's major offices – or at least not seriously contest them – in the general election. This time, the deal made sense – since the Farmer-Laborites had no candidate for president and would likely have gained the state offices anyway. True to their word, the Democrats withdrew their candidates for Governor and Senator. In return, the major Farmer-Labor candidates and the party itself openly and loudly proclaimed its support for Franklin Roosevelt in the coming presidential election.¹⁰

Benson's rhetorical strategy during the general election was to vigorously attack the opposition Republicans. In an address broadcast over WCCO radio on October 23, 1936, Benson claimed that the Republican platform "exists only on paper. It is no longer a program . . ." He also denied being a communist, and pointedly referred to his long-term church membership. The next day, in another speech delivered over WCCO radio, Benson called out several Republican figures by name, quoted them, and then nastily dismissed their intent and ideas. In fact, most of Benson's campaign speeches that survive from October 1936 (the height of the general election campaign season) were attacks on Republicans and Republican

⁹Elmer Benson, *Speech to the Farmer-Labor Convention*, March 1936, 2, 9-10, Elmer A. Benson Papers, Box 3, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Elmer Benson Papers].

¹⁰"Minnesota: Democrats There Put Hopes In Support of the Olson Forces," *New York Times*, November 1, 1936, 32; see also James Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1983), 249.

policy.¹¹ Benson's Republican opponent, Martin Nelson, could simply not match Benson's oratorical energy and – in one case – was even unable to arrive at the correct radio studio location to debate Benson on air.¹² In a bizarre last-minute campaign twist, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate – the always combustible John Regan – blasted any idea of comity with the Farmer-Labor Party, and essentially endorsed Nelson for governor over Benson.¹³

As noted earlier, Olson's death had created considerable sympathy for the Farmer-Labor Party. His sudden passing had shocked the state's electorate and he had been publicly lionized at his large ceremonious funeral in August 1936. This lingering sense of grief and sympathy may have been one of the main factors in Farmer-Labor candidates receiving greater support in November – which turned out to be the most favorable results ever for the party. Part of this trend may have also been due to the Democratic cession in the Senate and governor's race. Elmer Benson won the governor's seat with a 58% majority – the highest ever in Minnesota's history – even higher than Olson's victory had been in 1930. Lundeen was elected to the Senate with a 57% majority. Six other Farmer-Labor candidates were elected to state offices. Perhaps most importantly, five of the Farmer-Labor congressional candidates were elected to the House, reversing the party's congressional setback of 1934. Veteran Representatives Paul Kvale and Richard T. Buckler were joined by newcomers Henry G. Teigan, John T. Bernard, and Dewey W. Johnson. Although the Republicans were largely unsuccessful in the election, it was really the Democratic Party that suffered the most loss of ground – with the singular exception of their victory in the presidential race. Other than carrying the state for Roosevelt, the Democratic percentages for most of the other major

¹¹Elmer Benson, WCCO Radio Address, October 23, 1936 and WCCO Radio Address, October 24, 1936, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 3.

¹²“Nelson ‘Joust’ With Benson Strikes a Snag,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 17, 1936.

¹³“Regan Strikes at F-L Fusion,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 27, 1936.

offices hovered just above 10% – a stinging rebuke of the party’s candidates on the state level, but a confirmation of their wisdom in having come to an agreement with the Farmer-Laborites.¹⁴ Another interesting trend was the high support for the Farmer-Labor candidates – especially Benson and Lundeen – in the urban Twin Cities area.¹⁵ In fact, *The St. Paul Pioneer Press* estimated that Benson and Lundeen had won over their closest opponents in Ramsey County by almost a two-to-one ratio.¹⁶ Dewey Johnson’s election in the Fifth District was indicative of voter support in Minneapolis as well. Thus, by 1936 much of the party’s core voter strength came from the state’s urban regions – evidence that support for the movement had shifted a bit, and that the resounding success of the movement in 1936 had depended on urban support.

Hjalmar Petersen served as governor between late August 1936 and early January 1937. In this role, Petersen seemed to signal that his political ambition would continue in the future – even taking what appeared to be a strong interest in state voter demographics. In response to a request made by Petersen, an ex-officio study was conducted on the governor’s behalf on 1930 census trends in Minnesota “showing the numerical strength of the German element” in the state. The purpose of the data compiled and its summary were clear in a message sent to Petersen: “If you can use the information contained in this excerpt for your own election campaign and for that of your party, you are welcome to it.”¹⁷ Apparently, Petersen was concerned with pursuing a statewide office – and it seems likely that this was not necessarily limited to his current campaign for the Railroad and Warehouse Commission.

¹⁴Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 227, 229-230.

¹⁵Orlin Folwick, “Christianson Trails 32,000, Nelson 13,000: Farmer-Laborites’ Margin in Cities Greater Than Opponents Expected,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 4, 1936.

¹⁶“F-L Nominees Get Big Margin in Twin Cities: Ramsey Trend Heavy for F. R. and Benson,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 4, 1936.

¹⁷Letter of Hermann Rothfuss to Hjalmar Petersen, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 9.

This demographic element was apparently significant, and was noted by others at the same time as well. Vince Day – in a memo giving advice to Elmer Benson – advised the incoming governor that he should maintain ties with “the Scandinavians and the Germans.”¹⁸ Both pieces of correspondence are evidence of a split within the party centered – not just on Petersen and the rural-agrarian wing versus Benson and the urban-labor wing – but also along ethnic lines as well.

After the election in November, Petersen received strong signals from Benson and other members of the party leadership to postpone making major appointments or avoid taking any legislative initiatives. However, Petersen apparently resented what he perceived as interference in his duties as governor. Although Benson had been elected governor in early November, he would not take office until early January. In the meantime, Petersen continued to exercise executive authority as he saw fit and the tensions between him and the Benson wing grew worse. To his credit, Petersen made some attempts to include Benson in transitional decision-making, including personnel appointments. However, Benson was either unavailable or uninterested in fulfilling this role.¹⁹

Governor Petersen markedly increased his public profile in December, making a number of public appearances, and delivering some speeches and radio broadcasts. Several of these are notable for the content of their messages. On December 6, Petersen spoke at a corner stone laying ceremony for the Arlington Hills Lutheran Church in St. Paul. In his speech, Petersen denounced the repression of religion in the Soviet Union, and also the

¹⁸Vince Day, Memo to Elmer Benson [undated], Vince A. Day Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Vince Day Papers].

¹⁹Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 140.

persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany.²⁰ These statements are notable for their criticism of the Soviet state – held in high esteem by many on the political left in the 1930s – and were a signal of Petersen’s intentional differentiation between himself and his party’s left wing. The sympathy that Petersen expressed for the plight of German Jews is also significant, because he would be accused of anti-Semitism a short time later. Just days after the Arlington Lutheran Church speech, Petersen released a written tract on conservation. In it, the governor went out of his way to attack Abe Harris – one of Floyd B. Olson’s closest confidants. Petersen claimed that Harris was a “swivel-chair artist and propaganda expert” who was interfering with the work of the current administration, and was “stick[ing] his nose into affairs where it does not belong.”²¹ Abe Harris – then an editor at the *Minnesota Leader* – exploded with rage, calling Petersen a “dirty, filthy coward” who should “submit at once to a lunacy examination.”²² This personal conflict – coupled with a dispute between Benson supporters and Petersen over the appointment of a new Railroad and Warehouse Commissioner – was the last straw of any pretense of party unity. Petersen fell so far from official Farmer-Labor favor that he was attacked on the front page of the *Minnesota Leader* on December 26, 1936.²³ The rift between the presiding Farmer-Labor governor and the Benson wing of the party was now out in the open – and it would remain a public issue for some time. Despite his denunciation by the *Minnesota Leader*, Petersen had a significant number of supporters (especially in the rural-agrarian sector), and they looked to him as their leader within the party.

²⁰Hjalmar Petersen, “Corner Stone Laying – Arlington Hills Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Dec. 6, 1936” [speech], 1-2.

²¹Hjalmar Petersen, “Statement on Conservation” December 1936, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 9.

²²Letter of Abe Harris to Hjalmar Petersen, December 21, 1936, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 9.

²³Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 141.

The Benson Administration: 1937-1939

Elmer Benson was considerably different in style and substance from Floyd B. Olson. Olson had long managed to present himself and his politics as attractive – or at least acceptable – to a wide number of persons, both politically and in terms of demographics. Olson was larger-than-life, gregarious, seemingly practical, and inspiring – although he also recognized political realities. He had a phenomenal ability to tailor his messages to various groups to make it seem like he was always on their side – or at least not a threat. Olson rarely attacked individuals – and when he did, he did so successfully. Like Olson, Benson had long been associated with the farmer-labor movement, having been active in the Non-Partisan League and then in the Farmer-Labor Party. Benson had also long been associated with Olson within the party leadership.²⁴ Benson had small-town roots, hailing from Appleton, Minnesota, where – in his short career before politics – he had worked a series of jobs, including stints as a secretary at a cooperative and a cashier at a local bank. Unlike his rival, Hjalmar Petersen, Benson had served in the military during World War I and often referred to his veteran status to bolster the legitimacy of his anti-military sentiments. In terms of his political persona, Benson – unlike Olson – often lacked the folksiness and personal warmth that Olson had used to communicate across the electoral divide and arrange friendly deals. Benson was noted by some to be colorless, humorless, and politically uncompromising in comparison to the now deceased former governor.²⁵

A quick anecdote relates these perceptions clearly – even according to Benson himself. Shortly after Benson's inauguration, John S. Pillsbury (a Minneapolis industrial

²⁴*Interview with Governor Elmer A. Benson, Interviewed by Martin J. McGowan, December 1981 and August 13, 1983 in Appleton and Bloomington, Minnesota, transcript of interview, 3.*

²⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 234.

magnate and heir to the Pillsbury Corporation) had returned from a meeting with Governor Benson and two union officials. Apparently, Benson's ideas were too far to the left for the industrialist. Pillsbury remarked to the union officials after the meeting that "Olson used to say these radical things, but this son of a bitch [Benson] actually believes them." In other words, Benson was more confrontational and less accommodating in private than Olson had been. Benson himself proudly related this story years later during an interview.²⁶

Even so, Elmer Benson was not merely a doctrinaire party hack. The more detailed picture that emerges of him from oral history interviews and his writings suggest a serious and committed political intellectual – albeit one who lacked mainstream popular appeal, had a quick temper, and typically refused to compromise or flatter either his allies or his opponents.

Figure 28. Elmer Benson in 1937. Benson was elected Governor of Minnesota in 1936 with the largest electoral margin ever up to that time. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



Benson was dealing with a different political landscape in early 1937 than Olson had faced between 1931 and mid-1936. On the national level, the Democrats under Roosevelt were unquestionably the main agent of change – and a significant agent at that. The politics of the New Deal had greatly changed the American political landscape and had created Roosevelt's New Deal coalition which had shifted many voter groups into the Democratic

²⁶Interview with Elmer Benson by Steven J. Keillor, January 20, 1982; referred to in Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 143.

Party. This transition would eventually lead to the declining appeal of the Farmer-Labor Party as being the main agent of reform. In addition, the leftists of the hard-core labor groups and the Communist Party had begun to actively infiltrate third-party movements and other left-leaning organizations in 1935 in an effort to influence them, and to help create “Popular Fronts” against encroaching international fascism. This trend would include Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party. As a result, these infiltrators began to increasingly exert pressure within the party. This increased the party's factionalism – and also made the party vulnerable to charges of communism by the party's opponents. This factionalism would become a serious issue for the party after Olson's death. Documents uncovered in Russian archives by the researchers John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr confirm this shift of local communists from a position of boycotting the Farmer-Labor Party in 1934 to a position of infiltration into the party starting in late 1935.²⁷ Also, Vince Day noted as early as October 1935 Communist Party leader Earl Browder's attempts to openly cooperate with the Minnesota Farmer-Laborites [see Chapter Five].

Benson was also beset by the very serious (and continuing) feud between himself and his main rival within the party, Hjalmar Petersen. It was clear that Petersen had enjoyed the role of chief executive, and had tried twice in 1936 to receive the Farmer-Labor endorsement for that office in the election. By early 1937, Petersen had become the main figure within the party opposed to Benson's leadership. In January 1937, Petersen had been forced to give up the governor's office in favor of the recently elected Benson. Breaking with a tradition that had crossed even party lines, Petersen did not show up at Benson's oath of office ceremony –

²⁷John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, “Researching Minnesota History in Moscow,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), 5-6.

a deliberate slap at Benson. The two men would continue to compete with each other in this internal rivalry and it became a major factor that negatively impacted the party and its image presented to the public at large.²⁸ Their rivalry was also emblematic of the rural-agrarian and urban-labor split within the party. As early as May 1937, Petersen was making openly critical public statements regarding Benson's leadership and the "Mexican Generals" in the governor's inner circle.²⁹ Later, in February 1938 when Petersen was asked to specify the meaning of this phrase, he claimed that the "Generals" were Abe Harris, Roger Rutchik and Art Jacobs (secretary to the Speaker of Minnesota's House) – all of whom were leading Jewish members of the Farmer-Labor Party aligned with Benson.³⁰

Governor Benson's legislative program in 1937 was relatively ambitious. He proposed a wide agenda in his lengthy inaugural address which focused on both national and state issues. On the national level, Benson urged Congress to enact a series of acts designed to benefit American farmers. This included guaranteeing them prices for agricultural goods that met or exceeded their cost of production, federal crop insurance, credit loans for crops withheld from the marketplace, and an end to speculative practices within agricultural markets. He also called for true neutrality in the face of impending war, and castigated the Supreme Court for some of its recent rulings – even suggesting that its power to rule certain types of laws unconstitutional should be taken away.³¹

On the state level, Benson's proposals were no less ambitious. He called for increased taxes on large industries and chain stores, and an increase in income tax on the wealthiest

²⁸Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 143.

²⁹Letter of Hjalmar Petersen to Art Connelly, May 22, 1937, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 9.

³⁰Hyman Berman, "Political Antisemitism in Minnesota during the Great Depression," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3/4, American Bicentennial: I (Summer - Autumn, 1976), 254.

³¹Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 89.

Minnesotans. He also proposed to extend greater benefits to state workers, promoted cooperatives, sought compulsory workers' compensation, and increased payouts to the elderly and unemployed. Benson also called for state ownership of several entities including the liquor and cement industries, and the electrical power system. However, despite the audacity of his proposals, Benson lacked both the political ability and personality to make them palatable to the opposition. Not surprisingly, his program ran into serious trouble in the legislature, which would remain largely opposed to Benson's leadership during his term of office. The initiatives were stalled there for three months, during which time Benson refused to negotiate. He further displayed anger not only against the opposition, but sometimes even against members of his own coalition.³²

Benson then arranged a rally on the State Capitol grounds on April 4, 1937, to support his legislative initiatives. This rally was attended by some members of the party and the Farmers' Holiday Association, but also by members of other leftist organizations, most notably a group called the "People's Lobby" – which included communist radicals. The crowd totaled at least several thousand. Benson spoke at the rally and was bellicose in his remarks. He denounced "reactionary legislators" and further stated, "It's all right to be a little rough once in a while." As the demonstration wound down, about 200 of the more radical demonstrators burst into the Capitol building and put the Senate tax committee under siege. Fearing for their safety, the committee quickly adjourned. Benson arrived at the state capital the next morning to address the "People's Lobby" – who had by that point occupied the senate chamber for 15 hours. Benson – far from disparaging their actions – essentially congratulated the sit-down strikers and told them that "you have accomplished your purpose"

³²Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 89-95, 97-102; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 238.

and that they “had done a good job” – but that now they were to continue advocating their cause outside the chamber. The Republican senate majority leader, Senator Charles N. Orr, protested Benson’s handling of the event, even suggesting that Benson’s activities were tantamount to “inciting [a] riot.”³³ Such actions did little to alleviate mainstream concerns about gubernatorial restraint and helped Benson’s enemies portray him as an extremist. A rising Republican star – Harold Stassen – emerged at the time as the moderate voice of reason in the ensuing debate and proclaimed that meaningful reform in the state was threatened by extremists on both the right and the left (a theme that he would use repeatedly in his now budding political career).³⁴

As governor, Benson did not hesitate to use the power of his office to settle old scores or to take executive actions that might seem trivial or even petty in a modern context. For example, Benson invalidated the license of the Pinkerton’s Detective Agency to work within Minnesota. This move was significant because Pinkerton’s was often hired to break up union activities and quell labor unrest. Pinkerton’s had a long history of such anti-labor activity in Minnesota, which stretched all the way back to the days of the Commission of Public Safety during World War I.³⁵ This was not the only lingering issue from World War I that Benson addressed. In September 1917, Professor William Schaper, a Political Science professor of German ancestry whom Benson had known when he had been a student at the University of Minnesota, had been dismissed from the university for his supposed “pro-German” views. Twenty years after Schaper’s dismissal, Benson personally intervened with a letter to the

³³“Senator Orr Charges Benson With Inciting Riot,” *The Evening Tribune*, April 6, 1937.

³⁴Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 241-242.

³⁵James M. Youngdale (editor), *Third Party Footprints: An Anthology From Writings and Speeches of Midwest Radicals* (Minneapolis, MN: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1966), 315.

University Board of Regents and encouraged his reinstatement.³⁶ The University Board of Regents then adopted a resolution on January 28, 1938, which reinstated Professor Schaper, paid him \$5,000 in back pay, and expressed regret for his termination which had taken place over 20 years earlier.³⁷

Benson also dealt with significant continuing labor strife within the state during his term. His handling of a labor strike in Albert Lea in April 1937 was particularly notable. Workers there at the American Gas Machine Company had gone on strike to support union representation. A sympathy strike by the workers at the local Woolworth's also ensued and – in addition – sympathetic union workers from Austin (twenty miles to the east) also joined in the protests. The Freeborn County Sheriff, Helmer Myre, responded to the strike by breaking picket lines and escorting non-union workers into the plant. Riots then ensued in the town, and Myre arrested over 50 strikers and agitators. Governor Benson responded to the situation by visiting Albert Lea personally (much as Olson had done in Austin in 1933). But unlike Olson, Benson – unequivocal in his support of the strikers – sought no compromise. Instead, he ordered the sheriff to release the strikers from the county jail, and Myre – apparently unwilling to resist the governor's authority – complied.³⁸ Accounts differ on the nature of Benson's actions, with some denouncing his intervention as being radical and heavy-handed, but others claiming that he had effectively defused the situation and prevented further

³⁶Youngdale, *Third Party Footprints*, 318-321.

³⁷"The Reinstatement of Professor Schaper," *Science*, New Series, Vol. 87, No. 2250 (Feb. 11, 1938), 141-142.

³⁸"Crowds Watch Battle Between Deputies and Strikers," *The Evening Tribune* [Albert Lea], April 5, 1937; see also "Strike Town Ruled by Mob: Minnesota Governor Turns Out Prisoners," *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 1937, 1, 3; see also Peter Rachleff, "Organizing 'Wall to Wall': The Independent Union of All Workers, 1933-1937" from Staughton Lynd (editor), *We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 11, 62.

violence.³⁹ Interestingly enough, Benson was so busy at this time that the event quickly faded from his concern. Only a few days later, he addressed a major labor rally at the Minneapolis Auditorium. Although he singled out the Citizens' Alliance for criticism, Benson did not even mention the Albert Lea episode in his speech.⁴⁰

During a series of lumbering strikes in northern Minnesota in 1937, Benson again intervened aggressively on behalf of striking labor activists. He authorized state relief for striking workers and even ordered the National Guard and the state highway patrol to assist the strikers, primarily by maintaining order and preventing strikebreaking coercion in the region. This was an unprecedented action and was in great contrast to the state's policies during the war years of 1917-1918, when state branches had been used to quell labor strike activity. Benson's assistance made a difference: the timber companies sought negotiations and the labor side made significant gains. Many of the lumbering camps would become unionized after this struggle in 1937, even though Minnesota lumbering was in decline overall in the state. Thus Benson – unlike Olson – was more overt in his support of organized labor, and even used the authority of his office and branches of the state itself to promote such causes.⁴¹ This made Benson very popular with the party's urban-labor constituency – however, it also raised considerable questions about the proper use of executive power and gave his critics ample ammunition to label him a radical executive.

³⁹Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 119-120; Shields claims that Benson prevented a larger riot within the town, and that Myre was ready to respond to renewed riot activity with machine-gun fire.

⁴⁰Elmer Benson, text from speech given at labor rally, Minneapolis Auditorium, April 11, 1937.

⁴¹Stacy Mitchell, "Union in the North Woods: The Timber Strikes of 1937," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 56, No. 5 (Spring, 1999), 267-269.

In addition his concerns about labor issues, Benson also repeatedly stressed in his rhetoric the need for continued farm policy reforms and other issues. In October 1937, Benson expressed such concern about the American farmer's position:

Certainly the farmer's place in society is not that of a mere creature of toil whose chief end is to work on the land [to create] the means of profit for others but not himself. This would make the farmer a serf, rather than a citizen . . . We have a right to expect . . . government . . . to play its part . . . in promoting the development of equality of opportunity. The vast majority of farmers, both in Minnesota and the nation, do not now enjoy such equality of opportunity.⁴²

In December 1937, Benson traveled to Oregon and addressed the Oregon Commonwealth Federation – a newly formed left-of-the-New Deal organization which sought to nationalize the war munitions industry and to pursue public ownership of banks, “monopolies” and “natural resources.” Benson was sympathetic to the group and its aims, and in a lengthy address on December 3, 1937, he made a number of statements which summarized some of his political attitudes:

We in the Farmer-Labor Party do not place men and property on the same plane. We do not regard . . . labor . . . as merely part of the cost of production . . . We do not look upon the farmer as merely a creature of toil . . . We hold that they are entitled not only to political citizenship, but also to economic citizenship . . .” [emphasis in the original]⁴³

Also in December 1937, Governor Benson championed the cause of the former labor leader and convicted bomber, Thomas Mooney. Benson traveled to California where he met with Mooney at San Quentin Prison, and then later gave a speech on behalf of Mooney's cause in San Francisco. Mooney had been convicted in 1916 on scant evidence, and his

⁴²Elmer Benson, “Address of Governor Elmer A. Benson at the Minnesota Farm Conference,” October 4, 1937, 8-9.

⁴³Elmer Benson, “Address to the Oregon Commonwealth Federation” December 3, 1937, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 3.

imprisonment had long been a cause for the left. Benson railed against Mooney's conviction, and compared it to the repression in Minnesota during World War I under the Commission of Public Safety. Mooney would later be pardoned by California's governor in 1939.⁴⁴

Two months later, at the Governor's Dinner, held at the Minneapolis Auditorium, Benson delivered another long address which was printed in a pamphlet for easy distribution at the event. He stated that the Farmer-Labor platform and its initiatives "is a liberal program . . . designed to bring the greatest good to the greatest number . . ." He further claimed that the party proposed "a more just and a more equitable distribution of the world's goods."⁴⁵

On March 25, 1938, Benson addressed the Farmer-Labor Women's Federation, where he asserted the importance of equal rights for women, calling for "equal pay for equal work" – a phrase commonly used even today. Benson was apparently one of the earliest politicians to use this phrase. Also of note is an edit that Benson himself apparently applied to a passage of his speech at the last minute. He crossed off a lengthy statement which accused the "fascist leaders" of ignoring the economic needs of the people and thus propelling the world into another war for territorial gain. This is evidence that Benson – despite his reputation for uncompromising leftist behavior – apparently did exercise a degree of self-restraint.⁴⁶

Farmer-Labor Figures on the National Level: 1936-1940

As in the 1920s and the early 1930s, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor congressional delegation continued to influence national politics between 1936 and 1940. One of the most

⁴⁴Elmer Benson, "Address by Governor Elmer A. Benson, San Francisco, December 5, 1937" Elmer Benson Papers, Box 4.

⁴⁵Elmer Benson, "The Farmer-Labor Program: Social and Economic Security" [pamphlet of Benson's speech], Elmer Benson Papers, Box 3.

⁴⁶Elmer Benson, "Speech to the Farmer-Labor Women's Federation" March 25, 1938, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 3.

intriguing Farmer-Labor figures to emerge on the national stage in this period was John Toussaint Bernard. Bernard was an immigrant from Corsica who had come to Minnesota's Iron Range as a child, and had worked as a miner, a fireman, and finally as a union organizer. Bernard later joined the Farmer-Labor Party and eventually became a local party chairman. In 1936, Henry Shoemaker – the then dispossessed former Farmer-Labor Congressional Representative from the southern part of the state – began to eye the Eighth District (which encompassed the Iron Range and the northeastern part of the state) as a base for his next congressional campaign. Governor Olson and the party leaders shuddered at the thought of another Shoemaker campaign and so looked to Bernard to run for office there instead. Although Bernard had no direct political experience, he was encouraged by party officials and Governor Olson to run in order to stave off a campaign by Shoemaker in that district. Bernard agreed, ran a successful campaign, and was elected to Congress in November 1936.⁴⁷

Almost as soon as he was sworn in as a Representative, Bernard started making waves. In January 1937, during one of his early sessions in Congress, Bernard noisily upset the sonorous activity of the House by strenuously objecting to the Speaker's attempt to shuffle a neutrality bill through the chamber without debate. The bill banned the United States from selling arms to either side in the then raging Spanish Civil War. Such a bill was well in line with American isolationism and was reflected in the Farmer-Labor Party's views at large. However, Bernard's perspective was different. Bernard had grown up in Europe, where he had marched in May Day parades and sung the *Internationale* in solidarity with

⁴⁷Barbara Stuhler, "The One Man Who Voted 'Nay': The Story of John T. Bernard's Quarrel with American Foreign Policy, 1937-1939," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Fall, 1972), 85.

workers. Bernard believed that German Nazi and Italian Fascist interference in Spain was enabling Franco's forces there to win, and that support for the loyalist republican side was crucial in the international fight against the spread of fascism. Bernard's stubborn objection forced a vote on the bill in the House. The bill passed 431 to one – the one dissenting vote being Bernard's. Bernard would continue to advocate for U.S. aid to the Spanish republicans and even visited Spain during his tenure as a Congressional Representative. His internationalist stance was ahead of American public opinion, however, and was too closely aligned with the international communist movement to appeal to mainstream voters at the time. Bernard was accused of being a communist himself. He denied this for years, but then essentially admitted that he was a communist in the years just before his death. Bernard's outspoken activism along with charges of communism made him too controversial even for the voters of the Eighth District. In 1938, Bernard lost his re-election bid to the same Republican foe he had defeated just two years earlier. Even so, Bernard later referred to his bold internationalist stance proudly, and asserted that he had been the only member of the House with the courage to stand up against fascism in Spain in 1937.⁴⁸

Bernard was also known for his strong stands in support of labor. On June 3, 1938, Bernard spoke prominently in favor of railroad workers who had been threatened with significant wage cuts. After his stint in Congress, Bernard remained active as a labor leader and made a long career of organizing labor. When World War II broke out, he sent President Roosevelt a handwritten letter (on House of Representatives stationary) volunteering his

⁴⁸Stuhler, "The One Man Who Voted 'Nay'," 84-88; see also "Roots of Radicalism" from *Iron Range: A People's History*, KTCA video, http://www.mnvideovault.org/search_results.php?q=John+Bernard&search-go.x=16&search-go.y=13, accessed September 7, 2015.

efforts for the war and reminding Roosevelt that he (Bernard) had voted alone against the Spanish arms embargo in 1937.⁴⁹



Figure 29. John T. Bernard with his daughter in about 1936, just before he was elected to Congress. Bernard had never held political office before his 1936 congressional victory, and never spoke English without a heavy French accent. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Richard T. Buckler had originally been elected to the U.S. House from Minnesota's Ninth District in 1934 (having beaten the mercurial Arthur C. Townley in the Farmer-Labor primary race). He had been re-elected to Congress in 1936. Buckler made only a few speeches in Congress, and these statements addressed the issues of farm loans and credit (he supported the Frazier-Lemke Bill in 1936), denounced the role of the Federal Reserve Bank, and supported the concept of "cost of production" for farmers.⁵⁰ In March 1936, Buckler was also one of the congressional Representatives to openly welcome and congratulate Arthur W. Mitchell – the first black Democrat in Congress.⁵¹

Dewey W. Johnson was elected to the House on the Farmer-Labor ticket in 1936. Johnson had a background as a lawyer, and had been associated with the party for some years earlier. He had served several terms in the Minnesota House in the early 1930s, and had been

⁴⁹John T. Bernard, "Remarks of the Honorable John T. Bernard" reprinted from the *Congressional Record*, June 3, 1938 and Letter from John T. Bernard to Franklin Roosevelt, December 17, 1941, John T. Bernard Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter John T. Bernard Papers].

⁵⁰Richard T. Buckler quoted in the *Congressional Record*, May 13, 1936, May 27, 1936 and May 10, 1938, copies in the Richard T. Buckler Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Richard T. Buckler Papers].

⁵¹Letter of Arthur W. Mitchell to Richard T. Buckler, March 19, 1936, Richard T. Buckler Papers, Box 1.

appointed a deputy commissioner of insurance in 1935. Johnson served only one term in Congress however, and died shortly thereafter.⁵²

Henry G. Teigan had long been one of the pivotal members of the farmer-labor movement. Teigan – originally from Iowa – had gravitated to North Dakota to teach school as a young man, and once there he had become involved with the Socialist Party. When Townley’s NPL crusade had reached a critical mass in North Dakota in 1915, Teigan had abandoned the Socialist Party and had become a leader within the NPL. Teigan subsequently moved to St. Paul in 1917 and he had served as the secretary for the National Non-Partisan League from 1916 to 1923. As the Farmer-Labor Party rose to prominence in 1923, he left the waning NPL and served as secretary to Senator Magnus Johnson until 1925. From 1925 until 1933, Teigan had been an active newspaper writer and editor promoting the Farmer-Labor cause. In 1933, he had been elected to the state Senate, but had continued to be a chief writer and editor of the party’s *Farmer-Labor Leader* publication in the 1930s. Olson’s death in 1936 brought Lundeen into the Senate race and created a vacancy in the Third District for Teigan, who ran as a Farmer-Labor candidate there and won the election. While in Congress, Teigan authored several significant political tracts. One of these advocated public ownership of the iron and steel industry. The other was based on statements he had made on the floor of the House on August 16, 1937, which called for the creation of a national Farmer-Labor Party. Teigan would also later become more outspoken in his support of Spanish republicans, signaling his alignment with the leftist side of the party.⁵³

⁵²“JOHNSON, Dewey W. (1899-1941)” in *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=J000125>, accessed September 14, 2015.

⁵³Henry G. Teigan, “Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party has record of service in behalf of farmers and workers: national Farmer-Labor Party a necessity: remarks of Hon. Henry Teigan of Minnesota, in the House of

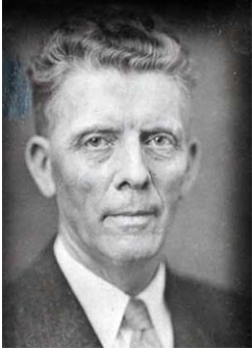


Figure 30. Henry G. Teigan in 1936. Teigan had a long history of working behind the scenes for the Non-Partisan League and then the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota. Lundeen's assumption of Olson's Senate candidacy in 1936 provided Teigan the opportunity to run for Congress himself. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Teigan reflected a considerable degree of connection to Moscow-inspired leftist politics, going so far as to praise the Soviet Union in the 1930s. His views in this regard were apparently known to others as well. In October 1937, Teigan was invited to contribute an article to the Soviet English-language periodical *Soviet Russia Today* as part of its celebration of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the USSR.⁵⁴ The same month, Teigan praised the Soviet Union in writing, stating that:

. . . greater progress has been made in economics, science, art and in education generally [by the USSR] than has ever been made by any nation during a period many times as great.⁵⁵

Teigan also maintained a close connection to Howard Y. Williams, who by 1937 was connected to the decidedly leftist National Farmer-Labor Political Federation. Williams had been one of the main architects of the controversial 1934 Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party platform. Williams remained a close confidant of Teigan's even after Teigan won election in 1936 and served as a Representative in the House. In some cases, Teigan referred persons in

Representatives, Monday, August 16, 1937." Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1937; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 250.

⁵⁴Letter of Jessica Smith (editor, *Soviet Russia Today*) to Henry Teigan, October 2, 1937, Henry G. Teigan Papers, Box 19, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, Minnesota [hereafter Henry Teigan Papers].

⁵⁵Letter of Henry Teigan to Corliss Lamont, October 4, 1937, Henry Teigan Papers, Box 19.

various states outside Minnesota to contact Williams directly apparently as part of a wider campaign to seed farmer-labor movements in other states such as Ohio.⁵⁶

Teigan also defended the Spanish republican government against accusations of being communist, pointing out that very few of the republic's deputies were overtly communist (he often cited this number as being sixteen). Teigan also defended the Spanish republicans in 1938 against charges by persons in America who were concerned about republican attacks against the Spanish church. Teigan countered such pleas by denouncing the Franco forces as being "Moorish" (since Franco had launched his uprising using a Spanish division based in Spanish Morocco).⁵⁷ Even so, despite his defense of the Spanish republican cause, Teigan also pointedly rejected the idea of boosting the American armed forces, stating in 1938 that he opposed the "proposed increase of naval and military expenditures."⁵⁸

Paul J. Kvale continued in his role as a Congressional Representative from the Seventh District in the northwestern section of the state, easily winning re-election in 1936. However, Kvale's political activity declined significantly starting in early 1936, and this lack of congressional activity lasted into 1937. Between April and June 1937, Kvale missed a majority of votes in the House. Kvale became more active starting in August, when a bill – which he supported – to make the Pipestone site in southwest Minnesota a national monument was passed, and Kvale celebrated the bill's passage by smoking a "peacepipe" with the Speaker of the House in front of photographers. In early 1938, Kvale once again became more politically active in Congress and his voting record percentage improved

⁵⁶Letter of Henry Teigan to William Black, October 2, 1937; Letter of Henry Teigan to Howard Y. Williams, October 2, 1937; Letter of Henry Teigan to Thomas S. Wright, November 16, 1937, Henry Teigan Papers, Box 19.

⁵⁷Teigan wrote a number of letters in February 1938 defending the Spanish republicans, Henry Teigan Papers, Box 22.

⁵⁸Letter of Henry Teigan to Roswell P. Barnes, February 15, 1938, Henry Teigan Papers, Box 22.

considerably.⁵⁹ However, his campaign in 1938 was less enthusiastic than in years past. One of his campaign ads which ran in a local newspaper, *The Hendricks Pioneer*, was a small print ad buried on page two, well below ads for other (much less prominent) races. Kvale would be defeated in the 1938 election and would never return to public life after that.⁶⁰

Henrik Shipstead continued in his role as Minnesota's senior Senator in the late 1930s, caucusing with the Republicans in the Senate and continuing to speak out in favor of farm and labor causes. He also continued to oppose American involvement in international affairs, even as war in Europe loomed in the late 1930s. Even after war had broken out, Shipstead continued to state that "I am opposed to the United States mixing into European politics."⁶¹ Also, the question of Shipstead's possible sympathies for anti-Semitism in 1940 might be raised by a letter forwarded to him by fellow Senator Ernest Lundeen in July 1940. The letter in question came from a constituent in Hinckley, Minnesota who openly complained about the appointment of a "Jewish communist" in the Selective Service arm there, and the anti-Semitic tone of the letter is unmistakable. Shipstead's reaction to the letter is unknown, however the purpose of the letter being forwarded to Shipstead is at least somewhat suspicious, and Lundeen's commentary on the letter is laconic and uncritical of the its content.⁶²

⁵⁹Sally J. Southwick, *Building on a Borrowed Past: Place and Identity in Pipestone, Minnesota* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 107; see also Paul Kvale's record on www.GovTrack.us, https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/paul_kvale/406503, accessed September 5, 2014.

⁶⁰"Re-Elect An Experienced Man on His Record – Paul John Kvale to Congress – Vote the Farmer-Labor Ticket," *The Hendricks Pioneer*, Nov. 4, 1938, 2.

⁶¹Letter of Henrik Shipstead to C. C. Ludwig, Henrik Shipstead Papers, Box 5, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Shipstead Papers].

⁶²Letter of Ernest Lundeen to Henrik Shipstead, July 17, 1940; Letter of M. G. Newman to Ernest Lundeen, July 13, 1940, Shipstead Papers, Box 6.

After his harrowing primary challenge in 1934, Shipstead seems to have permanently turned his back on the Farmer-Labor Party, however. By 1939, Shipstead had cut any ties between himself and the Minnesota-based party. His official switch to the Republican Party in August 1940 made front page news, yet at the same time, the reaction was muted since it had long been anticipated that he would make this change of political allegiance. Shipstead was unmoved by criticism that he had deserted the cause of the underdog, telling one critic that he would have “continued loyalty to the interests of the common people” despite his party switch.⁶³ Shipstead’s rate of absenteeism in the Senate varied greatly in the years between 1936 and 1940. There were some months when he did not miss any votes, and other months when he was absent up to 50% of the time. Between 1936 and 1940, he did not author any significant lasting pieces of federal legislation, and also became a more outspoken critic of President Roosevelt.⁶⁴

Instead, it was the junior Senator, Ernest Lundeen, who became one of the most visible Farmer-Labor figures in Congress between 1937 and 1940. Lundeen had been selected as the replacement Senate candidate for the Farmer-Labor Party upon Floyd B. Olson’s death in August 1936. Like many other Farmer-Labor candidates in the 1936 election, he had won his office easily. Lundeen had long been a champion of agrarian causes and was critical of American military intervention and internationalist policy. Lundeen had enjoyed a long political career as a Republican before switching to the Farmer-Labor Party. As a Republican in Congress in 1917, he had voted against America’s entry into the war, and this stand against military intervention overseas not only fit in well with the Farmer-Labor

⁶³Letter of Henrik Shipstead to Everett E. Rorer, Shipstead Papers, Box 6.

⁶⁴“Henrik Shipstead” on www.GovTrack.us:

https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/henrik_shipstead/409863, accessed September 4, 2015; see also Martin Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota* (Chicago, IL: Packard and Company, 1940), 132, 138-140.

Party's isolationist outlook, but would also be a lasting stance for him personally. Lundeen was thus strongly aligned with the Lindbergh-inspired, rural-agrarian wing of the party.⁶⁵

Although Lundeen and Teigan were from opposite wings of the party, they authored several important tracts in this period which placed them as the intellectual co-leaders of the farmer-labor movement on the national level in this period. Teigan authored several pamphlets of significance, including *Public Ownership of the Iron and Steel Industry* (1937), which advocated for precisely what its title suggested. In August 1937, Teigan publicly praised the record of the Farmer-Labor Party in the Congressional Record and called for the creation of a national third party along the same political lines. This idea had been floated before. In fact, Lundeen had supported a national third party movement earlier. In 1936, Lundeen had actively encouraged the third party candidacy of North Dakota Representative William Lemke. Lemke – a Republican sympathetic to Farmer-Labor policy – had authored a farm mortgage relief bill in 1934 that had eventually been rejected by President Roosevelt. Lundeen was forced to abandon his support of Lemke during the 1936 state party convention however, when – as already mentioned – in exchange for supporting Roosevelt for President, Lundeen was granted the party's endorsement for his Senate campaign. Lundeen was also a consistent and outspoken critic of American interventionism, even to the point of casting suspicion on the British and favoring Nazi Germany.⁶⁶

Lundeen's activity and influence waned after the 1938 general election. Like many other Farmer-Laborites, he may have sensed a permanent decline in the party's appeal due to their stunning losses that year – and possibly his own chances for re-election in 1942.

⁶⁵"Ernest Lundeen" entry in the Minnesota State Legislature Archive:
<http://www.leg.mn/archive/LegDB/Articles/13717LMMemorial.pdf>, accessed January 6, 2014.

⁶⁶William K. Shearer, *Minnesota's Farmer Labor Party* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1997 [originally published in *The California Statesman*, 1997-1999], 4.

Lundeen's congressional voting participation reached a peak of inactivity between early 1939 and mid-1940, when – like Kvale had in 1937 – he missed a majority of congressional votes.⁶⁷

Even so, Lundeen spent his last months in office firmly opposed to American intervention in the growing war in Europe – so much so that allegations of pro-Germanism were eventually leveled against him. In January 1940, Lundeen demonstrated his suspicion of British intent when he accused Lord Beaverbrook of misrepresenting Britain's ability to pay off debt to the United States.⁶⁸ In March 1940 (well after the war in Europe had begun), Lundeen continued in his role as one of the Senate's most visible isolationists, calling for "strict neutrality" and for continued trade with Germany. Lundeen was also associated during this time with the German-American Commerce Board, a shadowy organization with Nazi ties. In early August 1940, Lundeen even called for the creation of a national third party dedicated to American neutrality.⁶⁹

However, Lundeen's outspoken activism was not to last. He was killed along with 24 others in a plane crash just 36 miles west of Washington, D.C., on August 31, 1940. The plane had been flying through a heavy rain storm, and had been reported to be flying in the wrong direction just before it crashed.⁷⁰ Questions were later raised about Lundeen's death. Some even contended that Lundeen had been under investigation for his German ties. The

⁶⁷Ernest Lundeen's record on www.GovTrack.us:

https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/ernest_lundeen/407000, accessed November 7, 2014.

⁶⁸"Lundeen Disputes Beaverbrook On Debt: Senator Insists British Should Pay by Transferring Colonies," *New York Times*, January 8, 1940.

⁶⁹"Lundeen Wants Neutrality Party," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, August 1, 1940, 2; see also "Lundeen Issues Call for Anti-War Party To Be Formed in Chicago by Farmers, Labor," *New York Times*, August 2, 1940.

⁷⁰"Sen. Lundeen, 24 Others Killed As Airliner Crashes in Virginia," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, September 1, 1940.

Justice Department denied this rumor on September 17.⁷¹ But in fact, the FBI had indeed targeted Lundeen for his German connections, especially his ties with the suspicious pro-Nazi figure, George Sylvester Viereck. An official FBI investigation concluded in 1942 officially accused Lundeen as being under Nazi influence in the months before his death. By this time, America was embroiled in the war and the public had little sympathy for any pro-German views.⁷²



Figure 31. Ernest Lundeen casting his ballot in 1936. Lundeen had enjoyed a considerable political career before moving from the Republican Party to the Farmer-Labor Party. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

It should be noted that the congressional Farmer-Labor delegation as a whole between 1936 and 1940 was limited in its ability to influence legislation and national policy. Because of their minority status, the Minnesota Farmer-Laborites in Congress were often at a disadvantage in terms of committee appointments and securing broad support for their proposed legislation. After 1933, when Roosevelt's New Deal Democrats took control of both houses of Congress, the Democrats dominated committee leadership positions and appointments, and often gave secondary appointments to Republicans as a matter of political necessity. Lacking sufficient numbers to form a caucus of significant influence, the Farmer-Labor congressional representatives were thus often overlooked in regards to committee

⁷¹"Lundeen Investigation Denied," *New York Times*, September 17, 1940, 4.

⁷²Glen Yeadon and John Hawkins, *The Nazi Hydra in America: Suppressed History of a Century* (San Diego, CA: Progressive Press, 2008), 151-152; see also Albert Eisele, "Death of senator from Minnesota still shrouded in mystery," *MinnPost*, September, 3, 2009.

assignments. Even so, Paul Kvale managed to stay on the Military Affairs committee and Henrik Shipstead's seat on the Foreign Relations committee (a post which he had held since 1923) remained secure. And although the Farmer-Labor contingent in Congress was often sympathetic with the New Deal agenda in general, they often proposed competing legislation – typically to the left of Roosevelt's stands. These initiatives rarely had any significant support outside of the Farmer-Labor congressional caucus however, and were typically overshadowed by Democratic legislation instead.⁷³

The Decline of the Farmer-Labor Party

Despite their overwhelming victory in the 1936 election – or perhaps because of it – there was considerable conflict starting in 1937 both within the Farmer-Labor Party and within a number of labor organizations in Minnesota associated with it. This conflict was the outgrowth of years of disagreement between liberal reformers on one hand and leftist radicals and their urban-labor allies on the other. Floyd B. Olson had managed – with great effort and skill – to keep these groups united in the Farmer-Labor coalition. However, Elmer Benson apparently lacked this same ability to unify, and was less willing to compromise politically. As a result, this split between urban-labor radicals and rural-agrarian liberals became more pronounced over time. Within the party, this schism was chiefly centered on loyalty to either Elmer Benson or Hjalmar Petersen and their respective political views.⁷⁴ Petersen's supporters tended to be associated with the rural-agrarian voter base. Benson's supporters

⁷³Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 168-169; see also Shearer, *Minnesota's Farmer Labor Party*, 7.

⁷⁴*Twentieth Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project: Interview with Irwin Herness*, Part 1 – at ca. 12 minutes, 30 seconds – the subject discusses competition between Petersen and Benson. Minnesota Historical Society: <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display.php?irn=10362550>, accessed October 20, 2014.

were found more within the Farmer-Labor Association (FLA) and the urban-labor sector – centered chiefly in the urban and industrial areas. This division in the party’s ranks would last until the end of the party’s days, and was noted later (in 1944) by Hubert H. Humphrey:

The Farmer-Labor party [sic] was divided between the traditional agricultural Populists and the left wing, more urban Marxists. The first group, [was] led by former Governor Hjalmar Petersen . . . They were honest progressive, principled people . . . Elmer Benson [was] the leader of the left wing Farmer-Laborites . . .⁷⁵

Benson’s close association with the urban-labor wing – some of whom were indeed radicals – did not help his efforts to portray himself as a non-extremist. For his own part, Governor Benson apparently misread this situation in 1937, and believed that an alliance with leftist (and even communist) figures was an acceptable part of a ruling left-wing coalition. As a result, the party under his leadership pursued more extreme policies in the name of economic justice.⁷⁶

However, Benson’s urban-labor base had fractures as well. The party’s urban-labor supporters went through a series of public conflicts in 1937 and much of this conflict occurred within the labor constituencies of Minneapolis. Most of this struggle was due to competition between different factions of labor activists (independent “Trotskyites” versus Communists directed by the Comintern), and/or between the American Federation of Labor (AFL) groups versus the newly formed Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). In other words, these factions often competed for power and influence and as such came into increasing conflict with each other. This competition for control of organized labor leadership within the city eventually led to the intervention of Governor Benson. In

⁷⁵Hubert H. Humphrey (Norman Sherman, editor), *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), 84-85.

⁷⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 245.

September 1937, Benson met with almost seventy union leaders in the state capitol (the state legislature was out of session at the time) in an attempt to instill some degree of unity.

However, Benson was unable to quell the disputes among these labor groups. As a result, Benson himself also became targeted by some urban-labor leaders in Minneapolis, who even alleged “communist” control of the FLA within Hennepin County in the *Minnesota Union Advocate*.⁷⁷

These struggles within the ranks of labor also spilled into city politics in 1937, the most significant instance being the mayoral election in Minneapolis. The serving Farmer-Labor Mayor, Thomas Latimer, had created something of his own political machine within the city and was apparently too cozy with the Citizens’ Alliance for the state party’s tastes. Disapproving of the Latimer regime, Benson personally encouraged party regular Kenneth C. Haycraft – a former college football star, securities investigator and confidant of the late Governor Olson – to run against Latimer in the primary. The race was bitter. The “Latimerites” accused Haycraft and his supporters of being communists, and the race fell largely along labor group lines. Haycraft fought back with assurances of his opposition to communism and accused Mayor Latimer of cozying up to anti-union forces (who had even used the police to break up a strike in 1935). The race reached its climax in May-June 1937 and Haycraft won the primary. However, the red-baiting strategy that had been employed by Latimer and his supporters was now taken up to a large degree by Haycraft’s Republican opponent, George Leach. The “red” label stuck to Haycraft, and Leach and the Republicans re-took the mayor’s office in the special election. The Farmer-Labor Party had failed their first post-1936 election test, and had done so within one of their erstwhile strongest bases of

⁷⁷Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 142-145.

electoral support. Such factionalism would be an indicator of things to come. Haycraft's undeserved label of having communist ties would haunt him until the McCarthy era of the 1950s.⁷⁸

Disagreements over American foreign-policy also caused significant divisions within the party as well. Traditionally, the agrarian revolt had always had a domestic focus and had been typically isolationist in its leanings. Many elements of the party's urban-labor wing had a long tradition of associating with international socialism, which typically had a pacifist – if not isolationist – viewpoint as well. However, leftist sympathies began to change in the mid-1930s, when the situation in Europe increasingly appeared to be a struggle between the rise of fascism *vis-à-vis* the communist and socialist parties (and the Soviet Union). Many labor-oriented leftists – especially those with a communist or socialist bent – began to advocate greater interventionism on the part of the United States in the mid-1930s. This is clearly seen in John T. Bernard's position on the Spanish Civil War in 1937. This trend was – once again – part of an ideological struggle between the urban-labor left and the more traditional rural populist agrarian faction. Tensions over this issue within the movement only became greater from 1937 to 1939 as war became more imminent, exacerbating the party's factionalism, since the traditional rural-agrarian wing continued to see no need for intervention while the urban-labor wing advocated for a more active resistance to fascism.⁷⁹

Governor Benson himself later weighed in on the issue. Benson professed that there were a wide variety of views within the party in the 1930s on American foreign policy and that the issue was complicated since “isolationism” could mean any position from pro-

⁷⁸William Millikan, “The Red-Baiting of Kenneth C. Haycraft: A Minnesota All American,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Winter, 1994), 180-185.

⁷⁹Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 196, 228; see also Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 141; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 248, 250.

German sentiment to complete neutrality. Benson himself took a strong stand for neutrality and isolationism in 1937, delivering a speech titled “Mobilizing for Peace” in which he labeled war the “Great Illusion” and claimed that it offered only misery and destruction. Benson further encouraged his young audience to organize for peace as a means to preventing another war – or American intervention in another war.⁸⁰ Some of the more leftist figures within the Farmer-Labor Party (such as Teigan and Bernard) favored more American support for the anti-fascist cause before 1939 as a means of preventing fascist aggression in Europe.⁸¹ But many others in the party – notably Shipstead and Lundeen – were suspicious of foreign entanglement and hostile towards greater American involvement with Europe. This sentiment reflected the rural Midwestern isolationism that had been expressed earlier by Charles Lindbergh, Sr. Both Lundeen and Shipstead would remain committed isolationists until their final days in office.⁸²

The 1938 Election

One of the most striking aspects of the 1938 election was the transition of the Republican Party from its “Old Guard” status towards a more progressive version of Republicanism. This trend was not without struggle, nor was it entirely comprehensive. Leading this vanguard of change within the party was the Dakota County Attorney, Harold Stassen. Stassen was an unlikely Republican figurehead. When he was in his twenties, he had organized and led the Young Republicans organization in Minnesota. A chief aim of the group was to reform the state Republican platform by embracing the popular planks which

⁸⁰Elmer Benson, “Mobilizing for Peace” speech text, 1937, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 3.

⁸¹Elmer Benson, “Politics in My Lifetime,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Winter, 1980), 155-156.

⁸²George W. Garlid, “The Antiwar Dilemma of the Farmer-Labor Party,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 40, No. 8 (Winter, 1967), 369-371.

the Farmer-Labor Party had used to woo voters away from the Republicans in the first place. This experience in leadership had made Stassen an effective speaker and organizer, and – at the tender age of thirty-one – he decided to challenge the party establishment and run in the party’s gubernatorial primary. He won the primary race, and then turned his attention to the Farmer-Labor opposition.⁸³

In the meantime, the rivalry between Hjalmar Petersen and Elmer Benson started to reach a boiling point. Petersen – a Railroad and Warehouse Commissioner and a prominent party leader – continued to face significant opposition from within his own party’s leadership. He was even publicly censured by the FLA state committee in January 1938 for his statements against Benson. Petersen responded with a very public speech promising greater cooperation between the Farmer-Labor Party and business and industry should he be elected governor. He also used the speech as an opportunity to attack communism within the party and implied that Governor Benson and his administration were allowing such infiltration to occur. On February 5, the Fourth Ward Farmer-Labor Club of Minneapolis passed a resolution publicly denouncing Petersen and accusing him of collaborating with the party’s enemies.⁸⁴ Also, just before the March convention, some of Petersen’s supporters within the party were threatened with expulsion at local meetings. However, Petersen’s public denunciations of Benson’s leadership found him new friends. Throughout February, Petersen received a number of letters from prominent Minnesota business leaders

⁸³Theodore Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1975), 536-537.

⁸⁴Petersen kept a record of his own denunciation from the Fourth Ward meeting, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 10.

encouraging him to challenge Benson for the party's endorsement.⁸⁵ At the state convention in March 1938, Benson appeared to tack more towards the political center. At least part of this maneuvering was done in order to refute some of the more extreme charges that had been made by Petersen in the previous two months. As such, the convention adopted more conservative planks in its platform in 1938 as compared to 1934 or even 1936.⁸⁶

Figure 32. Elmer Benson giving a speech in 1938. Benson would face a serious challenge from his rival, Hjalmar Petersen, in the 1938 gubernatorial primary. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



There were also some Farmer-Labor efforts to recruit Democrats to their cause in the 1938 election. This represented a shift, since until 1938 it had been the Democrats who had typically approached the Farmer-Laborites with such proposals. However, despite their poor showing in the 1936 election, the Democrats showed little interest in getting involved in the ongoing factional dispute within the Farmer-Labor Party, and no agreements were reached between the two parties in 1938. In the meantime, the Republicans had experienced their own internal struggles, but had then decided on and backed their rather moderate gubernatorial candidate, Harold Stassen. This was a significant shift, since Stassen was considered to be young, dynamic and relatively progressive. Many Old Guard Republicans did not regard him

⁸⁵Letter of Steve Gadler to Hjalmar Petersen, March 21, 1938, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 10; this was one of a series of letters which appeared to be part of a coordinated campaign encouraging Petersen to challenge Benson.

⁸⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 255, 259.

as being politically experienced or trustworthy, but there was no doubt that they would vote for him in November 1938.⁸⁷

Petersen and Benson clashed openly in a bitter primary campaign between April and June of 1938. Petersen accused Benson and his cohorts of being party hacks, allowing communist infiltration, abusing patronage, and of ruining the image and effectiveness of the Farmer-Labor Party. Benson sometimes lost his temper on the campaign trail and came under increasing attack outside of his own party. Petersen had much less support within the party organizational structure itself, but did have support from many of its outstate members and even some Republicans – who may have genuinely backed him as a more moderate figure, or may have simply encouraged him to run as a means of splitting the farmer-labor movement. In any case, Petersen’s campaign was poorly run and had little support within the party cells – but did have some significant Republican donors. Petersen also accepted the support of some anti-Semitic figures in Minnesota, who supported Petersen’s statements which alleged close ties between the party’s “Mexican Generals” and communists. Petersen himself typically refrained from making such statements directly and even publicly disavowed anti-Semitic rhetoric towards the end of his primary campaign. However, he benefitted directly from such sentiments, which appeared to have some sway in the state’s rural German and Scandinavian communities.⁸⁸

The Farmer-Labor primary contest attracted the most voters in 1938, garnering 55% of the total primary vote. The governor’s race within the party was very close. Initial results seemed to indicate that Petersen had won, however, late tallies coming in from Duluth and

⁸⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 261-262.

⁸⁸Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 153-160; see also Berman, “Political Antisemitism in Minnesota,” 253-255.

the Iron Range eventually put Benson in the lead. Benson won over Petersen in the primary, but his victory was narrow, with only 51.4% of the vote. Such results were too slim to demonstrate party unity. Benson's victory would thus leave the party bitter and divided. Stassen had won the Republican primary with a 47% plurality - an impressive showing considering that he was running against two established leaders (including George Leach, the current mayor of Minneapolis). Even so, Stassen had not alienated his party base and they would back him in the general election. Furthermore, Stassen's wide network of Young Republicans and his appeals to party unity went a long ways in shoring up his base as well.⁸⁹

Petersen and his supporters were bitter at their loss. A few of Petersen's chief supporters (and even his campaign manager, J. Lawrence McLeod) defected to Harold Stassen's campaign - viewing Stassen as a more palatable candidate than Benson. Sensing the danger of party disunity, Benson's supporters desperately reached out to Petersen, and asked him for his public endorsement of Benson. After a long period of entreaty, Petersen finally made a statement on September 27 - which was dull and unenthusiastic - and in effect a non-endorsement for Benson. Petersen stated that he would "remain silent in the general election . . ." and would not "attempt to dictate . . . to the members of our party." In other words, the voters themselves should decide the election according to their best judgment. Many would decide that Stassen was the better choice instead of Benson.⁹⁰

⁸⁹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 263-265, 270.

⁹⁰Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 163; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 266-267.



Figure 33. Hjalmar Petersen in 1938. Petersen had tried to capture the leadership of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1938, but was defeated by Benson in a bitter primary campaign for the party's gubernatorial nomination. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Harold Stassen began his general campaign bid by advocating “enlightened capitalism” – a vision of government which steered to the right of the Farmer-Labor platform, but which also embraced their common sense reforms that had proven to be popular, such as the farm mortgage moratorium. However, Stassen’s Republican supporters also charged their opponents with being communists and repeated the charge that Benson and the Farmer-Labor Party had become corrupt over patronage. Stassen further contended that the Republican Party under his leadership was better suited to provide meaningful reform for the state’s bureaucracy. One of the main planks in Stassen's platform was the promise of a merit system for the state civil service. This plank was designed to combat the party machine of the Farmer-Labor Party and the patronage that they had doled out since the early 1930s. Anti-Semitism also became an aspect of the Stassen campaign and seemed to take its cues from Petersen’s primary challenge to Benson. Indeed, as noted earlier, Benson (like Olson had before him) relied on a number of leading Jewish figures within the party for support. Benson was closely advised by Abe Harris, an editor of the *Minnesota Leader*, and Benson’s personal executive secretary, Roger Rutchick, was Jewish as well. Other Jewish figures within the party had been prominent in their support of Benson in his primary campaign

again Petersen. Such figures would now become the focus of the opposition's anti-Semitic rhetoric.⁹¹

Raymond P. Chase – an enduring Republican smear artist who had long dogged the Farmer-Labor Party – published and distributed the booklet *Are They Communists or Catspaws?: A Red Baiting Article* in September 1938 (printed by an anonymous publisher). The piece was one of the most sensationalistic tracts ever to be authored in modern Minnesota political history. In it, Chase subtly pointed out that many of the Farmer-Labor Party's figures in Benson's inner circle were Jewish. He also suggested that Earl Browder of the Communist Party had given his endorsement to the Farmer-Labor Party as being the vehicle under which communists and socialists could unite. Chase quoted Browder as saying that: "Our fundamental conception of the Farmer-Labor Party is that it will include also the Socialist and Communist Parties."⁹² Chase further claimed that the ties between Benson and his inner circle and the communist movement were significant and undeniable – despite Benson's assurances to the contrary. The booklet was not a cheap rag – it was a well-designed, attractive, glossy-paged publication that included many pictures and made use of contemporary font and style elements.⁹³ It was widely distributed during the late part of the general campaign – especially to rural and small town regions. Even so, Stassen himself – as Petersen had earlier – publicly repudiated anti-Semitism as a campaign tactic, yet Stassen benefitted from those who supported him and had no compunction about using such approaches to further their candidate.⁹⁴

⁹¹Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 147; see also Berman, "Political Anti-Semitism in Minnesota," 256-258.

⁹²Ray P. Chase, *Are They Communists or Catspaws? A Red Baiting Article*, [no listed publisher] 1938, 22.

⁹³Ray P. Chase, *Are They Communists or Catspaws?*, passim.

⁹⁴Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 163-164.

In many ways, the 1938 primary and general campaigns represented the highpoint of political anti-Semitism in Minnesota. It should be noted that Minnesota society itself was significantly anti-Semitic in the 1930s. Jews were often barred from membership of many prominent organizations, including the main social clubs and even the AAA. In the 1930s, isolationist views took on an increasing anti-Semitic tone, emphasizing a lack of sympathy for Jews in Germany under Hitler's rule. In 1940, Charles Lindbergh, Jr. would make some shockingly anti-Semitic public statements, which had their roots in the rural populist wing of the movement which Lindbergh's father had helped to found in 1918. Minnesota would struggle with this issue even throughout the 1940s, and it was not until the efforts of Democratic Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey to ensure civil rights for Jews after 1945 that progress was made. It was during the 1938 campaign that anti-Semitism was used most obviously as a political tool – both by Petersen in his primary campaign against Benson, and then later by supporters of Harold Stassen during the general election.⁹⁵

Benson's main campaign strategy during the general election was to embrace Roosevelt's New Deal with a series of like-minded slogans that tacked back towards the moderate left-of-center. Benson received a cool reception from the White House, however. The Roosevelt administration considered Benson to be an unstable political liability. The Roosevelt Democrats were in the midst of their own difficult mid-term national campaign and apparently did not want to expend any additional political capital – or risk any additional controversy – to support Benson. Benson's rhetoric during the 1938 campaign was moderate

⁹⁵Berman, "Political Antisemitism in Minnesota," 256-257; see also Keillor, 156.

in tone and avoided radical proposals or any talk of state socialism (a technique commonly used by Farmer-Labor candidates when their electoral support seemed uncertain).⁹⁶

Benson also took on the label of “liberal” during the 1938 general election, and he often championed and re-defined the terms “liberals” and “liberalism” in his campaign speeches:

Liberals seek to liberate the human spirit and personality from artificial shackles of one kind and another . . . to liberate – that is the aim of liberal government . . . Liberals in government are chiefly concerned with having government aid the people in today’s efforts to liberate themselves from want and insecurity. They know this cannot be done except by reforming the unjust economic arrangements which have resulted in a repeated lack of balance between the peoples’ power to produce goods, and their power to buy what they can produce.⁹⁷

In an effort to tack back towards the center and assure business owners of his belief in small free enterprise, Benson’s campaign sent a form letter to a number of small business owners. In the letter, Benson proclaimed that he had no intention of ever imposing a sales tax on retail sales within the state. Benson further claimed that “chain stores” were a common enemy of small merchants and the farmer-labor coalition, and that the real focus of any proposed state tax increases under his administration was directed at wealthy individuals and larger corporate entities.⁹⁸

Stassen effectively campaigned as a moderate-progressive Republican figure. He aligned himself with “responsible” labor leaders in the AFL (a technique used on the national level by other Republican candidates that year) and actively courted the labor vote by campaigning in factories and other industrial locations. He also embraced some Farmer-

⁹⁶Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 268.

⁹⁷Elmer Benson, 1938 campaign speech, excerpted in Youngdale, *Third Party Footprints*, 328-330.

⁹⁸Elmer Benson, “A Message To Independent Businessmen,” October 1, 1938, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 11.

Labor measures of the past few years which had proven to be popular, such as a ban on using the state's National Guard against labor and an extension of the farm mortgage moratorium. Stassen further emphasized the need for a clean broom to sweep clean the "machine" of years of Farmer-Labor state domination, while his supporters played upon social conservatives' fears of communism and other associated evils.⁹⁹

Despite his supposed tack towards the center, Benson's campaign was less effective than Stassen's and had little mainstream appeal. Benson was endorsed by the CIO – an emerging rival to the AFL, and considered in that era to be the more radical of the two groups. Benson was hurt by covert communist support for his campaign, and his opponents used this against him. The general election results in November 1938 represented a great shift in voter sentiment from 1936. The Farmer-Labor candidates were defeated in every major state race, often polling only between about 28% and 33% of the vote. Stassen was elected governor with almost 60% of the popular vote – a figure which trumped Benson's victory two years earlier (as well as Olson's landslide in 1930). Republican candidates won other state offices with either majorities or pluralities. The Democratic candidates polled very poorly, ranging from only about 6% to 14% of the vote, depending on the candidate and the office.¹⁰⁰

The election also revealed the significant trend that Farmer-Labor support had dropped substantially in the state's main urban areas in 1938. Stassen and the Republicans earned a majority of votes in Minneapolis and St. Paul – previously, the biggest stronghold of the Farmer-Labor Party. Even St. Louis County (the Duluth area) voted for Stassen – a

⁹⁹Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 151-152.

¹⁰⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 271-274.

significant electoral turnabout from 1936.¹⁰¹ This shift in urban support away from the Farmer-Labor Party and towards the Republicans meant that – save for some future hoped-for dramatic resurgence – the demise of the party was now a real possibility.

In the congressional races, Teigan, Kvale, Johnson and Bernard were all defeated. The Farmer-Labor Party now maintained only one congressional member in the House of Representatives: Richard T. Buckler in the Ninth District. Henrik Shipstead and Ernest Lundeen remained the state's two Farmer-Labor Senators, since there had been no Senate election in 1938. However, the political winds were now starting to blow against the Farmer-Labor Party, and this would affect both Shipstead and Lundeen. The allegiance of Shipstead – long both the party's icon and pariah – was about to officially change. Lundeen would soon enter his least effective period in office and shortly thereafter become a highly visible isolationist, much in the image of Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., whom he pointedly admired.¹⁰²

The election results of 1938 were also shaped in part by the nation's overall political mood, which had turned away – at least a certain degree – from an enthusiastic embrace of the New Deal and interventionist government. The Great Depression had made a comeback in the years 1937-1938. Known as the "Roosevelt Recession," it represented the New Deal's first obvious failure to notably improve the nation's economy and the voters had noticed. Nationally, in the congressional elections, the Republicans picked up seven Senate seats and eighty House seats – a significant change in power. Roosevelt himself would refrain from implementing any further New Deal policies in early 1939.¹⁰³ It should also be noted that

¹⁰¹"Stassen Wins by Landslide," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 9, 1938.

¹⁰²Ernest Lundeen, "A Farmer-Labor Party for the Nation" [pamphlet, 1936?], Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 274.

¹⁰³Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 305-309.

fledgling Farmer-Labor parties in the neighboring states of Iowa and Wisconsin also suffered severe and irreversible electoral defeats in 1938.¹⁰⁴

The Republicans won all of the major state offices and control of the state legislature in 1938. This included the election of former Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist – the controversial figure who twenty years earlier had done so much to cause the farmer-labor coalition to come into being in the first place. Burnquist was elected to the office of State Attorney General with a plurality – a post which he would hold until 1955. The Democrats’ hopes for 1938 had – once again – been dashed. Although the Democrats had continued to demonstrate that they could not gain electoral majorities in most of the state races, the decline of the Farmer-Labor Party after 1938 would strengthen the Democrats’ position and make the possibility of an eventual fusion between the Democrats and the Farmer-Labor Party more of a reality.¹⁰⁵

In the weeks after their decisive electoral loss, many of the Farmer-Labor Party’s supporters and figures expressed shock, if not disbelief. After his loss in the governor’s race, Elmer Benson received many letters and telegrams from supporters – both from inside the state and nationwide – expressing shock and disappointment at his defeat. Benson himself seemed to be in a state of denial about the party’s long-term prospects. In a letter to Joseph Schlossberg of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America dated November 15, 1938, Benson lamented the election results but also referred to his “temporary defeat” – implying not only that he would seek office again, but that he believed in the party’s long-term chances for success. In another letter sent later in the month, Benson resolved to “build a

¹⁰⁴Hugh T. Lovin, “The Fall of Farmer-Labor Parties, 1936-1938,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Jan., 1971), 25.

¹⁰⁵Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 154-156.

finer and better Farmer-Labor organization for the future.” Benson would indeed continue to strive for political success. However after the 1938 election, the party would never attain the degree of influence that it had enjoyed earlier in the decade.¹⁰⁶

The Stassen Administration: 1939-1940

In the aftermath of the 1938 defeat, the Farmer-Labor Party and its members knew that they had been dealt a significant setback. While the party and FLA leadership attempted to salvage what they could from their stinging defeat, many rank and file members began to defect. The FLA membership immediately declined. Active recruitment efforts were largely abandoned. Many state employees stopped making their “contributions” to the party and the Association, seeing no sense in paying money to an entity which could no longer protect their jobs. In the coming months, this trend would mean the end of state employee mandated contributions to the Farmer-Labor Party and a sharp decline in the party’s finances.¹⁰⁷

Governor Stassen began implementing his program in early January 1939. He reached out to Hjalmar Petersen – possibly to woo Petersen and his supporters and further erode the base of the Farmer-Labor opposition, or possibly to stave off Petersen’s potential open political opposition. Petersen remained a major Farmer-Labor figure and his support – or acquiescence – would have been valuable to Stassen. Stassen even invited Petersen to join the Republican Party. However, Petersen – never one to easily accede to the authority of another politician – took issue with Stassen over the governor’s proposed changes to the powers of the state Railroad and Warehouse Commission (Petersen’s department). Petersen

¹⁰⁶Benson spent much of the month of November 1938 sending correspondence to his supporters, thanking them for their efforts in the election and ruminating about the next steps for the Farmer-Labor Party, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 14.

¹⁰⁷Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 276.

was also outraged over Stassen's civil service reforms which resulted in the termination of the overwhelming majority of Farmer-Labor appointees in the state bureaucracies between January and July 1939 – even though abuse of party patronage had been one of Petersen's main issues in the 1938 primary. Petersen had now found a new political cause, and he would identify Stassen from this point on as being his main political enemy (even though his feud with Benson would continue as well).¹⁰⁸



Figure 34. Governor Harold Stassen signing a bill in 1940. Stassen was a moderate Republican who challenged his own party as well as the Farmer-Labor opposition. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Stassen's inauguration signaled a definite change in state policy. For eight years, Minnesotans had been told by a sitting or incoming Farmer-Labor governor of the dangers of economic insecurity, of the need for government intervention into the economic sphere, and the anticipation of impending conflict between the governor and the legislature. Instead, Stassen emphasized reorganizing the Minnesota State government and focused mainly on civil service reform within his first months in office. In addition, Stassen enjoyed a majority in the state legislature, and had few issues selling his initiatives there. As a result, Stassen and his Republican majority had a very strong hand in crafting legislation beginning in early 1939. As promised, Stassen and the Republicans enacted significant civil service reform, creating a new state system based on merit, and implemented a very extensive state code of ethics (which remains in place to this day). However, these reforms were delayed in their

¹⁰⁸Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 172-173.

implementation and before they became fully enforced, Stassen and his allies used this transitional period to purge the state government of Farmer-Labor appointees on a massive scale. An estimated 80-90% of these workers were terminated. It was the end of the Farmer-Labor Party's patronage system on a grand scale.¹⁰⁹

Stassen's and his allies' efforts to oust Farmer-Labor figures from within the state government bureaucracy was controversial and politically motivated. Between Stassen's inauguration in January 1939 and an imposed deadline of August 1, 1939 for terminating "unqualified" state employees, almost 2,400 state employees were removed from office. Stassen often filled most of these vacated posts with Republican-leaning appointees instead. The night before the deadline (July 31), the activity in the state capitol was intense, with many persons lobbying to receive Republican appointments. The whole situation was so egregious that even the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* – no friend of the Farmer-Labor Party – denounced Stassen's "reforms" as being embarrassingly partisan.¹¹⁰

The negative effects on the Farmer-Labor Party and the FLA were immediate. Membership in both organizations had dropped sharply after the 1938 election and the anti-patronage legislation only accelerated this trend. Stassen's reforms barred state workers from participating in political campaigns as part of their jobs, using state equipment or capital to support such actions, and also banned government figures from using their office or state position to "solicit" campaign or party donations. These reforms had an immediate effect on the farmer-labor movement, since the party had grown dependent on such state employee contributions as a main source of its funding. The electoral defeat in 1938 had already soured

¹⁰⁹Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 537; see also Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 173.

¹¹⁰Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 172-173.

Farmer-Labor Party and FLA membership considerably. Now, with the gradual elimination of mandatory state employee contributions, the funding for the farmer-labor movement was cut significantly within a short period of time.¹¹¹

The defeat of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1938 also caused a crisis within the party itself. After the election, the growing schism between the leftist urban-labor and liberal rural-agrarian factions only intensified. The leftists favored continued existence as a third-party with a more hard-core leftist platform. Many of these on the left were associated with labor activists, doctrinaire socialists or communists (e.g., persons like Benson, Bernard, and Teigan). Many of the party's liberals were associated with the rural-agrarian wing of the party whose roots lay in the rural and small town regions, held a more conservative social outlook, and focused more on populist planks rather than on grand schemes of nationalization (e.g., persons like Hjalmar Petersen and Henrik Shipstead). This split was further exacerbated – not just by politics – but also by ethnic factors. The largely Scandinavian and German outstate population often looked with suspicion on the Finnish, Irish, and Jewish figures of the party located on the Iron Range or in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Indeed, some of Petersen's assaults on Benson and his supporters in 1938 seemed to have an ethnic component that was either implied or overtly stated. It has already been mentioned that Petersen had a specific interest in the German voter demographic of Minnesota, and that Vince Day was aware of the distance between the Benson leadership group and the German and Scandinavian populations in the state.¹¹²

¹¹¹Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 285.

¹¹²Keillor Steven J. "A Country Editor in Politics: Hjalmar Petersen, Minnesota Governor," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 48, No. 7 (Fall, 1983), 292; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 263; see also Berman, "Political Antisemitism in Minnesota," 261-262.

After the 1938 election, some liberals within the party increasingly began to look for other political options. For some, this meant leaning towards fusion with the Democrats in Minnesota. Others looked to the Republican Party, who seemed more than willing to accept such dissidents. Harold Stassen himself tried to encourage Hjalmar Petersen to leave the Farmer-Labor Party in 1939 and join the Republicans. Other liberal Farmer-Laborites would continue to cling to the idea of maintaining their third party movement but fretted over their party's dalliance with communists. Aware of mainstream suspicions of communist influence, the party also made attempts to – once again – purge communist elements from its ranks after the 1938 election. This continued to foster conflict and factionalism within the party. The FLA was especially rife with these kinds of struggles. The state convention in January 1939 witnessed this pattern as well, and did little to bring the wings of the movement together.¹¹³

A short time later, the Farmer-Labor Party would suffer the loss of its entire remaining congressional delegation, and this occurred without an election. In early August 1940, Henrik Shipstead officially switched to the Republican Party, and the news was noted statewide.¹¹⁴ He had long been despised by the party's leftist wing and as a Senator, he had long sat on the Republican side of the Senate chamber. After the stinging Farmer-Labor defeat in 1938, there was little reason for Shipstead to remain tied to a party which he had never fully embraced, and which had shown him considerable hostility in recent years. Shipstead later claimed that he had made his decision to leave the party in 1934 – no doubt due to the acrimony of the 1934 convention and the challenge that he had endured from Francis Shoemaker [see Chapter Five]. Shipstead himself had consistently demonstrated an

¹¹³Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 279.

¹¹⁴"Filings Close; Democrats Put In Two Slates: Shipstead Decision to Run Under GOP Banner Is Day's Highlight," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, August 2, 1940.

ability to gain more votes than almost any other Farmer-Labor candidate however, and he relied on this strength as he officially changed his party allegiance.¹¹⁵

As part of his transition to the Republican Party, Shipstead authorized a biography to be written by Martin Ross (*Shipstead of Minnesota*), which was published in 1940. The book is largely a hagiography of Shipstead and his past stances, a storied version of his personal history, and a simple theme which explained his switching parties: Shipstead was – and had always been – a strong independent, and to him, parties were merely a vehicle to house candidates. The conclusion offered by Ross was that Shipstead had switched parties because the Farmer-Laborites had drifted too far to the left, while he (Shipstead) had remained consistent in his outlook. In other words, Shipstead claimed (through Ross’s elegant prose) that it was the movement that had changed – not him. Ross was connected to Shipstead’s alma mater, Northwestern University in Chicago, and took most of the notes for the book on a train ride that he and Shipstead shared traveling from Chicago to Washington, D.C. The book would become – and still remains – the most authoritative source on Shipstead’s life up to the present. Interestingly enough, the entire work contains no source citations – however since it was authorized by Shipstead, it can be assumed that he approved of its content.¹¹⁶ All significant works on Shipstead written since 1940 have used the Ross biography to sketch out Shipstead’s early years – even though there is no documentation within the text and very little of it (if anything at all) is supported by archival materials in Shipstead’s papers.¹¹⁷

The sudden death of Farmer-Labor Senator Ernest Lundeen later that same month (on August 31) created an opening for his Senate seat. Governor Stassen ruled himself out as a

¹¹⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 278.

¹¹⁶Martin Ross, *Shipstead of Minnesota* (Chicago, IL: Packard and Company, 1940), passim.

¹¹⁷The bulk of Shipstead’s papers and archival materials date from the mid-1920s on and contain hardly anything on his life before becoming a Senator in 1923; Shipstead Papers.

candidate only several days after Lundeen's death (on September 5).¹¹⁸ Even so, the vacancy represented a chance for the Republican governor to fill the seat with a party loyalist and further chip away at the Farmer-Labor structure. Stassen appointed Joseph H. Ball, a thirty-four year old newspaperman to the Senate instead.¹¹⁹ Together with Shipstead's official defection to the Republicans on August 1, both of Minnesota's Senate seats switched from the Farmer-Labor Party to the Republican Party within a very short period of time.¹²⁰ The last Farmer-Labor Representative in Congress, Richard T. Buckler, also switched over to the Republican Party at the same time.¹²¹

As the Farmer-Labor Party lost its influence and its offices from late 1938 to 1940, its faltering condition opened up new possibilities for political alliances. Discussions between moderate Farmer-Labor figures and members of the Democratic Party were started once again to explore options for fusion. The Democratic position was now different: even though the Farmer-Labor Party had tallied nearly three times as many votes as the Democrats had in the 1938 election, the Democratic Party was now starting to become the more senior partner in the arrangement. Increasingly, liberal-moderate – and then more radical – Farmer-Labor leaders looked to fusion with the Democratic Party as being their next political move. The Democrats soon openly encouraged Farmer-Labor figures to actively join their party. Although this was only a trickle at first, the exodus had begun.¹²²

¹¹⁸“Stassen Out of Race; Minnesota Governor Not to Seek Senator Lundeen's Seat,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1940.

¹¹⁹“Newspaper Man Named As Minnesota Senator,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1940.

¹²⁰“Shipstead Bolts Farmer-Laborites; Minnesota Senator Files as Republican--Hits Third Term,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1940.

¹²¹Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 156.

¹²²Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 283.

For the Farmer-Labor Party as a whole, the years 1936 to 1940 represented a road from political opportunity (with a landslide win in the 1936 election) to political crisis (with their decisive defeat in the 1938 election). In terms of political platform and rhetorical vision, the Farmer-Labor Party had essentially outlived its usefulness, losing its “vigor and idealism” by the end of the 1930s. This was due to several factors, many of which were beyond the power of party leaders and candidates. The first was the usurpation of much of the Farmer-Labor cause by aspects of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal presidency, which started making significant changes on the national level in agricultural and labor policy starting in 1933. The second factor was that the Farmer-Laborites were able to portray themselves as outside reformers for only so long before they had to acknowledge the fact that they too had become part of the political status quo both in St. Paul and in Washington, D.C., and as a result, were at least somewhat responsible for political failings. This can clearly be seen in the party’s patronage abuses which were challenged so effectively by Harold Stassen in the 1938 election.¹²³

Because the Farmer-Labor Party had become so weakened by 1939, it would eventually become unable to operate as an effective opposition. Politically, this placed the Farmer-Labor Party in new political territory. During much of the 1920s, the party had been the effective and growing opposition to the Republican Party within the state – chiefly by rallying around a common core platform. This platform was anti-establishment in nature, and was supported in general by both of the movement’s main constituencies – the rural-agrarian and the urban-labor sectors. This unification had worked well through the mid-1930s, when

¹²³Leslie Gene Rude, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1962, 280.

there was little state or national government policy to support their aims. However, after the arrival of the New Deal, policies emerged which provided some degree of support for farmers and labor. Also, years of state-level Farmer-Labor rule seemed to drive the party's wings further apart, and relations between the rural-agrarian and urban-labor wings became increasingly strained. After 1938, the party had been largely displaced from power, humiliated by election results, stripped of much of its finances, and became so focused on internal divisions that effective political or legislative opposition became almost impossible. Although it was too early for the party's leaders to realize it, the party had passed its peak of power and was now in its early stages of decline. As this decline solidified and became more obvious over the next few years, the party became less effective both at campaigning and at producing policy alternatives.

By mid-1940, the farmer-labor movement in Minnesota had reached its nadir – and one from which it would not recover. Yet, many within the party remained in denial about their future prospects. The Farmer-Laborites were unable to regain their lost influence and momentum from late 1938 to mid-1940. The 1938 election results had dealt the party its worst electoral setback. The reforms of Stassen and the Republicans beginning in 1939 had cut off the party's main source of funding and exposed its abuse of patronage. Henrik Shipstead – party elder statesman and longtime favorite son – had left the movement for good. In the meantime, storm clouds over the impending war in Europe continued to cause considerable debate within the movement's traditionally isolationist ranks – as did conflict between labor groups. Charges of communism and extremism – long a rhetorical staple of the movement's enemies – continued unabated, but by the late 1930s had more validity (given the “Popular Front” approach being taken by many leftists). The 1940 election would

be a chance for the Farmer-Laborites' to prove to their critics that their electoral experience of 1938 had been just a short-term setback.

However, in these hopes, they were to be disappointed.

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE WILDERNESS: 1940-1948

By September 1940, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party was in a state of decline. They had suffered a smashing electoral defeat in the 1938 election – along with the decline of their party base and much of their financing shortly afterward. The defections of Senator Shipstead and Representative Buckler and the death of Senator Lundeen in August 1940 had also hurt the party. In addition, the movement was riven by continuing factionalism between the party's leftist urban-labor leadership and its liberal rural-agrarian wing. The party also continued to face Governor Stassen's relatively popular moderate Republican policies. Worse, membership and the party's finances would remain in a depressed state through the early 1940s. Although the party leadership and its overall structure remained intact – its ability to effectively campaign had been greatly reduced from its peak of influence in the mid-1930s. Even so, the party looked towards the next election in November 1940 as a chance to reverse their fortunes and regain at least some of the position that they had lost between 1938 and 1940.

In the meantime the Republican governor, Harold Stassen, had proven to be popular and ambitious. Stassen's star rose considerably in 1940 when he was asked to give the keynote address at the Republican National Convention in late June. Stassen delivered his address and boldly endorsed Wendell Wilkie for president (a move which broke with precedent, since the keynote speaker had traditionally refrained from making such

endorsements). Stassen then became Wilkie's campaign floor manager at the convention. Wilkie won the final nomination floor vote and became the Republican presidential candidate to face President Franklin Roosevelt in the general election. Stassen thus swiftly achieved prominence within the ranks of national Republicans, and – since his endorsed candidate had won the nomination – his fame and influence grew. A Gallup poll conducted in 1940 indicated that Stassen was one of the most widely known and admired Republican figures in the country, and he returned to Minnesota later that summer to run again to retain his governor's office.¹

The 1940 Election

Early indicators in the 1940 election showed that Stassen enjoyed wide approval within the state. At the same time, the Farmer-Labor Association (FLA) had dropped in membership from about 20,000 members in 1938 to only about 3,000 members by late 1940. This was a signal of definite decline for the farmer-labor movement in Minnesota. Nevertheless, the party leaders were still interested in contesting the 1940 election. The leading party rivals – Hjalmar Petersen and Elmer Benson – even sought to patch up their differences. However, the schism in the party between leftist urban-labor and agrarian-rural wings was significant, and these divisions continued to play out throughout the 1940s. This could be clearly seen on the Iron Range (in the northern part of the state) in 1940, when the leftist faction won its struggle for control of the party there, empowering such figures as John

¹Steven J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), 171-177.

T. Bernard. In response, dissenting liberal-moderate Farmer-Labor members in the Eighth District bolted and even temporarily created their own movement.²

In March 1940, the Farmer-Labor Party held its state convention. The big question would be which faction – Benson’s leftists or Petersen’s liberal-moderates – would dominate. The loss of the 1938 election had seemed to discredit the Benson faction, and Benson himself tried to mediate an agreement between both wings of the party. However, John T. Bernard and other Benson supporters attempted to gain control of the state’s party structure at the convention. This prompted a strong reaction from the Petersen wing, which eventually dominated the meetings and presided over the most divisive Farmer-Labor convention to date. This process became so disruptive that the convention was essentially postponed because of this conflict. It would not convene again until three months later (on June 21, 1940).³ This was an indication of serious continuing Farmer-Labor disunity within the rank and file – as well as a demonstration of the continuing rural-agrarian and urban-labor split within the party.

Meanwhile in St. Paul, the city elections in early 1940 signaled new hope for the Democrats. The St. Paul Democrats in Ramsey County were able to forge a Democratic-led coalition which included support from the Farmer-Labor group. This new coalition resulted in a victory for the Democratic mayoral candidate, John J. McDonough. This seemed to signal the Farmer-Laborites’ new willingness to work with Democrats and even accede to their leadership. When the Farmer-Labor convention was finally reconvened in June, the radical and liberal-moderate factions were unable to agree on candidates. Instead, they

²Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 285.

³James M. Shields, *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson* (Minneapolis, MN: T. S. Denison & Company, 1971), 228-230; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 286.

simply nominated competing figures for the primary races. However, a significant shift of voters away from the Farmer-Labor primaries now occurred. In the primary election of 1940, the total percentage of votes for Farmer-Labor candidates was only 23% of the electorate as a whole – a huge drop from the 55% that had cast primary ballots for the party in the 1938 primary race.⁴

Luckily for the party, Benson and Petersen came to an understanding about which office each would seek in the 1940 election, thus avoiding open conflict in the primary race. Benson sought the open Senate seat (intending to run against the party's former stalwart, the now-Republican Henrik Shipstead in the general election). Petersen sought the party's endorsement for governor and intended to challenge the incumbent Republican, Harold Stassen. Both ran in the party primary, which was held in September 1940, and both easily won their races. However, the remainder of the party primary races were hotly contested by a host of either pro-Benson or pro-Petersen figures, with no clear overall win for either side. It would be too much to claim that Benson and Petersen "buried the hatchet" for the general election (they remained personally estranged from each other). However, for appearances, the two refrained from open criticism of each other, and even made a couple of stiff joint appearances together during the general election campaign.⁵ Petersen also claimed in private that he and Benson were meeting face to face and were cordial with each other. He further claimed that he carried "no animosity" towards Benson and that the newspapers were

⁴Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 287-290.

⁵Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 231-232.

attempting to re-hash the bitterness of their 1938 primary campaign.⁶ Whether this was completely true or not, it was the official impression that he intended to convey.

The election of 1940 was a true three-party race. Despite the earlier cooperation between Democrats and Farmer-Laborites in the St. Paul mayoral race, there was no electoral “understanding” between the two parties in 1940 on the statewide level, nor were there any serious efforts to conduct negotiations for an official merger. Foreign policy issues were central to the 1940 election, and these worked to keep the Democrats and the Farmer-Laborites apart. Because the Roosevelt Administration had moved towards a stance of close support for Britain in 1940, a political alliance with a largely pro-isolationist movement such as the Farmer-Labor Party was difficult for the Democrats. Even Stassen and his appointed ally, Senator Joseph Ball, had proven to be more supportive of Roosevelt’s increasing interventionism than the Farmer-Laborites had. However, the landscape was confused by Petersen’s embrace of President Roosevelt as a figure of domestic reform, and Petersen’s claim that he supported Roosevelt in the presidential election. Petersen also asserted that Farmer-Laborites outnumbered Democrats in the state by at least two-to-one, and that “certainly the Farmer-Labor Party is closer to the New Deal in its social program than Wilkie-Stassen Democrats.”⁷ Petersen’s attempt at association with the New Deal was not very successful. However, the 1940 election would be the last one before America entered the war, and differences over foreign policy between the Farmer-Laborites and Democrats

⁶Letter of Hjalmar Petersen to H. O. Berve, October 5, 1940, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 13, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Hjalmar Petersen Papers].

⁷Hjalmar Petersen, “Statement by Hjalmar Petersen,” October 2, 1940, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 13.

would recede shortly after. From that point on, the fusion of the two parties made increasing political sense.⁸

Petersen had been elected to a six-year term on the Railroad and Warehouse Commission in 1936. Since he had assumed that office in early 1937, Petersen had been free to run as a gubernatorial candidate in 1938 without losing his current public office. This pattern would continue in the 1940 and 1942 elections as well, giving Petersen the opportunity to run for office without any fear of losing his commission seat. He would use this advantage both to oppose Stassen's policies and to ready his own runs for the governor's office.⁹

During the campaign, Petersen attempted to make an issue of Stassen's support for Wilkie in the 1940 general election. As noted earlier, Stassen had emerged as a major Republican figure due to his declaration of support for Wilkie earlier in the year, and Stassen had indeed been very active within the Wilkie campaign during the general campaign season. In a radio address delivered at St. Cloud on October 22, Petersen criticized Stassen as being an absent governor who had been "running all over the country" trying to get Wilkie elected.¹⁰ In the end, this appeal would have a limited effect on Minnesota voters, however.

The general election results of 1940 proved that the previous election of 1938 was not an aberration, but was instead part of a wider trend. Although Franklin Roosevelt carried Minnesota in the Electoral College, the Republican candidates won all major state and federal offices with either a slight majority or plurality of the vote. The Democrats again lost – however their percentages had increased in range (from about 11% to 20%) in the

⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 291, 293.

⁹Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 174, 192.

¹⁰Hjalmar Petersen, text of radio speech made at St. Cloud, October 22, 1940, Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Box 13.

statewide races. Likewise, the Farmer-Labor Party lost all of the major state races, with most of its candidates polling in about the 20% range. The single high point was Hjalmar Petersen's campaign, which won 35% of the vote in the governor's race, and in early returns, appeared close to edging out a plurality against Stassen. Ethnic factors continued to play a role in outstate rejection of Democratic candidates. The Democratic base remained anchored in St. Paul and Ramsey County, and was centered largely within the Irish Catholic community located there. Cultural barriers still existed between outstate Scandinavians and Germans who continued to vote either Republican or Farmer-Labor as a matter of course, and simply eschewed the Democratic Party because of its associations with eastern big cities and different ethnicities.¹¹

The 1940 election results signaled the continuing decline of the Farmer-Labor Party, but a slight rise in favor for the Democrats. The results of 1940 also reinforced the need for the two parties to work together to create a single left-of-center coalition, since their separate vote totals were simply not enough to beat their Republican opponents (though together, they represented a potentially successful electoral coalition). In 1941, conversations about a possible merger began again, but this time with renewed interest on both sides. A few of the more mainstream Farmer-Labor figures even officially made the transition into the Democratic Party. However, there were still considerable gaps to bridge. Conservative Democrats remained adverse to a merger since they suspected the Farmer-Labor Party of harboring communists. In addition, many Farmer-Labor figures also continued to oppose the

¹¹Orlin Folwick, "Governor Has Slim Plurality Over Petersen," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 6, 1940; see also Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 294-296.

national Democratic foreign-policy, which was becoming increasingly interventionist under the Roosevelt Administration and which heavily favored the Allied side.¹²

American Entry into World War II

As the war in Europe developed, it quickly transitioned from Poland's dramatic and swift destruction at the hands of German forces in October 1939 to the "sitzkrieg" months of inactivity between November 1939 and April 1940. During this lull in the west, the Soviet Union took advantage of its non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany and attacked its neighbor, Finland. This Soviet invasion of Finland in late 1939 contributed to dynamics within the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. A large number of Minnesotans in the northeast part of the state were of Finnish heritage, and many of these "Red Finns" had extensive associations with organized labor and the party. Leftist doctrine had called for support of the USSR in international circles. However, the Soviet invasion of the Finnish homeland caused some Finnish Minnesotans to seriously question this viewpoint – since Soviet aggression seemed clear and unnecessary. This event caused further disruption within the party – especially among the leftist faction and the Finnish rank and file – and gave rise to new debates on the American position on the war. This additional factionalism contributed even more to the party's disunity. At the same time, the rural-agrarian members of the Farmer-Labor Party tended to assert strong isolationist views throughout 1940-1941. This faction of the party actively campaigned for the America First movement, which sought to keep America neutral. Both Hjalmar Petersen and Senator Ernest Lundeen were active in this movement, which seemed to align closely with the traditional isolationist views of many

¹²Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 297.

Midwestern pro-agrarian politicians. Petersen even made a speech on WCCO radio in March of 1941 vigorously supporting the position of American isolationism. This movement was also aided in its cause by the celebrity of Charles Lindbergh, Jr., who openly spoke out against American participation in the war, and cast suspicions on British intentions. In addition, on September 1941, Lindbergh made some controversial anti-Semitic statements in public in Iowa as part of this isolationist campaign. Lindbergh was criticized for making these statements, yet the debate over American entry to the war raged on.¹³

In June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. This action cemented the Farmer-Labor urban-labor base's support for American participation in the war against the Axis Powers. Although the Farmer-Labor Party membership remained fractured in its views on American participation in the war, the public position taken by Petersen and the isolationist wing prevented the party from seeking any accommodation with the Democrats until December 1941. However, any remaining Farmer-Labor suspicion of Roosevelt's interventionist foreign-policy was largely sidelined by Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The Japanese action – in combination with the German invasion of Soviet Russia six months earlier – now solidified the lines of the international struggle against international fascism. All ends of the American political spectrum lined up in a united front to enter the war and fight against the fascist powers. This opened the door to open cooperation between the Democrats of Minnesota and the Farmer-Labor Party. Even so, it still took some time for favorable factors to coalesce which would allow a Farmer-Labor-Democratic fusion. No merger would take place between the two parties in 1942 as some had

¹³Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 185-186.

hoped. However, the main issue of division had now been swept from the table and there was increased cooperation between the two parties starting in 1942.¹⁴

The 1942 Election

Harold Stassen had remained popular as a governor throughout his two terms in office. However, with the American entry into the war, pressure had mounted on him as a young patriotic American to demonstrate a meaningful commitment to the war effort. For Stassen, this meant the personal sacrifice of leaving office to enter the armed forces. At the beginning of the 1942 campaign, Stassen announced that he would run for governor again, but would only serve several months of his third term so that he could enlist in the Navy. Stassen had to deal with issues of naming a successor and also from challenges from the conservative wing of his own party – who often viewed Stassen as being too moderate. Meanwhile the Farmer-Labor Party continued in its processes to nominate candidates for the 1942 election. However, by now the party had lost much of its rank and file, had little financial support, and was failing to attract any significant new talent. Little had changed since 1940 for the party, with the exception of America's entry into the war – which far outweighed domestic politics at this time. Some Farmer-Labor figures were increasingly deserting to either the Republicans or the Democrats, and rivalries between the urban-labor leftists and the rural-agrarian moderates within the party continued unabated even though the war issue had subsided by 1942.¹⁵

¹⁴John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: the Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 97.

¹⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 306-312.

This continuing intra-party conflict can be seen in Elmer Benson's Senate primary race in 1942. Benson was a reluctant candidate. His confidant and biographer, James M. Shields, claims that Benson ran only because he (Benson) saw no other viable candidate to take on the role.¹⁶ But Benson faced unexpected challenges in his quest for the Farmer-Labor endorsement for the Senate. He had been set to run against Henry Arens, the aging former lieutenant governor and political ally of Hjalmar Petersen. However, at the very last minute, Ernest Lundeen's 46-year-old widow announced that she would seek the seat herself – both as a means of keeping her husband's political legacy alive and as a means to clearing her husband's name (which had recently surfaced in an official congressional investigation of pre-war German collaboration). Although Norma Lundeen had little chance of winning the primary, her entry into the race increased intra-party divisions, and proved to be embarrassing for Benson. In the primary campaign, Lundeen accused Benson of being an "internationalist" bent on using American military force throughout the world – even after the war's conclusion. Norma Lundeen had been an active member of the America First movement, and her campaign voiced the dying breaths of Farmer-Labor isolationism. Benson won the primary, but even so, the three-way race did little to boost party unity, and underscored the continuing rural-agrarian and urban-labor schism.¹⁷

Even so, the 1942 election revived the Farmer-Labor and Democratic "understanding" for certain state electoral races. In seven of these races, the Farmer-Labor Party withdrew their candidates in order to avoid directly clashing with Democratic Party candidates and increase both groups' chances against the Republicans. This arrangement was

¹⁶Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 252.

¹⁷Darcy G. Richardson, "Time Capsule: Farmer-Labor Party's Norma Lundeen Seeks Late Husband's Seat in U.S. Senate," *Uncovered Politics*, July 25, 2012.

a prologue to the merger, and represented a shift – since the Farmer-Laborites were clearly ceding more ground to the Democrats than they had in past deals. In the primary races, a vast majority of votes were cast for the Republican candidates and only 22% for the Farmer-Labor Party. For the most part, the liberal-moderate faction of the Farmer-Labor Party won their primary races, however they were unable to prevent Elmer Benson from winning the nomination for the Senate race. Once again (as in 1940), the Farmer-Labor Party would field Petersen as the gubernatorial candidate and Benson as the Senate candidate. In other words, after two more years of decline, inactivity and continuing factionalism, the party offered the same choices of major candidates to the state’s voters as they had in 1940.¹⁸

The general election results in November 1942 continued to show the trend that had been established in 1938 and in 1940. Stassen was re-elected with a significant majority. Petersen did the best of all the Farmer-Labor candidates, capturing almost 37% of the vote in his run for governor, a slight improvement over his 1940 showing. Even so, Petersen’s term on the Railroad and Warehouse Commission had now expired, and his bid to unseat Stassen had “flopped.” The press noted that – for the first time since 1931 – there would be no Farmer-Labor executive at the state level.¹⁹ Benson earned only about 26% of the vote in the Senate race, losing to the Republican, Joseph Ball, who won with a plurality of 43.6%. The Farmer-Labor candidates won none of the major state races. It would be their last official election as a party. With the inevitable decline of the Farmer-Labor Party now firmly signaled by their decisive defeat in three consecutive elections, it was clear that the Farmer-Labor Party needed the merger with the Democrats to remain a viable political force.

¹⁸Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 313.

¹⁹“Thye Way Out In Front For Lt. Governor,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 4, 1942.

Isolationist sentiments were no longer a driving factor in opposing President Roosevelt's foreign policy, and recent American military successes in North Africa had muted further concerns that the war represented a disastrous mistake for the United States. With this barrier removed, it was just a matter of getting the party leaders on both sides to agree to move forward.²⁰

The Merger: The Creation of the DFL Party

The electoral arrangements that the Democratic Party and the Farmer-Labor Party had arrived at in 1942 would become the basis for renewed efforts at merging the two parties. The Farmer-Labor Party remained a shadow of its former self in early 1943. Its membership and finances had been throttled by Stassen's election in 1938, and the elections of 1940 and 1942 had not provided the resurgence in electoral influence that they had longed for. Even so, the party structure remained intact, as did its FLA chapters and a significant percentage of its voter base. This voter base was now much smaller than their Republican rivals – but was still a larger base than what the Democrats possessed. Both sides now clearly saw the advantage of fusion. For the Democrats, a merger with the Farmer-Laborites would give them a broader base of liberal support throughout the state – something that the party had lacked since the earliest days of Minnesota statehood. With support from the national Democratic organization, it was hoped that the Farmer-Labor wing could be absorbed, and that this newly merged organization would become a much larger and unified left-of-center major party. For the Farmer-Laborites, the decline of their third party movement pointed to the necessity of fusion as being the only means of again achieving electoral significance.

²⁰Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 316, 319-320.

Gone were the days of their upset third party victories, as were many of the pressing issues of agrarian and labor interests which they had championed for so long. Disagreement between the two parties over the war issue had also disappeared. In addition, Soviet Premier Josef Stalin officially disbanded the Comintern organization in 1943. This action reduced Soviet influence on sympathetic leftist groups overseas (i.e., in America), and allowed for less resistance within the more radical Farmer-Labor sectors to merge with the Democrats.²¹

Thus began the long process of merging the two separate political parties into one. There has been some disagreement on who was chiefly responsible for this merger. One of the more popular historical narratives was that Hubert H. Humphrey – then a budding but untested Democratic political figure – was the chief architect of the merger. This view was popular during the period of Humphrey’s Senate career and his rise to the Vice Presidency, and helped to shore up his image as a party builder and great political leader. Scholarly work on the subject since Humphrey’s death, however, has revealed a more complex and longer process than that offered by this historical narrative of the 1960s.

Hubert H. Humphrey was a graduate student in Political Science at the University of Minnesota in 1943, living with his wife Muriel and children in Minneapolis. Born and raised in South Dakota, Humphrey’s family had distinguished itself as solid Democrats in a state and region that typically identified as Republican in the early 20th century. Humphrey was intelligent, ambitious, and an admirer of Franklin Roosevelt. He was also a gifted speaker – often making appearances and speaking at university functions. Humphrey – a political neophyte – had run as the Democratic mayoral candidate in the 1943 city elections in

²¹Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), xiii.

Minneapolis, and had come close to beating the Republican candidate, Marvin L. Kline. Humphrey's slim loss in 1943 had only fueled his ambitions, however, and he soon sought a way to unify the two left-of-center parties in Minnesota. In the summer of 1943 (after his close loss to Kline) Humphrey wrote a "twelve-page, handwritten letter" to Frank Walker, the Postmaster General of the United States, in which Humphrey declared that it was foolish for two essentially liberal political parties in Minnesota to compete with each other in a three-way electoral race. Walker was not just the Postmaster General, but was also the Chairman of the National Democratic Committee. Humphrey hoped that Walker's support for a merging of the two parties in Minnesota would be the impetus that would make such a merger a reality. Receiving no reply of any significance, the 32-year-old Humphrey took \$70 in savings and set out for Washington, D.C., to meet with Walker in person.²²

Humphrey arrived at Walker's office, and dutifully waited in Walker's anteroom for several days, but was never admitted to meet with Walker. Discouraged, Humphrey was about to leave Washington, D.C. empty-handed, when he happened to run into an old friend of his father's – W. W. Howes – who had worked previously in the U.S. Postal Service and who knew Walker personally. Howes called Walker's office on the spot, and Humphrey was brought in (by Walker's own car) to meet with Walker that very day. Humphrey then earnestly explained his proposal to merge the two parties, and asked for support from the national Democratic organization in doing so. Walker responded positively and eventually sent his Assistant National Chairman, Oscar Ewing, as the main point person to oversee this fusion process in Minnesota. Humphrey himself then served as a figure in the merger

²²Hubert H. Humphrey (Norman Sherman, editor), *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), 81.

negotiations process, which took place in a series of meetings in Minneapolis and St. Paul between late 1943 and April 1944.²³

Figure 35. Hubert H. Humphrey shortly after being elected Mayor of Minneapolis in 1945. Humphrey was an ambitious political figure who had transitioned directly from being a graduate student in Political Science at the University of Minnesota to being a pivotal figure in the DFL Party. Humphrey would be elected to the Senate in 1948 and would later serve as Vice President of the United States. *Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



Even so, the concept of merging the two parties had a long history that had been extolled by a number of Minnesota figures (especially Democrats) since the 1920s. It would be inaccurate to claim that the merger was solely Humphrey's idea, or that he had been the only person to ever suggest it. In fact, in February 1944, Arthur Naftalin – then a graduate student at the University of Minnesota – had published an analysis of the Farmer-Labor Party's struggle within the Minnesota state government, focusing on the period of the 1930s in *The American Political Science Review*. Naftalin presented evidence that Minnesota was effectively a three-party system from the 1920s to the early 1940s. Although Naftalin praised the Farmer-Labor Party for its reform efforts, he asserted strongly that a liberal opposition split between two parties facing the Republican Party had little chance of success. Naftalin's implications were clear: a majority of Minnesotans favored political reform and supported Roosevelt's New Deal policies, yet liberal politics in Minnesota were being blocked because of a split voter allegiance to two parties opposing the Republicans. Naftalin's conclusion was

²³Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man*, 82-84.

that a merger of the Democrats and Farmer-Laborites would bring about the desired electoral majority and allow for a liberal political government. Such arrangements were in the offing by this time, and it is likely that Naftalin – a close associate Humphrey’s – and later Humphrey’s campaign manager during his run for Mayor of Minneapolis in 1945 – was expressing long-held Democratic sentiments for a merger.²⁴ Humphrey was likely aware of Naftalin’s article, and no doubt shared his viewpoint.

There were even earlier suggestions from Democrats for a merger as well. As early as 1941, several Democrat figures had created a plan to create a dues-paying organization aligned with the Democratic Party that would eventually merge with the FLA. It was then that the name “Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party” was first broached. These Democrats even created a Democratic Advisory Council in order to foster a merger at that time. However, Minnesota state laws presented a barrier to fusion, since it prohibited candidates and party workers from switching parties unless they pledged publicly that they had supported a majority of candidates (in the previous election) of the party they were joining. This law opened up any newly merged party up to potentially numerous frivolous lawsuits from both its political opponents and figures within the party itself. To get around this law, the Democrats decided to use another recent state law passed in 1939, which allowed political parties to craft their own constitution. This approach allowed them to define their own party governance process. The plan was to call a convention for both parties at some point in the

²⁴Arthur Naftalin, “The Failure of the Farmer-Labor Party to Capture Control of the Minnesota Legislature,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Feb., 1944), 71-78.

near future at which members would draft and approve a single constitution – effectively merging both parties at the organizational level.²⁵

Some time would pass before the issue was raised again. In December 1942 (after electoral losses by both Democrats and Farmer-Laborites), the state Democratic Party chair, Elmer Kelm, publicly pronounced that a merger between Minnesota Democrats and the Farmer-Labor Party would be desirable. Furthermore, Kelm drafted a memo in March 1943 to the national Democratic Committee which expressed concern about Roosevelt’s odds of carrying the state in the 1944 election, and claimed that fusion with the Farmer-Labor group might be the only possible method for Roosevelt’s success. Between March and June of 1943 however, little action or encouragement was taken by the national organization. Humphrey’s visit to Walker’s office in June may have indeed been the catalyst needed to dispatch Oscar Ewing to Minnesota. However, pleas from Minnesota Democrats had already arrived in Washington D.C. well before Humphrey’s visit.²⁶

In any case, Ewing arrived in Minnesota in August 1943, and conducted a “discussion” in St. Paul regarding the “unity of Democrats, Farmer Laborites and Liberals in connection with the coming political campaign and for the support of the President.” No record of this discussion exists. However, Elmer Benson described it in brief in a letter he later sent to Frank Walker. Benson praised Ewing’s efforts and made strong denunciations against the state’s Republicans, claiming that “in Minnesota today there is not one key government position held by a person who would in any way support the President.” Although Benson may have been overstating the situation, it is clear from his reaction to the

²⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 302-304.

²⁶Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 107-108.

Ewing discussion that he and his supporters were increasingly viewing fusion as a favorable course of action.²⁷ In another letter sent the same day to Oscar Ewing, Benson thanked Ewing for his work in bringing the two parties together. Benson further stated that persons within the farmer-labor movement were indeed open to a merger, but that such an action was “going to take lots of work.” Benson recommended that this work begin immediately. He further promised Ewing that “I want to assure you again that I shall be happy to do everything that I can.”²⁸

There seemed little doubt that a merger would benefit the Democrats mathematically more than it would benefit the Farmer-Laborites. It is erroneous to assert that the Democratic Party’s power in Minnesota was growing in a significant manner on the state level in the early 1940s in the years before the merger. The Democratic totals for the governor’s office had been only 6% in 1938, 11% in 1940, and 9.5% in 1942. In other words, a Democratic rise in the state was still not inevitable by 1943. Even by the early 1940s, Democrats – though they had made some gains in some races – were still clearly the third-place party in Minnesota politics. Even so, the Farmer-Labor decline since 1938 had been so rapid and seemingly permanent that there were no prospects for its future growth and reinvigoration. Only a fusion with the Democrats would – at least in theory – substantially increase (or at least unify) the left-of-center voting base, and it made little sense for two parties with large electoral minorities to compete with each other against the Republicans.²⁹

²⁷Letter of Elmer Benson to Frank Walker, August 26, 1943, Elmer A. Benson Papers, Box 18, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Elmer Benson Papers].

²⁸Letter of Elmer Benson to Oscar Ewing, August 26, 1943, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 18.

²⁹James Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1983), 250; see also Carl H. Chrislock, “The Drama of a Party’s History” (typed manuscript, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN, 1960), 5.

The main figures in the merger – which took place in a series of communications and meetings in late 1943 and early 1944 – came from both the state and national Democratic organization, and from what might be termed the Benson wing of the ailing Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party (the mostly urban-labor-oriented Farmer-Laborite group that had long championed the leadership of Elmer Benson). For the Democrats, the Assistant National Chairman, Oscar Ewing, took a lead role in courting Elmer Benson and making overtures to the Farmer-Labor group. The State Democratic Chair, Elmer Kelm, became the main negotiator for the Democratic side. Elmer Benson and his personal Secretary, Roger Rutchick, emerged as the main Farmer-Labor figures in the mediations. Humphrey served as an assistant to Kelm and apparently as an overall mediator in the process. Humphrey’s role was also that of being a diplomatic mediator – which fit in with what had become his main interest: the success of the merger itself. The first official communication between the two parties was a letter sent on November 25, 1943, from Elmer Kelm and addressed to Elmer Benson (then chair of the Farmer-Labor Association) and Paul Tinge (then chair of the Farmer-Labor Party). In the letter, Kelm outlined the need for an effective and united war effort and support for President Roosevelt, and pointed out that an “obstructionist republican [sic] congressional bloc . . . makes it imperative that the democratic [sic] and progressive forces of the State of Minnesota unite.” No mention was made of the power arrangements within the proposed new party. Kelm also stated a fallback position: if the merger was not to occur, then at the very least the two organizations should “integrate our efforts as separate organizations” (implying that the parties should at least continue to come to understandings in state races, so as to not split the liberal vote).³⁰

³⁰Letter of Elmer Kelm to Elmer Benson and Paul Tinge, November 26, 1943, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 18.

Between Thanksgiving of 1943 and New Year's Day of 1944, Benson and the Farmer-Labor leadership considered their reply. Benson's official response was issued on January 7, 1944, and was addressed directly to Elmer F. Kelm. Benson's tone in the letter was positive, diplomatic and flattering to both Ewing and Kelm. Benson also praised Roosevelt's war efforts and bemoaned Republican opposition to both Roosevelt's foreign and domestic policy. Towards the end, his intent for merger and its purpose was made clear:

We have concluded in our joint meeting of the State Committees of the Farmer Labor Party and Association, with the advice of labor and farm leaders, that unity of the Democrats and Farmer Laborites can bring broad political unity in Minnesota . . . It can, by uniting the people of our state, rock the foundations of the Minnesota Republican Senators and Congressmen who have so ignobly identified themselves with the Unholy Alliance . . . We are for [the merger].³¹

Benson then traveled to Washington, D.C., and met with President Roosevelt in early February, 1944. This meeting and the subsequent tone of Benson's letter to the President represented a decided change from Benson's earlier attitude towards Roosevelt, which – while varied between 1940 and 1944 – was typically critical. In terms of foreign policy, Benson had initially seemed to view Roosevelt as an interventionist in the vein of Woodrow Wilson and a supporter of capitalism – a “fascist” in his own way.³² However, in terms of domestic politics, Benson always favored Roosevelt's runs for the presidency in comparison to Roosevelt's Republican opponents – even as he advocated for more federal action from Roosevelt on farm issues. Throughout 1942, Benson had become more supportive of Roosevelt's foreign policy, but continued to admonish Roosevelt on agricultural policy, pushing for more federal farm support. This is reflected in the letter he sent to President

³¹Letter of Elmer Benson to Elmer F. Kelm, January 7, 1944, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 18.

³²Letters of Elmer Benson to Irene Paull, October 3, 1941 and October 14, 1941, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 16.

Roosevelt (on February 5, 1944) in which he stated the importance of the farm vote, and encouraged Roosevelt to “take the lead” on farm policy. Benson’s suggestions included price supports, incentive payments, and guaranteed markets for crops. It is interesting to note that Benson mentioned nothing about the impending merger in the letter.³³

Once the goal of merging the two parties had been established, a rally day was planned for February 14, 1944, in order to prepare both sides for the official merger and create a positive atmosphere. This rally was attended by Vice President Henry Wallace and was presided over by Hubert Humphrey. Both of these Democratic figures praised the struggle of the Farmer-Labor Party and outlined common ground between New Deal Democrats and planks of the more moderate aspects of the Farmer-Labor platform. The new statewide party would become the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (known since then as the DFL). The merger of both parties’ titles emphasized not only the supposed equality of each wing, but also reassured Farmer-Laborites that their third party origins were not being forgotten.³⁴ Despite the rally and general approval from members of both parties, there was some lingering resistance as well. In essence, a few Farmer-Laborites resisted the fusion as being a “sell out” to a major party, while some conservative Democrats resisted being thrown in together with “radicals” from a former third party.³⁵ On March 14, 1944, Benson received a short letter from Vice President Henry Wallace:

Dear Elmer: I have gotten in touch with Oscar Ewing and I hope he will be able to keep up the good work. I appreciate the important part which you have been playing in doing this job.³⁶

³³Letter of Elmer Benson to Franklin Roosevelt, February 5, 1944, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 18.

³⁴Chrislock, “The Drama of a Party’s History,” 6.

³⁵Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 326-328.

³⁶Letter of Henry Wallace to Elmer Benson, March 14, 1944, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 18.

At the very least, the letter indicates that Wallace and Benson were on close terms, and that Wallace personally approved of Benson's efforts in the merger. The relationship between the two men would continue to grow, and would prove to be a critical factor in DFL Party struggles between 1946 and 1948.

The official merger came on April 14, 1944, when both parties convened in two hotels close to each other in downtown Minneapolis. Since a state law prevented party names from being capriciously imitated, the Farmer-Labor group voted to change its name to the "Fellowship Party" – satisfying the law's need to make the "Farmer-Labor" label available for the newly merged party. An official invitation was then issued by the Democrats to the former Farmer-Labor officials to join their convention. This invitation was accepted, and the conventions were then merged. The merged convention then voted to officially change the party's name to the "Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party" (or DFL) and the title has remained unchanged since then.³⁷

As mentioned earlier, Humphrey's role as a leader in the merger has long been debated. Many factors were moving the two parties together before his appearance on the scene in 1943, and he was not the only person involved in arranging the details of the merger. Humphrey's role was often overstated in the late 1950s and 1960s by his allies or sympathetic writers as his political star was rising (he was elected Vice President in 1964, and ran for President in 1968). This legend of Humphrey being the sole creator of the Minnesota DFL Party persisted for some time. Humphrey was no doubt influential in involving the national Democratic Party in 1943, and he did play a role as Kelm's assistant

³⁷"Farmer-Labor Party Dissolves in Minnesota To Merge With Democrats Backing President," *New York Times*, April 15, 1944; see also Laura K. Auerbach, *Worthy to be Remembered: a Political History of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, 1944-1984* (Minneapolis, MN: Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, 1984), 29.

and overall mediator in the critical merger meetings. No doubt, Humphrey's diplomatic presence overcame some deadlocks and unpleasant moments of negotiation.³⁸ What is less clear is how instrumental he actually was in bringing the two parties together. Contrary to some narratives, Humphrey was not the ranking Democrat present (that was state chair Elmer Kelm). Elmer Benson – the chief representative for the Farmer-Labor Party during the negotiations – stated years later that Humphrey was peripheral to the process – present during the meetings, but had little influence in the outcomes, and took no bold stances in leadership.³⁹ It should be noted however, that Benson was later very critical of Humphrey and they would become bitter rivals soon after the merger. Even Humphrey himself later chronicled that it was Benson who seemed to be the most determined to pursue the merger, often exclaiming at the meetings that Kelm and Humphrey were untrustworthy – but also repeatedly insisting that “we must unite.”⁴⁰

Humphrey's own papers only deepen the mystery. In the box which relates to the years of the mid-1940s, there are a series of folders holding Humphrey's “News Releases and Statements.” There is a folder for 1943 and a folder for 1945. There is no folder for 1944. Thus, at least some of the archival evidence for Humphrey's official actions seems to be lacking, and he may have indeed played less of a role than his many admirers have indicated in earlier decades.⁴¹ What is clear from examining the archives from these years is that Humphrey was highly focused on directing his energy and passion towards developing a

³⁸Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 114.

³⁹Interview with Governor Elmer A. Benson, Interviewed by Martin J. McGowan, December 1981 and August 13, 1983 in *Appleton and Bloomington, Minnesota* [transcript of interview], 17; see also Robert Sherrill and Harry W. Ernst, *The Drugstore Liberal* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968), 31-33 [contains a transcript of an even earlier interview with Elmer Benson which asserts a similar view].

⁴⁰Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man*, 85.

⁴¹Hubert H. Humphrey Papers, Box 24, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Humphrey Papers].

modern liberal ideology, attaining a prominent place within the Minnesota Democratic Party, and running for Mayor of Minneapolis in both 1943 and 1945.⁴²

It is also clear that Humphrey strove to align himself with labor in his bid to become Mayor of Minneapolis. His mayoral campaigns depended on this support from labor. A letter received on June 14, 1944 from John M. Jacobson – then a leading figure in a CIO political action committee – proves that Humphrey was indeed on close terms with CIO labor figures in this period. This is consistent with Humphrey’s stance as “labor’s candidate.”⁴³ Humphrey also apparently tolerated some of the pro-communist sentiments of the local CIO branches as part of the price he paid for their political support.⁴⁴ Other reports, most notably from Humphrey’s 1943 campaign manager, Frederick Manfred, claimed that Humphrey often faced a litmus test from Minneapolis CIO figures, who tried to get Humphrey to commit to supporting communism and the Soviet Union. Apparently, Humphrey deftly avoided commitment in this regard – although he himself would later face charges of being soft on communism.⁴⁵

Eugenie Moore Anderson is also frequently cited as being an instrumental figure in creating the DFL Party in 1944. However, her personal papers collection starts in 1945, and it seems that no primary sources from her collection date specifically to the time of the merger. Even so, Anderson was a major organizational figure within the Minnesota Democratic Party and was aligned with the Humphrey faction in the period 1945-1948. Anderson was critical

⁴²Humphrey Papers, Box 24.

⁴³Letter of John M. Jacobson to Hubert H. Humphrey, June 14, 1944, DFL Party Records, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter DFL Party Records].

⁴⁴Allan H. Ryskind, *Hubert: An Unauthorized Biography of the Vice President* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1968), 98-99.

⁴⁵Frederick Manfred, “Hubert Horatio Humphrey: A Memoir,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Fall, 1978), 93.

to combatting leftist figures within the newly formed DFL Party, and was the person who brought Humphrey into the Union for Democratic Action (or UDA) – a liberal Democratic caucus specifically dedicated to rooting out communists in the Democratic Party – in 1946.⁴⁶ In January 1947, the UDA would change its name to the Americans for Democratic Action (or ADA). From 1947 to 1948, Humphrey and his lieutenants were active leaders within the state chapter of the ADA, whose specific aim was to rid the Democratic Party of communist influences and support the party’s internationalist outlook. It is interesting to note that Anderson spent a great deal of time in the period just after the merger outlining the history of the Farmer-Labor Party and its antecedent movements such as the Grange movement and the Nonpartisan League. These handwritten notes appear to date from about 1945 to 1946, and may in fact be the first historical outline of the full Minnesota agrarian protest movement. She often used the phrase “Tradition of Protest” in these notes (a phrase later used by a number of historians – including Arthur Naftalin and Rhoda Gilman – when referring to the Farmer-Labor Party or the wider agrarian political movement). Anderson was appointed the nation’s first female ambassador (to Denmark) by President Truman in 1949. She was then later appointed ambassador to Bulgaria.⁴⁷

In any case, the merger was officially completed by April 1944, and from that point on, the two parties became one. Even so, the question of whether Democrats or Farmer-Laborites would dominate the new party was still unanswered. Both sides initially seemed happy with the arrangement, and both were given control of various DFL committees in an effort to share power amicably. Later, Benson and his supporters would complain about

⁴⁶Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 139, 142.

⁴⁷Eugenie Moore Anderson Papers, Box 13, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Eugenie Anderson Papers]; see also Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 578.

“Humphreyites” edging them out of the party. However, if Elmer Benson was dissatisfied with the results of the merger in 1944, his personal papers do not reflect this attitude. In his correspondence between April and June of 1944, Benson authored few letters of note, and none which shed any significant light – critical or otherwise – on the recent merger. Instead, he seems to have turned his attention to collecting newspaper articles of interest – most of which relate to issues that he either personally championed or apparently found interesting.⁴⁸

Elections: 1944 and 1945

Starting in 1944 the newly merged DFL Party ran candidates in elections, and for the first time since the early 1920s, Minnesota once again became a two-party state. However, the election of 1944 did not yield the gains that the former Farmer-Laborites and the Democrats had hoped for. It had been anticipated that the new DFL Party would combine the existing voter bases of both parties. However, the results of the 1944 election did not bear this out. Instead, the 1944 DFL Party totals were less than the previous combined totals that both parties had earned in the 1942 elections. Even so, President Roosevelt once again carried the state (although by a slim margin). In terms of state politics, the Republicans still had the edge – although the new DFL Party did manage to win two metropolitan district congressional races. It would be some time before the merger would bear more satisfactory electoral fruit.⁴⁹

An early glimmer of the future prospects of the DFL emerged in the spring of 1945. In the Minneapolis city elections that year, the energized Hubert H. Humphrey ran again for

⁴⁸Elmer Benson Papers, Box 18.

⁴⁹Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 119.

the mayor's office – facing the same opponent (Republican Marvin Kline) that he had faced in 1943. Humphrey's star had now risen in the new DFL Party, and his support came from a broadened left-of-center base with a strong labor component – as well as organizational support from the national Democrats. Humphrey's role in the 1944 merger had raised his status within the new DFL Party as well, and he was able to call in support from Elmer Kelm, the State Democratic Chair. Furthermore, Humphrey had skillfully created links (forged earlier) with both labor and business to propel his run for Mayor of Minneapolis in 1945. Having few rhetorical tools to employ against the surging Democrat, Mayor Kline accused Humphrey of being in league with “communists” during the campaign. Humphrey was forced to publicly deny associations between himself and communists within the newly formed party – demonstrated by a speech text from his 1945 campaign.⁵⁰ Despite Kline's attempt at red-baiting, Humphrey won the race and became Mayor of Minneapolis. However, the experience of facing charges of associations with communism apparently added to Humphrey's determination to create a broad-based liberal DFL Party free of any communist influence, and this policy would drive much of his intra-party agenda between 1946 and 1948.⁵¹

The Post-Merger Struggle: 1946-1948

Between late 1945 and 1947, there were many changes both domestically and abroad which affected DFL Party politics. The first and most obvious was the end of World War II and the formation of the United Nations. In addition, the beginnings of the Cold War

⁵⁰Hubert H. Humphrey, 1945 mayoral campaign speech text, Humphrey Papers, Box 24.

⁵¹Gary W. Reichard, “Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey,” *Minnesota History*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), 52.

between the United States and the Soviet Union (initially centered in Europe) created a political shift among American leftists. Whereas in 1942-1945, the impetus for leftist groups had been to seek alliance with liberals as a means to support the war and advance the international socialist cause (through support of the Soviet Union's war with fascist enemies), the end of the war and President Truman's anti-communist policies starting in 1946 led them in the opposite direction. With the threat of international fascism removed, they had little reason to continue an alliance with a party that now held a hostile stance towards the Soviet Union. The emergence of the former Vice President and Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, as a figure to the political left of Truman gave the leftist Democratic faction (and other leftist groups) a viable presidential candidate to support in the 1948 election. The Benson wing of the DFL (and Elmer Benson himself) would strongly support Wallace for President from 1947 to 1948. In Minnesota, their initial goal would be to control the DFL Party and direct its delegates to vote for Wallace at the upcoming national Democratic convention.⁵²

Throughout 1946 and 1947, the national Democratic Party leadership and rank and file began to move towards two ends of the political spectrum. On the right were those who supported President Truman and his policies, including his anti-communist and internationalist foreign policy. Specifically, this included support for the "Truman Doctrine" and the Marshall Plan. On the left were a minority of Democrats who coalesced around the leadership of Henry Wallace. Wallace was known as an outspoken advocate on agrarian issues and was critical of Truman's anti-Soviet and interventionist foreign policy. Wallace

⁵²G. Theodore Mitau, "The Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party Schism of 1948," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 34, No. 5 (Spring, 1955), 190; see also Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 169, 178.

had been removed from the Vice Presidential spot on Franklin Roosevelt's ticket in the 1944 election, and had been replaced by Harry Truman because of the controversies that Wallace had generated during his term as Vice President. These controversies included praising the Soviet Union during a 1944 tour there. Wallace had then served as Secretary of Commerce from 1945 until he had been removed from that office by President Truman after Wallace had made statements which were critical of American foreign policy. By 1946, Wallace was more outspoken, calling Truman's anti-Soviet policy closely aligned with "British imperialism." Wallace later gave an even more critical speech in 1947 which harshly criticized Truman's anti-communist intervention in Greece and Turkey. From that point onward, Wallace was considered to be a prominent critic of Truman – going so far in March 1948 as to suggest that Truman's policy was about to plunge the world into war.⁵³ Wallace and his supporters' views differed from the Truman Administration's approach on both foreign policy (which they felt was too interventionist) and domestic policy (in which they advocated a more active federal role in support of agrarian causes). By 1947, Wallace had made the decision to challenge Truman for the Democratic presidential nomination, and support for Wallace within the party's leftist ranks was significant. In Minnesota, this would mean support from the Farmer-Laborite Benson wing within the newly-created DFL Party. In the meantime, Hubert Humphrey had become a prominent member of the Democratic caucus which generally supported Truman and other more conservative post-New Dealers. This situation would mean serious conflict within the Minnesota DFL in 1947 and 1948.⁵⁴

⁵³“Truman Invites War’ – Wallace,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 19, 1948.

⁵⁴Mitau, “The Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party Schism of 1948,” 189-192.

The resignation of the State DFL Party Chair, Elmer Kelm in 1945 also opened the door to further factionalism within the party. Kelm had been a critical figure in the merger negotiations, and was widely viewed as being a compromise figure acceptable to the national Democrats and not beholden to the Farmer-Laborite faction. His exit for an appointment at the federal level created an opportunity for the Farmer-Laborites to exert more control over the party leadership. As part of the merger deal, they had been given control of the DFL Executive Committee, and – upon Kelm’s resignation – they used a provision within the party rules in January 1946 to appoint a replacement chair without a statewide vote. The committee also took the ominous step of changing the existing weighting of DFL delegates, giving more power to urban areas – an action that heavily favored the urban counties of Hennepin, Ramsey and St. Louis in the upcoming caucuses (in effect, giving the majority of party representation to these urban-labor base regions). Although these actions were challenged, there were enough votes within the party in 1946 to confirm this course of action, especially since the Benson wing still had significant sway over its labor base, including much of the CIO, and the old Democratic base was still less numerous than the former Farmer-Labor base.⁵⁵

This shift in the DFL Party in early 1946 essentially placed the former Farmer-Laborites of the Benson wing in control of the party’s organizational structure. This faction included bona fide communists and other leftists who were supportive of Benson’s political agenda, and whose political views tended to be doctrinaire leftist. This viewpoint included greater calls for state intervention in economics and a policy of non-confrontation with the Soviet Union. This shift in the party’s power structure was significant, since the goal of

⁵⁵Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 131-133.

Humphrey and the Democrats in 1944 had been to create a newly formed left-of-center party within Minnesota, but one without any significant radical influences. However, the former Farmer-Laborites' assertion of power through the DFL Executive Committee – and then within local and district meetings – essentially put them in charge of the party by early 1946. For Humphrey and his like-minded supporters, this was a disaster. For them, the loss of the party leadership threatened their entire liberal constituency. This would become a serious issue that would split the party between 1947 and 1948, and would also manifest itself in state-level presidential politics as well.⁵⁶

Even so, by this time, Humphrey had established himself as the public face of the DFL as its most visible and charismatic figure as Mayor of Minneapolis. However, Humphrey's busy schedule as mayor was one of the factors that created opportunities for the Benson wing to assert their influence within the party in 1946 – even after the DFL Executive Committee had made its aims clear. Humphrey later noted how the “radicals” had taken control of the DFL:

Then I relearned another lesson: Our conventions ran over Saturday and Sunday. Many people had to leave early on Sunday afternoon to drive back home, some of them as much as three hundred miles. Farmers who had a neighbor milk the cows for them on Saturday night and Sunday morning had to get home for the evening milking. City people wanted to get back to their families, to get ready for the next week's work. But the left wing stayed on. They used their old tactic of keeping the convention in session very late. Then, when enough of our people had gone, they modified the state party constitution, increasing the size of the executive committee, filling those offices with their people to get control of the party structure.⁵⁷

In this passage, Humphrey not only explained some of the logistics behind this takeover in 1946, but also highlighted the cleavage between the rural-agrarian and urban-labor wings of

⁵⁶John Earl Haynes, “Farm Coops and the Election of Hubert Humphrey to the Senate,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Apr., 1983), 202-205; see also Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 136-138, 164.

⁵⁷Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man*, 105.

the nascent DFL. There were in fact, tangible reasons relating to these divisions – which had also existed in the former Farmer-Labor Party and explain (at least in part) – why the former Farmer-Laborite Benson wing’s bid for power in 1946 was successful. Humphrey – aghast at leftist control of his newly formed party and suspicious of the new leadership’s intent – wisely refused to accept nomination for any office that might lead to political failure or remove him from the Twin Cities area. Instead, he would run again for Mayor of Minneapolis in 1947 – and once again he would win. Even so, Humphrey began his campaign for the 1948 Senate race almost immediately after winning re-election as mayor.⁵⁸

Humphrey later claimed that he detested communists and their subservience to Moscow. In 1941, he had noted their “flip-flops” on the war issue, when they had labeled World War II an “imperialist war” until a week before the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The next week, Humphrey had noted that *The Minnesota Leader* had “change[d] its tune” and had called for American intervention in Europe against Germany. As long as the war lasted, the alliance between communists and their hard left allies on one hand and the party liberals on the other hand lasted. But even as early as 1946, Humphrey noted that his support for Truman was making him a target of the left wing of his own party.⁵⁹

Ironically, Elmer Benson himself seemed to have moved beyond the scope of state party politics starting in 1946. Shortly after his wing of the DFL took control of the party leadership structure, Benson began to focus on other activities. He spent most of his time between 1946 and 1948 outside of Minnesota working for a number of leftist causes and organizations. He became a leading figure within the National Citizens Political Action

⁵⁸Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 131-136.

⁵⁹Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man*, 103-105.

Committee (NCPAC), a newly formed national leftist umbrella group headquartered in New York City. Benson became very active as a leader in the group, often authoring statements, making appearances and conducting correspondence on the group's behalf. In May 1946, Benson authored the group's statement on the world food crisis, and much of his correspondence in 1946 was sent out from his office in New York City.⁶⁰ Benson's intense activity with NCPAC would last until his involvement with the Wallace presidential campaign. Benson declared his open support of Wallace as early as March 1947, when – in a radio broadcast over WCCO radio in Minneapolis – Benson criticized President “Truman's new imperialism” and rejected the concept that the United States should “become the new custodian and financier [sic] of the Tottering [sic] British Empire.”⁶¹

In the meantime, the 1946 elections proved that political transitions were in the making. The elections signaled the end of the career of the former Farmer-Labor Party's longest serving figure, Henrik Shipstead. Shipstead had remained one of the most outspoken isolationist members of the Senate right up until the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. He had voted for American entry into the war after Pearl Harbor, but even then was critical of future U.S. overseas commitments and military activity. He also opposed conscription in 1942 and continued to express fears that the United States would be drawn into continuing European geo-political intrigue after the war. Even at the very end of the war (in August 1945), Shipstead expressed open skepticism about the American need to have intervened militarily.⁶² These isolationist sentiments continued even after the war and led

⁶⁰Elmer Benson and NCPAC “Statement on the World Food Crisis,” May 13, 1946, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 20.

⁶¹Elmer Benson, text of speech broadcast over WCCO radio, March 15, 1947, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 20.

⁶²Shipstead Papers, Box 12; it is clear from several letters that Shipstead remained skeptical about the need for war in the first place and about the current administration's ability to conclude an effective peace.

him to be a prominent Senate critic of the impending American entry into the United Nations in late 1945.⁶³ He was only one of two Senators to vote against American entry into the UN, claiming that:

Common sense tells me that the political and military obligations inherent in this treaty supersede the power of the Congress to control our military resources, and lay down the basis for our foreign policy.

Shipstead's sentiments and his vote against the American entry into the UN in July 1945 opened him up to a challenge from the Stassen/internationalist wing of the Minnesota Republican Party. Shipstead – a Senator since 1923 – was defeated in the 1946 Republican primary. Shipstead's isolationist views – even among Minnesota Republicans – were solidly in the minority by then.⁶⁴

The DFL Party showings in the 1946 general election were even worse than their results in 1944. No major shifts occurred, and the Republicans as a group remained firmly in control of the governor's office and the legislature. In addition, the Republicans recaptured the two congressional seats that had been taken by the DFL in the 1944 elections. The only bright spot for the DFL that year was their victory in the Eighth District (which included the Iron Range region) where the DFL candidate, John Blatnik, had sailed to victory. Politically, Blatnik was firmly in the Benson camp, and his victory strengthened the Benson wing's control of the DFL Party. Humphrey and Blatnik thus became two of the party's major stars – but representing competing factions. Blatnik's victory would fuel the fire of conflict within the DFL between Humphrey and his supporters on one side, and the Benson wing on the

⁶³Barbara Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1968* (St. Paul, MN; Minnesota Historical Society, 1973), 93-96.

⁶⁴Bernard Lemelin, "An Isolationist Politician in an Internationalist Era: Senator Henrik Shipstead of Minnesota and the United Nations, 1945–1946," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 01/2007; 37(1):56-57.

other – although it should be noted that both Humphrey and Blatnik refused to publicly criticize the other.⁶⁵

However, as the Benson wing was working to strengthen its hand within the DFL, Humphrey was working to weaken it. Starting in 1947, there was the beginning of a shift of the CIO away from the Benson wing and towards Humphrey, especially in Minneapolis. This was the direct result of Humphrey's communications with Philip Murray, the national head of the CIO. Murray – like many labor leaders in the immediate years after World War II – had begun to turn away from doctrinaire leftism. He also understood that Humphrey was an electable figure, but could not win the upcoming Senate race without control of his own party or significant union support. Benson wing supporters within the CIO presented an obstacle, since they were unwilling to abandon the leftist politics that Murray now objected to. Starting in 1947, Murray attempted to instill more national leadership over the Minnesota CIO unions. He found a strong supporter in Robert Wishart, a local CIO figure who was willing to promote Murray's agenda of loosening the Minnesota CIO unions from the Benson wing's grasp. Wishart worked throughout 1947 and 1948 to re-align the CIO unions to steer clear of Benson wing politics and to support Humphrey, and met with at least a certain degree of success in this regard.⁶⁶

At the same time, Humphrey began to receive significant support from outstate farm cooperative organizations. Although such farm co-ops were no longer a swiftly growing agent of economic change and had reached their peak in the 1930s, they still remained significant in their scope and membership across the state – especially among farmers in the

⁶⁵Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 297-298; see also letters from early 1948 in which Humphrey states that he "supports" Blatnik in his upcoming campaign, Humphrey Papers, Box 26.

⁶⁶Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 155-161.

rural regions. Many of these coop organizations had also been associated with the Hjalmar Petersen-led, rural-agrarian wing branch of the old Farmer-Labor Party. The sentiments of most coop members – and especially the leadership of coop organizations – were firmly in support of Humphrey in his quest to wrest control of the DFL from their old factional nemesis (the Benson wing). The co-op groups often arranged for Humphrey to speak at local gatherings, and also worked in close conjunction with the AFL – creating (ironically) a new and unique farmer-labor political initiative. Later, the co-ops would encourage significant pro-Humphrey DFL participation in the 1948 caucuses in the rural areas as well.⁶⁷

By March 1947, the struggle within the DFL had burst out in the open. Orville Freeman – a strong Humphrey ally, State Secretary of the DFL Party, and the only member of the DFL Executive Committee to oppose the Benson wing’s agenda – announced in the *Minneapolis Tribune* that communists controlled the DFL Association (a group which had emerged from the old FLA). As such, Freeman maintained that the press should do more to differentiate between the activity of the Association and the DFL Party itself. Humphrey and his allied ADA figures also joined in this rhetorical point, and continued to hammer home the same theme through much of 1947. The internal struggles of the DFL would now be played out to the media – and to the public at large. Although this strategy was risky (since it invited censure by the party leadership), Humphrey and his allies apparently thought that enhanced public scrutiny of the party would benefit their cause.⁶⁸

⁶⁷John Earl Haynes, "Farm Coops and the Election of Hubert Humphrey to the Senate" *Agricultural History*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (April, 1983), 201-211; see also Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, 107, 221.

⁶⁸Jay Vessel, "Right Wing Move to Rid DFL of 'Left' Association," *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 18, 1947, 13 and "Roosevelt Hails Humphrey 'Comet': Harmony Marks A.D.A. Parley," *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 22, 1947; see also Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 164; the headline for the *Minneapolis Tribune* for March 18, 1947 reported on a failed assassination attempt on Humphrey’s life the previous month ("3 Shots Fired at Humphrey: Bullets Follow Threats Against Mayor’s Life") – an indication of the seriousness of the situation.

In late 1947, Humphrey's wing achieved a significant victory. Earlier that year, the Benson wing had decided to create a new league under party auspices aimed at recruiting college students: the Young Democratic Farmer-Labor organization (or YDFL). Humphrey and his supporters – many of them either college students or faculty at the University of Minnesota and a few other Minneapolis-St. Paul area colleges – saw the YDFL's creation as an opportunity to assert their influence. Party oversight of the initiative was lacking, and Humphrey and his supporters used their connections on college campuses to recruit supporters to fill the ranks of the new league. When the YDFL held its first meeting in November, Humphrey's supporters – aided by his lieutenants such as Orville Freeman, Arthur Naftalin, Eugene McCarthy, Donald Fraser and Walter Mondale (then a student at Macalester College) – were able to wrest control of the YDFL away from the DFL Party leadership structure in a deliberate and concentrated action. Although the YDFL itself had little influence on party decision-making, this public show of force in Humphrey's favor created favorable publicity for Humphrey, formed a new base of support for his candidacy, and reinforced the notion that the Humphrey wing was stronger and more popular than the entrenched Benson wing.⁶⁹

The DFL Executive Committee leadership – dominated by the Benson wing and disgusted by the YDFL's display of support for Humphrey – reacted to the situation on the evening of December 8. Committee member Herman Griffith issued a long and scathing official denunciation of Humphrey as being an instigator who had essentially taken control of the YDFL away from the party. Griffith accused Humphrey of being “a new threat to the common people” who had “the fullest support of the reactionary papers in Minnesota” in his

⁶⁹Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 300-301; see also Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 166-168.

quest to organize “disgruntled and discredited forces” to secure his (Humphrey’s) Senate nomination.⁷⁰ This attempt to discredit Humphrey and alienate him from the DFL base did not work, however. The reaction against the denunciation was immediate and uncompromising. Charles Bannister, a YDFL leader, labeled Griffith an “extreme left wing leader” who had turned on Humphrey because of the latter’s opposition to communism. John Moriarty, head of the DFL Party from Griffith’s own home district, stated publicly that Griffith’s views did “not represent the viewpoint of party members in St. Louis County.” Humphrey himself proudly embraced the denunciation, stating that “It is a distinct honor to be singled out for attack by the group in the DFL Party which Griffith represents.”⁷¹ In private however, Humphrey showed less confidence, since he had entered the political fight of his life. In the aftermath of the denunciation, he was desperately sending out messages in the hopes of gaining enough support to overcome the power of the entrenched state-wide DFL leadership. Humphrey confided that it was “time to count [my] friends” and further outlined his alliance with AFL and CIO labor (and specifically his connection to Philip Murray of the CIO). Humphrey further declared that he would not “let this issue rest” and that “open political warfare” had been declared by Griffith and his supporters.⁷² Later, the DFL Executive Committee officially disbanded the YDFL organization. However, Humphrey had shown the strength of his support through his control of the organization, and his YDFL supporters were not about to fade away. The battle for control of the DFL was on.

⁷⁰“Statement by Herman Griffith, Adopted into the Record by the Executive Committee of the DFL Meeting Sunday, December 7, at the Radisson Hotel, Minneapolis,” Humphrey Papers, Box 26; Humphrey was indeed receiving consistently positive reports from the press, which no doubt aided him in his struggles in 1947-1948.

⁷¹“DFL Split Widens As Policy Group Score Humphrey,” *Duluth Herald*, December 9, 1947.

⁷²Letter of Hubert H. Humphrey to Earl Bester, December 9, 1947, Humphrey Papers, Box 26.

By early 1948, Humphrey had cast a wide net of support across the state. This included a loyal band of “lieutenants” who embraced his vision of the DFL as being a mainstream party of reform devoid of communist influence and without any association with the Wallace campaign. Chief among these supporters was Orville Freeman. Freeman – the lone pro-Humphrey member of the DFL Executive Committee – stood as one of the few party leader figures to openly support Humphrey’s efforts. Freeman himself was adamantly opposed to the Wallace campaign, calling it “unwise and reckless” and claiming that it would damage “revitalized liberalism.” Freeman also noted that the AFL was “almost totally” against Wallace’s campaign – which represented a recent shift, since the Benson wing had previously had so much of its support from the urban labor sector.⁷³ Freeman had also concluded an alliance with Harold Barker, the State DFL Chair – who by this time was moving away from supporting the Wallace campaign, and was looking for support from anti-Wallace DFL figures as a means to maintaining his leadership role.⁷⁴ Barker himself – a former Farmer-Laborite – had played to the Benson wing in 1946 in a bid to become state party chair. However, his own political leanings were apparently fluid, and by 1948 he was willing to change his allegiance in return for influence over party patronage [see below]. Freeman would become one of Humphrey’s strongest allies in the struggle against the Benson wing Farmer-Laborites throughout 1948, and his positions on DFL committees would be used to great effect. Freeman’s alliance with Barker would likewise prove to be critical.⁷⁵

⁷³“Wallace & 3rd Party Movement,” January 18, 1948, Orville Freeman Papers, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, Gale Family Library, St. Paul, MN [hereafter Freeman Papers].

⁷⁴Letter of Orville Freeman to Harold Barker, January 2, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 26.

⁷⁵Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 176.

Another group (the “Minnesota Peoples Political Federation”) was also quickly formed to support Humphrey in his efforts and to conduct fundraising efforts. This committee waged a letter-writing campaign on behalf of Humphrey to raise funds specifically for the purpose of combatting the opposition Farmer-Laborites within the DFL. Calling the former Farmer-Laborites “the pro-Russian group” who rejected “the American Way,” the group labeled success in the current intra-party struggle as critical to saving the DFL from “the communist-Russian side” while providing a viable opposition to Republican politics. The money raised was to be used for “advertising, radio and direct mail campaign” for “critical areas” in the state.⁷⁶ The hyperbole of this outreach was at least somewhat effective: Humphrey’s forces would enjoy steady financing throughout 1948, and this would prove to be a significant factor.

Humphrey also received significant support during the 1948 party struggle and campaigns from the labor sector. This included the AFL, who by 1948 had turned away from their support for the Benson wing and the Wallace campaign. Humphrey himself was in contact with William Green (then President of the AFL) as early as January 1948, and their communications reveal a growing alliance which continued until after the DFL caucuses in April had been concluded. AFL support for Humphrey was present before these caucuses, and afterward during his primary and general campaign. Also, AFL labor voter registration reached a peak in 1948, and much of this vote would go to Humphrey.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Letter of Minnesota People Political Federation to “Fellow Minnesotans,” [undated – likely early 1948] Humphrey Papers, Box 26.

⁷⁷Letter of William Green to Hubert H. Humphrey January 16, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25; Letter of David J. McDonald to Hubert H. Humphrey, March 1948 Humphrey Papers, Box 25; Letter of Hubert Humphrey to William Green, May 4, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 1; see also Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 206.

Moreover, the efforts of Robert Wishart (Philip Murray's CIO envoy) within the Minnesota CIO had shifted much CIO union support to Humphrey's cause by mid-1948, and the influence of the ADA within the Democratic ranks was showing as well. In fact, by early March 1948, the CIO leadership within Minnesota had begun to swing its support over to the Humphrey side, causing considerable strife within its ranks.⁷⁸ Within a short time – and after brutal in-fighting – the Minnesota CIO forced the ouster of pro-Wallace CIO figures within their organization, laying the groundwork for greater labor support for Humphrey.⁷⁹ Although the CIO would not endorse Humphrey in 1948, it would not be the bastion of support for the Benson wing that it had been in the past. Together with strong support from the AFL, Humphrey in 1948 was indeed “labor's candidate.”

In early 1948, the nature of this intra-party struggle turned towards presidential politics, and would remain centered on this issue for much of the rest of the year. The Benson wing-controlled DFL had originally envisioned Wallace as being their official presidential candidate in 1948. However, as it became clear that Wallace would be unable to effectively challenge Truman within the Democratic Party, Wallace and his supporters moved towards launching a third party presidential campaign instead. This created a challenge for the Benson wing DFL leadership, since the DFL Party was officially tied to the national Democratic Party, and was theoretically obligated to support President Truman (whom they detested). This issue of DFL support for Wallace in 1948 would become a critical one within the party's struggles that year.

⁷⁸“CIO Ballot Fight Flares: Textile Union Joins A.D.A. Against Leftists,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, March 10, 1948.

⁷⁹“5 CIO Officials' Ouster Sought As Wallace Backers,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 12, 1948; see also “CIO Fight Flares On Third Party: Top Leaders Face Abuse,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, March 16, 1948.

The Humphrey forces looked to early 1948 as the time to take control of the party's leadership structure, and organized themselves with this specific intent. By most accounts, Benson's absence from state party politics combined with overconfidence on the part of the Benson wing within the DFL contributed to the Humphrey wing's success. Humphrey also reached out to Howard Williams in an effort strengthen his appeal to former Farmer-Laborites who might be won over. Although Williams had a long history of associating with leftist causes, by 1948, he had shifted his stance towards support of liberal politics instead. Another key change was DFL chairman Harold Barker's move away from the Benson wing and the Wallace campaign, In January Barker announced that he would not participate in the DFL effort to support a Wallace campaign.⁸⁰ This may have been part of some deal reached earlier with Humphrey since – a short time later – Humphrey instructed the Democratic National Committee that he was assigning all of his federal patronage powers over to Barker. Barker himself trumpeted the new agreement in a letter to Senator Howard McGrath (then Chairman of the Democratic National Committee) a short time later.⁸¹ The DNC Executive Director, Gael Sullivan, immediately sent a letter to Humphrey asking him if this arrangement was, in fact, legitimate.⁸² Humphrey himself confirmed his endorsement of the patronage arrangement two days later via telegram.⁸³ Humphrey's price for support from Barker was high, but it would make a critical difference.

Humphrey and Freeman were then able to call a meeting of the DFL Central Committee (bypassing the hostile Executive Committee) in February 1948. By this point, Humphrey's support had grown within the DFL, and they were able to outnumber their

⁸⁰Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 175-176.

⁸¹Letter of Harold Barker to Howard McGrath, March 5, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

⁸²Letter of Gael Sullivan to Hubert Humphrey, March 8, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

⁸³Telegram of Hubert Humphrey to Gael Sullivan, March 10, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

Benson wing rivals at the meeting. The Humphrey-friendly Central Committee then shifted the composition of the DFL Steering Committee – which oversaw and ruled over the DFL precinct caucuses. This action put the DFL Steering Committee firmly under the control of Humphrey supporters, and this would later become an important factor in the DFL struggle.⁸⁴

Although Humphrey and his supporters had triumphed at the February DFL Central Committee meeting, Humphrey himself noted that “the biggest battle is yet to come” – referring to the looming precinct caucuses (scheduled for April 30).⁸⁵ These caucuses would determine the leadership composition of the DFL in 1948. By this time, Humphrey’s early successes were attracting more support. He received a number of encouraging letters of congratulations in early March along with promises of general support and financial funding to aid him in his continuing quest to wrest control of the party. At least some of this support was arranged or encouraged by Orville Freeman.⁸⁶ Humphrey himself was effusive in his thanks to would-be supporters and quickly acknowledged their congratulations – often asking for additional continuing support as well.⁸⁷

It seems reasonably clear from archival materials dating from March to April 1948 that there was considerable dissension within the DFL ranks on the issue of delegate status and the legitimacy of certain caucus votes and other official party business. Many DFL local meetings passed conflicting resolutions regarding the nature of membership, delegate status, and voting procedures. It is also apparent that allegiance within local meetings was often split along pro-Benson/Wallace and pro-Humphrey/Truman lines. However, by late April, the

⁸⁴Mitau, “The Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party Schism of 1948,” 190.

⁸⁵Letter of Hubert Humphrey to Robert C. Bell, March 8, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

⁸⁶Letter of Hubert Humphrey to Orville Freeman, March 4, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

⁸⁷Letter of Hubert Humphrey to Frank O’Gorman, March 3, 1948; Letter of Hubert Humphrey to Gerald Mullin, March 4, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

trend appeared to be moving towards the ejection of Wallace supporters from within the DFL.⁸⁸

The most specific reason for this related to the DFL constitution itself, which forbade any support for a third party candidate outside of the Democratic Party structure. When the Benson wing DFL members proclaimed in mid-April their intent to support Wallace in the presidential race against Truman, the DFL Steering Committee struck back decisively. Orville Freeman issued a decisive imperative on April 19 which essentially sought to bar the Benson-Wallace supporters from the impending DFL caucuses. In a letter drafted on DFL State Central Committee stationery, Freeman instructed all DFL county chairs that the DFL constitution “clearly establish[ed] our affiliation with the Democratic Party” and that efforts by “Wallace third party officials to abrogate” this affiliation with the national Democrats (and Truman) made any such “adherent” an inadmissible delegate – and thus unable to “participate” in the DFL caucuses.⁸⁹ The timing of the letter – just eleven days before the caucus – was no doubt influential in shaping caucus results.

Humphrey was further aided in his struggles by supportive coverage and editorials from the mainstream press. In particular, an article appeared in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* shortly after the March convention which vilified the Benson wing and the Wallace campaign, and which portrayed Humphrey as being a brave, resistant hero and anti-communist stalwart. The article’s author – L. D. Parlin – effectively labeled Benson and Wallace as pro-Soviet hacks pursuing revenge by seeking to prevent Humphrey’s election “at all costs.” They were further portrayed as communist dupes and essentially traitors to the

⁸⁸“Resolution: Detroit Lakes DFL Central Committee,” April 18, 1948, Francis Monroe Smith Papers, Box 2.

⁸⁹Letter of Orville Freeman to DFL County Chairmen, April 19, 1948, Francis Monroe Smith Papers, Box 2.

liberal cause, since they were willing to throw the Senate election to Republican Joseph Ball instead of supporting their own party frontrunner (Humphrey). Humphrey was further praised as being “the only DFL leader today who is feared by the GOP in a statewide election.” The article was a significant endorsement for Humphrey – not just in his current struggles within the DFL – but as a candidate in the general election. For own his part, Humphrey proudly embraced the title of leader of the anti-communist group within the DFL, and used it as a rallying cry for his Senate campaign and for the wider struggle within the party.⁹⁰

The April 30 caucuses were a fractious affair. In some cases, separate caucuses were held along factional lines, and the legitimacy of some precincts’ and counties’ outcomes would not be determined until later by the DFL Steering Committee. Much of Humphrey’s support came from rural districts, and from caucuses organized by Orville Freeman in Hennepin, Ramsey and St. Louis counties (which excluded Wallace supporters). Within Hennepin and Ramsey counties, there was considerable discrepancy and many procedural conflicts over legitimate delegate status and official representation. The competing caucuses in those counties necessitated rulings recognizing only one set as being official. It was at that point that DFL Steering Committee stepped in and effectively negated the Benson/Wallace caucuses, and endorsed the Humphrey/Freeman caucuses. In the wake of these official decisions in his favor, Humphrey was swift to claim triumph.⁹¹ The mainstream press aided him in this quest, portraying him as the victorious leader of the anti-Wallace wing of the DFL.⁹² On May 8, Humphrey publicly proclaimed that “our party has experienced a rebirth” and called the Wallace campaign a “threat” that had galvanized ordinary Minnesotans to

⁹⁰L. D. Parlin, “Third Party Strategy Shifts,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 28, 1948.

⁹¹Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 182-191.

⁹²“Humphrey Forces Map New Drive,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, May 2, 1948.

support his cause within the DFL. Humphrey predicted future success in any remaining struggles with the Wallace/Benson wing, and even declared his intention to “drive the Wallaceites out of the party at the June 12 Brainerd state convention.”⁹³ On May 12, he himself pointedly embraced the title of being “the leader of the Minnesota DFL right wing forces which recently trounced the Wallace faction.”⁹⁴

Humphrey built further on his anti-communist persona at the Hennepin County DFL Convention on May 14. In a lengthy speech laced with grand rhetoric, Humphrey declared that the DFL had now become a party “free of any ‘unity deal’ with communism” and that the DFL had refused to become “the tail of world-wide political kite that finds its strings moored in the Kremlin.” He further rejected both extremes of the political spectrum, criticizing both Republican “reactionary” and fascist and communist “totalitarian” politics, and praised the party’s current agenda of moderate progressive reform. In addition, Humphrey claimed that the recent “fight within the DFL Party” had been part of the world-wide struggle against communism – an effective argument in this period when East European countries were being closed behind the “iron curtain.” Unlike “Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Roumania and other countries” the struggle against communism in Minnesota had been successful, and the DFL under his leadership had foiled the attempt of “a handful of people” in their bid to achieve “conquest of a major political party in Minnesota.”⁹⁵

Humphrey’s anti-communist liberalism (as well as his dynamic rhetorical abilities) was appealing and growing, and was enhanced by what had now become a well-financed statewide campaign. Humphrey also enjoyed extensive support from labor in the general

⁹³“DFL Factions Still Battle,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, May 9, 1948.

⁹⁴Hubert Humphrey, Press Release Statement, May 12, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 3.

⁹⁵Hubert Humphrey, “Address Before Hennepin County DFL Convention,” May 14, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 26.

contest, including personal support from William Green (the President of the AFL).⁹⁶ In addition, there was a strong alliance between both the AFL and sections of the CIO aligned with the ADA – as well as support from the rural regions with the farm co-ops. Altogether, this had become a significant base of support within the DFL for Humphrey.⁹⁷ Thus, in the wake of the April 30 caucuses, Humphrey’s forces had not only triumphed within the party, but had shifted the support of much of the organized labor movement and the rural-agrarian liberals towards their candidate in the general election.

When it became clear to the Benson wing that Wallace would not be able to run with DFL support, and that they were losing control of the main party structure, they made the decision to leave the DFL Party and hold their own separate convention. The official DFL convention in June at Brainerd was thus essentially boycotted by the Benson wing, which instead convened earlier in Minneapolis (in May).⁹⁸ There, the Benson wing declared itself to be the “Progressive Democratic Farmer-Labor Party.” This new Progressive DFL (or PDFL) then further asserted that their convention and structure was the actual DFL Party, and in this effort they apparently hoped to retain as much of the party’s base as possible. By May 1948 however, Humphrey and his allies were in firm control of the existing DFL Party – and the Benson wing had been driven out. These former Farmer-Laborites now staked their entire future on the viability of the Wallace presidential campaign and their attempt to gain support from voters for their new PDFL Party.⁹⁹

Indeed, the PDFL/Wallace faction did not go down without a fight. Even after the results of the April 30 caucuses had dealt them a stunning blow, and they had essentially

⁹⁶Letter of Hubert Humphrey to William Green, May 4, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

⁹⁷Letter of Hubert Humphrey to Florence Fredricksen, March 17, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 25.

⁹⁸Mitau, “The Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party Schism of 1948,” 192.

⁹⁹Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 173-177.

withdrawn from the official DFL Party structure, they continued to maintain that they were the true heirs of the “pro-Roosevelt Democrats” and that the Farmer-Laborites constituted “80%” of the DFL base (a statistic which by this point was an obvious exaggeration). The PDFL, under the leadership of such figures as James Youngdale, continued to blast Truman and Humphrey and denied that there was – in fact – any such thing as a “national Democratic Party.” Instead, they asserted, the PDFL wing and the pro-Wallace campaign were the essence of the Farmer-Laborite tradition which represented true reform, and that all other campaigns in the state were essentially “Republican” in nature.¹⁰⁰

The PDFL’s doctrinaire leftist candidates – with their limited appeal, their uncompromising support for Wallace, their diminishing base, and their disdain for Truman’s anti-Soviet policy – found few adherents and many critics. It should also be noted that the recent advent of the Cold War and the closing of the “iron curtain” across Eastern Europe no doubt played a role in increasing the numbers of voters who favored Humphrey’s anti-communist stance. As noted earlier, Benson himself was very focused on the national Wallace campaign and was often absent from Minnesota during this period. Worse for the PDFL, since 1946 a major shift had occurred in labor’s support for the old Farmer-Labor leadership. As noted earlier, the AFL was anti-communist by 1947, and recent developments in Europe only hardened this attitude. The CIO was nominally more sympathetic to the Benson wing, however, efforts by Philip Murray and Robert Wishart to steer Minnesota CIO unions towards Humphrey had been at least partially successful. Although the CIO did not endorse Humphrey during the April 1948 caucuses, shifts in the CIO had prevented it from

¹⁰⁰James M. Youngdale, “Letter submitted to ‘Everybody’s Ideas’ Column,” *Minneapolis Star*, May 7, 1948, Elmer Benson Papers, Box 21.

becoming a solid core of support for the Benson wing as well. Thus, without their urban-labor base to back them in their support of Wallace and the creation of the PDFL in 1948, the Benson wing had much less to draw upon than the rising Humphrey. Thus, the PDFL in 1948 was merely a party leadership without any significant voter base.¹⁰¹

The names of these competing “DFL” parties then became a major issue, since state law prevented any two parties from having similar names. Only one of the groups could legally use the phrase “Democratic-Farmer-Labor.” The PDFL sought to pre-empt the DFL in this regard by filing its list of candidates first, thus beating their rivals to claiming the “Democratic-Farmer-Labor” title. Initially, the Republican Secretary of State accepted this approach – which in effect barred the DFL from using its own party name. This caused considerable furor within the DFL, and was only resolved with an order from the Minnesota Supreme Court (which eventually recognized the DFL’s list of candidates as being legitimate). However, the question of which movement was the “real” DFL remained an unsettled matter. The PDFL group then decided that contesting the primary elections within the existing DFL party would be their best chance to demonstrate their strength. And so, the decision was made to run PDFL candidates in the DFL primary races. The winner(s) of these races would thus be the ultimate indication of voter sympathies, and demonstrate which party was the “real” DFL. This final test of popularity between the two competing factions took place in the 1948 DFL primaries, which were held in September.¹⁰²

The final result of these DFL struggles was Humphrey’s resounding victory over the PDFL candidate (James M. Shields) in the Senate primary in September 1948 – as well as the

¹⁰¹Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 170-172, 178.

¹⁰²“Primary Election Returns On Election Held September 14, 1948” [Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1949], <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/archive/sessions/electionresults/1948-09-14-p-man.pdf>, accessed December 16, 2014.

defeat of the rest of the slate of PDFL candidates. There was now no question that the Benson wing's approach had been widely rejected by the DFL voters at large. Forced to abandon any pretense of association with the DFL, the Benson wing officially released the PDFL Party title and renamed their organization the "Minnesota Progressive Party." However, this new party would retain only a very small and dwindling base, and had little influence on the general election.¹⁰³

Humphrey's general election campaign left no doubt that he was running – not just as a candidate of reform – but also as a candidate against communist influence on the left. In September 1948, he stated quite clearly his rejection of communist-inspired leftism:

I feel somewhat like you do about the Communists. I detest them, I detest their philosophy and political strategy, and their notions at home and abroad. All my political life I have been outspokenly opposed to Communists and Communism. I have opposed them both within and outside my party. I think it is now clear that the DFL Party has finally rid itself of its Communist and fellow traveler element . . .¹⁰⁴

In the 1948 general election, Humphrey was elected to the Senate (defeating the incumbent Republican Senator Joseph Ball by a significant margin). President Truman carried Minnesota in the Electoral College as well. In the last days of the campaign, and in the bitterest of ironies, it was Henry Wallace himself – desperate to support Democrats whom he thought represented his political outlook – who had endorsed Humphrey for the Senate late in the race. The reaction to this endorsement from Elmer Benson – Wallace's own national campaign chair – was a stinging public rebuke of Wallace. The Benson wing's erstwhile political champion – and the main reason they had bolted from the DFL in the first place – in the end had stabbed them in the back. The fate of both the Wallace campaign and

¹⁰³Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 203-204; see also Shields, *Mr. Progressive*, 314-317.

¹⁰⁴Letter of Hubert Humphrey to N. J. McLeod, September 1, 1948, Humphrey Papers, Box 1.

the hopes of the embittered and friendless Minnesota Progressive Party were now sealed. The DFL Party did not attain a majority in the state legislature or capture the governor's office in the 1948 election. However, they did elect candidates in four of Minnesota's nine congressional districts, including the political newcomer, Eugene McCarthy. Over time however, the DFL Party would become a major force to reckon with, and the 1948 election represented the real transition to Minnesota's balanced two-party status and the final end of the state's farmer-labor movement.¹⁰⁵

The elections of 1940, 1942, 1944, and 1946 lacked any luster for the Farmer-Labor Party and the nascent DFL. The elections of 1940 and 1942 proved that the Farmer-Labor defeat of 1938 represented what appeared to be a lasting trend. In an effort to form a majority party, and separated by few apparent issues, the Farmer-Laborites merged with the Minnesota Democratic Party in 1944. After the end of World War II however, politics on the American left shifted significantly. Most liberals favored President Truman's confrontational handling of the Soviets in Europe, while the doctrinaire left remained opposed to hostility towards the USSR. The specter of communism affected labor's sentiments, and after 1946 they increasingly flocked towards the liberal end of the spectrum, leaving the Benson wing of the DFL without a substantial base by mid-1948. Humphrey's and Freeman's efforts to organize attempts to take control of the DFL from the Benson wing succeeded in 1948 with the help of this changing shift in support from labor – as well as support from the rural-agrarian sector of the DFL. Humphrey's efforts were validated by the caucus results in April and by pro-DFL victories in the September primaries against PDFL challengers.

¹⁰⁵Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 209-210.

The Humphrey wing's takeover of the reins of the DFL Party in 1948 would prove to be long-lasting. In an era when the charge of "communism" would reach its greatest threat in the American mind, there was little chance of Benson's old Farmer-Labor militants regaining control of the DFL. Humphrey himself would turn his attention to a long series of new political struggles – this time at the federal level. He won his Senate race in 1948, and would remain in that office until he was elected to the Vice Presidency under President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. Humphrey would run for President as the Democratic nominee in 1968 – barely losing to the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon. In 1970, he sought – and easily achieved – re-election to the Senate from Minnesota. He passed away in 1977, and many consider him to be the greatest political figure in Minnesota history.

The DFL Party itself would slowly rise to great prominence from the 1950s through the 1970s, dominating much of Minnesota's politics. Orville Freeman would be elected the first DFL governor in 1954, and would later serve as Secretary of Agriculture under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Arthur Naftalin would be elected the first Jewish Mayor of Minneapolis in 1960. Donald Fraser would later serve as a Representative in the U.S. House and serve as Mayor of Minneapolis as well. Eugene McCarthy would later be elected to the Senate, and in 1968 his presidential campaign against Hubert Humphrey in the Democratic primary race would pit two of the oldest DFLers against each other on a national scale. Also in the 1960s, Walter Mondale was also elected to the Senate, and would later become Vice President under Jimmy Carter in 1977. In 1978 however, the DFL would suffer its worst electoral defeat since 1948, losing both of the state's Senate seats and the governor's office. Since that time, state politics have remained relatively balanced between the two major parties.

In 1980, Elmer Benson (then 85 years old) published a major summary of the political events of the 1940s and his views on them in an article in *Minnesota History*. Benson remained firm in his assertions that Humphrey had little to do with the creation of the DFL, and that the political stands that he (Benson) had taken in the 1940s against both Humphrey and Truman were fully warranted.¹⁰⁶

Harold Stassen went on to enjoy a long and varied political career, but never achieved his goal of being elected President of the United States. After his service in the Navy, Stassen was assigned to oversee the negotiations for the United States' entry into the new United Nations organization in 1945. Stassen's most credible run for the presidency occurred in 1948, when he was a major contender within the Republican ranks who possessed experience disproportionate to his relatively youthful age. Stassen was denied the Republican nomination in 1948. However, he would run again for president – sometimes as a Republican, and then later as an independent – well into his senior years.¹⁰⁷

Harold Stassen's old political foe – Hjalmar Petersen – had faced increasing loss of influence after his run for the governor's seat in 1942. Petersen had played no major role in the party merger negotiations in 1943-1944, and later, Petersen accepted a position with the federal government. In 1946, Petersen attempted to run for governor again – this time as a Republican – but was defeated in the primary. In 1954, Petersen ran again for the Railroad and Warehouse Commission, this time as a DFL candidate. He won the election, and served another six years in that capacity.

¹⁰⁶Elmer A. Benson, "Politics in My Lifetime," *Minnesota History*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Winter, 1980), 154-160.

¹⁰⁷Albin Krebs, "Harold E. Stassen, Who Sought G.O.P. Nomination for President 9 Times, Dies at 93," *New York Times*, March 5, 2001.

And finally, Arthur C. Townley, the man who had started the Nonpartisan League movement in North Dakota back in 1915 (and who was arguably the most important figure in the early years of the Minnesota farmer-labor movement), never gave up on his political expressions or ambitions. Although Townley had been thwarted in his control of the NPL in the early 1920s, and his “nonpartisan” strategy had been refuted by the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party’s success in the 1922 elections, he had tried – unsuccessfully – to regain prominence on several occasions. Townley spent many years laboring as a salesman and an oil speculator in relative obscurity from the late 1920s through the 1950s. It has already been noted that he attempted to run for the House and Governor of Minnesota in 1934 (see Chapter Five). However, his unsuccessful 1934 gubernatorial campaign would signal the end of his political ambitions for some time. Ironically, by the 1950s Townley – who himself had long been accused of being a “red socialist” earlier in his career – had become an ardent anti-communist speaker. In 1956, he attempted to run for the Senate in North Dakota as an independent, but polled less than 1% of the votes. He ran again for the Senate in 1958 – but again lost the race by a wide margin to his one-time protégé and long-time nemesis, William Langer. Townley died in a vehicle crash the following year.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸Kimberly K. Porter, “Arthur C. Townley (1880-1959)” entry in David J. Wishart (editor), *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 724; see also “United States Senate election in North Dakota, 1958” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Senate_election_in_North_Dakota,_1958, accessed April 7, 2015.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

With the victory of the Humphrey wing within the DFL Party in 1948 and Humphrey's triumphant election to the Senate in the same year, the remnants of the old farmer-labor movement in Minnesota either left the DFL Party or became assimilated into the Democratic-led structure. The farmer-labor movement in Minnesota came to an end – except for the remaining “Farmer-Labor” legacy in the state party's moniker. This name – the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party – has remained unchanged since 1944. Efforts to change the state party's name back to simply “The Democratic Party” or “The Democratic Party of Minnesota” were rejected by party regulars as recently as 1999.¹⁰⁹ Despite the struggle that occurred in 1946-1948, today's Minnesota Democrats seem to be proud of their “Farmer-Labor” heritage and the historic connection that the DFL title supposedly brings to that third party movement.

Minnesota has remained largely a two-party political system since 1948, with the notable exception of the Reform Party gubernatorial campaign of Jesse Ventura. Ventura became Minnesota's only third-party governor since the New Deal era when he was elected in 1998. However, Ventura's campaign was based largely on his own popularity, which had become significant by the time of his 1998 campaign due to his national exposure as a

¹⁰⁹Laura McCallum, “DFL Party Considers a Change,” *MPR News*, January 14, 1999.

television wrestler, supporting actor in movies (playing alongside such major celebrities as Arnold Schwarzenegger), and his Minneapolis radio talk show. Ventura openly broke with his Reform Party organization (initially started by H. Ross Perot) after a year in office over internal party politics. Ventura then remained an independent governor throughout the rest of his term. He served only one four-year term as governor (choosing not to run a second time). During his tenure in office, Ventura was dogged by controversy, routinely criticized by the local media, and often blocked by both the Democrats and the Republicans in the legislature. His attempts to create a larger third party movement were negligible and completely unsuccessful. Thus, despite the exception of Ventura's term as governor, the Farmer-Labor Party of the early-mid 20th century was really the only successful third-party movement that Minnesota has ever experienced.

Future Research

Despite the number of books and scholarly journal articles and other works which exist that cover the history of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota's history, there are needs for future research in this area or in subject areas closely related to it. Although extensive biographies of some of the movement's major figures exist, at least two of these works (James M. Shields' *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson* and George Mayer's *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*) are now fairly dated. While Mayer's book relies on a number of newspaper and archival sources, the Shields book is completely without documentation (although Shields was a close confidant of Elmer Benson and no doubt held insight that few writers on the subject could match). The most visibly lacking work in this regard is a current, comprehensive biographical narrative of Henrik Shipstead –

a four-term Senator and major political figure of the 20th century. As noted earlier, the major source for Shipstead's life is Martin Ross's *Shipstead of Minnesota* – which is even more dated than the books on Olson and Benson, and is also completely lacking in source documentation. There are also no current significant biographies on other prominent Farmer-Labor figures such as William Mahoney, Thomas Van Lear, Ernest Lundeen, Henry Shoemaker, or Ole and Paul Kvale (among others).

Minnesota's influential former Republican governor and "perennial" presidential candidate, Harold Stassen, also lacks a comprehensive biography. To date, there is no scholarly biography of Stassen – despite his stature as a major political figure both inside and outside the State of Minnesota. Stassen's long and varied political career (Governor of Minnesota, U.S. representative at the 1945 UN conference, 1948 Republican presidential candidate, special advisor to President Eisenhower, etc.) would make his biography interesting reading indeed. In addition, there seems to be little scholarly historical work in general on the Republican Party and its associated figures in Minnesota from 1918 to the 1940s, with the exception of Carl H. Chrislock's *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War*. However, that work focused mainly on the commission's activities during the war and the role of Republican Governor Joseph Burnquist in administering the commission.

Final Analysis

The Republican Party dominated Minnesota politics in the decades spanning the end of the Civil War until the 1920s. This leads to the question of why a credible political opposition did not emerge sooner than the farmer-labor movement in the 1920s. The answer

is that – with few exceptions – the Democratic Party in Minnesota simply did not enjoy any significant degree of support in Minnesota from after the Civil War until the late 1940s. Other movements did indeed arise (including bona fide third party movements), but these never really achieved any significant electoral success. These included the Grange movement of the late 1870s, the many efforts of Ignatius Donnelly to run as a candidate on a pro-agrarian platform, and of course, the Populist Party movement in the 1890s. Many of the issues championed by these earlier agrarian-based political movements were similar in principle to at least some of the agrarian planks of the Farmer-Labor Party, yet these movements failed to win elections. These groups had sizeable memberships and support at times, but never enough electoral support to win significant offices and enact alternative legislation.

The farmer-labor movement in Minnesota between 1918 and 1944 represented the only successful third-party movement in the state's history. No movement like it has existed before or since then, and because of this, an analysis of the movement and its history is indeed warranted. Questions and answers regarding the movement's nature and its successful rise – and demise – remain highly relevant to what was indeed an exceptional political chapter of Minnesota History.

The successful rise of the Farmer-Labor Party in the early 1920s was due to many factors, all of which coalesced during a unique period of American history. First, there were the progressive reforms of the early 1900s which allowed for greater citizen participation in the political party processes, specifically in selecting endorsed candidates. There were also technological innovations such as the use of automobiles in canvassing and campaigning (along with the construction of road systems which allowed greater access to all areas of the

rural regions). The proliferation of radio as a medium in the 1920s – and its extensive use by such figures as Floyd B. Olson – suggests that this new form of mass media may have played a role in transmitting political messages directly to the voters from the movement’s figures (with considerable emotional impact), thus bypassing more conventional media (namely, the mainstream newspapers, which were often unsympathetic to the Farmer-Labor platform).

No doubt, the lack of a credible opposition party within the state during the main period of the party’s success (1922 to 1938) contributed to the Farmer-Labor Party’s viability as well. As noted earlier, the Democratic Party in Minnesota simply did not have a substantial voter base from the late 1800s until the late 1940s, and was largely doomed to lose in the state’s elections. In fact, the Minnesota Socialist Party often did as well as – or better than – the Democrats in some urban areas until its sharp decline after World War I (for example, Thomas Van Lear had been elected Mayor of Minneapolis in 1916 as a Socialist). Given that there was no effective opposition to the Republican Party in that period, a genuine opposition movement – first within the Republican Party as “nonpartisan” and then outside the party as a third party movement – seems relatively easy to explain. In fact – given the small statewide size of the Democratic vote – the emergence of the Farmer-Labor Party could be viewed as a re-alignment of Minnesota politics from a one-party system dominated by the Republicans to a true two-party system (with the Democrats being the actual “third party” from 1922 to 1944).

More than that, the Farmer-Labor Party succeeded where its agrarian antecedents had failed because it was not solely an agrarian movement. Nor was it a movement that was formed and led chiefly by a rural-agrarian, populist-inspired leadership. It was, in fact, an entirely different kind of political movement. Unlike the earlier agrarian movements, the

Farmer-Labor Party was created and dominated by leaders with a socialist-bent who had emerged from an urban-labor political base where the organization and development of third party politics was the norm. For the many former Socialist Party figures who established the Farmer-Labor Party in the first place – especially William Mahoney and Thomas Van Lear – the tactics of political organization and the advocating of significant change appealed to broad working class constituents, and was a well-established trend. The initial inspiration of – and later the addition of – Townley’s rural-agrarian Nonpartisan League constituency to this urban-labor-led party gave the movement statewide appeal, and joined two disparate but equally dissatisfied groups of constituents who together created a significant anti-establishment electorate. The repressive nature of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety during 1917-1918 effectively alienated a number of German and Scandinavian rural-agrarian voters from the Republican Party, fueling Townley’s movement and turning them into anti-establishment voters. It also pushed the urban-labor and rural-agrarian wings together with its similar repression of both during the war. Although Townley’s movement had initially been wider and more influential, it would eventually be the Twin Cities-based urban-labor political leadership (through its use of the WPNPL) that would become the nucleus of the Farmer-Labor Party, and this nucleus would rise to essentially absorb the older rural-agrarian Nonpartisan League within Minnesota.

Despite the claims of some, the farmer-labor movement cannot be easily explained as the outgrowth of the work or the popularity of just one individual. Most commonly, Floyd B. Olson is cited as being the movement’s central figure without which the party would never have achieved any significant success. However, the party had indeed achieved success much earlier than Olson’s electoral victory in 1930 or even before his reforms of the Farmer-Labor

Association in 1925. In fact, electoral victories had been achieved by the Farmer-Laborites even before Olson ever became a party candidate. This is not to say that the movement did not have important figures that were critical to its success. However, this list of figures is longer and more varied than might be expected, and these figures displayed a degree of political differences based mainly on their embrace of either the rural-agrarian or the urban-labor base of the party. The most successful and enduring of these figures (Shipstead, Olson, etc.) were those who could effectively balance appeals to both the rural-agrarian and the urban-labor bases.

These leadership figures also played different roles depending on the phase that the movement itself was experiencing. In the early stages of the movement, Arthur C. Townley was undoubtedly the chief leading figure. His success in North Dakota starting in 1915 was the inspiration and the spur for the growth of the NPL in Minnesota beginning in 1917. Townley's re-location to St. Paul that same year ensured that Minnesota would be a main focus of his recruitment efforts. Townley was able to repeat some of his success in bringing farmers into the League in Minnesota from 1917 through the early 1920s. However, his efforts both to defend his waning position in North Dakota and extend the League's influence elsewhere meant that he would not be the only figure leading the Minnesota movement. This role was then filled by such alternative early leaders as William Mahoney and Thomas Van Lear, who were also successful in bringing Minnesota's urban-labor constituency together with Townley's rural-agrarian-based protest movement. Townley was thus important in the movement's early stages, but his insistence on remaining "non-partisan" clashed with the ambitions of the early Farmer-Labor leaders in Minnesota. As a result, these Twin Cities urban-labor leaders implemented their own statewide organization and control of the

movement, solidly moving it into the partisan realm of third party politics by 1922.

Townley's opposition to this approach signaled his decline in influence over the movement within the state.

The celebrity of Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr. aided the movement during its first campaign in 1918. However, Lindbergh was at the end of his political career at that time, and his controversial profile often worked against the party. Henrik Shipstead's 1922 campaign was the stuff of Farmer-Labor dreams: a dynamic common man-of-the-people canvassing the state in an automobile, speaking out boldly against larger economic interests, and championing the economic rights of farmers and laborers – and winning a stunning upset victory. Shipstead would remain a popular politician in Minnesota until the early-1940s. However, his tenure in Washington largely removed him from state party politics and worked against his status as a state party leader. Shipstead would become the party's elder statesman – vaunted for his ability to win elections and his position in the Senate, but scorned for his detachment with the state party and its other candidates. To claim that the movement was solely due to Shipstead's popularity would be problematic indeed.

Other Farmer-Labor figures that emerged in the 1920s were likewise important and influential. Magnus Johnson's upset Senate victory in 1923 gave the party temporary control of the state's Senate contingent – and reinforced its “common man” approach to politics. Other Farmer-Labor Congressional candidates – such as Knud Wefald and the Kvaales – remained stalwart party figures who consistently won races and worked to forward the party's national agenda. Later, figures such as Elmer Benson, John T. Bernard and Ernest Lundeen would become known for their strong and outspoken positions (and ones often not in sync with each other). Indeed, Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party had many public faces in

the 1920s and 1930s, and some – such as Elmer Benson and Hjalmar Petersen – displayed the conflicting sentiments that represented the rural-agrarian or urban-labor bases.

The real strength of the farmer-labor movement was its ability to effectively recruit voters and organize a new party structure, which sought support from an identified set of constituents, but also instructed those constituents on ways in which to support the movement. Political unity and a shared vision for the party were paramount to the movement's success – since as a third party the movement's staying power was considered questionable. It was under constant attack from its political opponents and the mainstream press. This is why party factionalism – which was often open in the Farmer-Labor Party, and fell along urban-labor and rural-agrarian lines (as well as ethnic divisions) – was harmful to the movement as a whole. The movement was most successful when it convincingly portrayed itself as unified bloc of earnest outsiders seeking a justified redress of economic grievances. Without unity of vision or leadership – or without a credible image as outsiders or reformers – the movement lost its steam and gradually went into decline. More importantly, the political marriage of urban-labor and rural-agrarian constituents was not meant to last. Their differences were too significant, and the changes wrought by American politics in the 1930s offered both groups of constituents at least some degree of political satisfaction and made their continued cooperation unlikely. The party never really resolved its stance on urban-labor leftism vs. rural-agrarian populism, and in the end, these two sectors of the party realized that they were not truly united.

However, just as the movement's rise to power in the early 1920s was fueled by many factors, so too was its decline in the late 1930s caused by numerous coalescing factors. By the late 1930s, much of the Farmer-Labor agenda had been replaced or preempted by the

federal efforts of the Roosevelt Democrats and the New Deal. Although there were significant differences in their platforms (which such figures as Elmer Benson were never remiss to remind President Roosevelt about), the significant federal intervention of the New Deal in the farm and labor sectors and their general reformist principles were enough to satisfy a critical mass of those constituencies. This defanged the farmer-labor movement and removed some of its most important electoral selling points. In essence, the continuation of such New Deal policies (e.g., support for agricultural subsidies and labor rights, etc.) obviated much of the need for the Farmer-Labor Party. Also, these national trends were far more influential and lasting than what could be legislated on the state level and so, many of the party's main issues that once galvanized its base in the 1920s and early 1930s had largely disappeared by 1938.

The fusion of the Farmer-Labor and Democratic parties occurred with great fanfare in 1944. This action also had the effect of bringing the Democrats together for the first time with the rural-agrarian Farmer-Laborites – many of whom were ethnic Scandinavians and Germans, and who would later ally with liberal Democrats in an effort to purge the party of the Benson wing urban-labor leadership. The end of World War II meant the end of the American alliance with the Soviets, and while the American hard left continued to champion the USSR, most labor groups turned away from open association with Soviet Russia. In doing so, they too shifted their support towards the liberal Democrats led by Hubert Humphrey. The struggle between 1946 and 1948 within the Minnesota DFL Party was chiefly decided by the Humphrey wing's determination to take control of the party and the support that they gained from labor, the rural co-ops (which largely overlapped with the rural-agrarian wing of the old Farmer-Labor Party), and the mainstream press. By 1948, the

Benson wing of the DFL had become a leadership clique without a substantial base after the DFL caucuses in April, and was thereafter cast out into the political wilderness.

There has also been the suggestion that the rise of Roosevelt Democrats nationally extended its coattails to the Minnesota branch of the Democratic Party, making it a stronger force and eliminating the need for a third party opposition to the Republicans in the 1940s. Norman Risjord noted in *A Popular History of Minnesota* that: “The long-dormant [Minnesota] Democratic Party had been rejuvenated by the New Deal.”¹¹⁰ However, there seems to be little evidence to support this point of view, since Democratic electoral figures as late as the early 1940s were still showing anemic electoral returns. No doubt, the role of Hubert Humphrey and his contingent of dedicated liberal Democratic followers provided fresh blood for the party and strengthened its appeal in the 1940s. However, these trends really did not occur until 1945-1948, and so it is somewhat problematic to conclude that the popularity of President Roosevelt led to the rise of the Democrats in Minnesota. In fact, as shown in Chapter Seven, Minnesota Democrats were seriously worried about the state’s presidential electoral votes going to the Republicans in 1944. This would suggest that the Democrats may have actually declined – or at best remained stable in their overall electoral power from 1938 to 1944 – which is hardly an argument for Roosevelt and the New Deal giving a re-birth to the Democratic Party within the state in 1944. The fact is that the Democrats needed the Farmer-Labor base added to their party in order to achieve a critical mass of voter support. Their gamble in 1944 in pursuing the merger had been risky, but in the end it had succeeded.

¹¹⁰Norman Risjord, *A Popular History of Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN; Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 375.

The lack of strong, unifying Farmer-Labor leadership after the death of Floyd B. Olson in 1936 no doubt also contributed to the party's decline. Olson possessed just the right political appeal, rhetorical passion, and diplomacy to balance the various wings and factions of the party in a way that maintained the Farmer-Labor coalition – and earn enough votes to win statewide elections. After his death, this lack of strong, unifying leadership led to factionalism centered on such figures as Elmer Benson (leading the urban-labor wing) and Hjalmar Peterson (leading the rural-agrarian wing). Neither had the ability to either bridge differences within the party or to work as effectively with establishment figures to smoothly legislate reform. The patronage issue – which had clearly existed during Olson's tenure in office – became a major campaign issue in 1938, and was one of Harold Stassen's main reform efforts once he had won the governor's office. This perceived corruption over the patronage issue put the Farmer-Labor Party on the defensive in 1938, and signaled a major transition from it being a party of reform to one defending its rather narrow interests.

The merger with the Democratic Party in 1944 meant the end of the Farmer-Labor Party itself, although the degree of influence of former Farmer-Laborites within the DFL was still undetermined until after the struggles within the party ended in 1948. Many general histories ignore this fact. In 1944, control of the party was relatively balanced between the former Farmer-Laborites and the resident Democrats. Shifts within the party starting in 1945 led to the Benson wing gaining control of the DFL in early 1946. It was the Humphrey wing's strongly organized anti-leftist campaign, and Humphrey's stunning Senate victory in 1948 that meant the real end of the farmer-labor movement within the DFL – and within Minnesota itself.

Final Thoughts

A movement which seeks to empower its constituents by appealing to their sense of self interest and formulating a grand vision of economic justice is at an advantage when their constituents are suffering from true economic injustice and their grievances are legitimate. Certainly, this was the case for many farmers and laborers in Minnesota in the 1920s and the early 1930s. Such a movement of reform starts to get on shaky ground, however, if it cannot deliver on its promises and/or revise its platform to appeal more to either its own radicals or to the moderate mainstream. In this sense, the party faced significant challenges because it was unable to fully deliver on many of its promises without taking stances that were too extreme or too moderate to satisfy both ends of its base. Eventually, the New Deal policies which favored farm pricing support and the legal right of labor to organize would provide significant governmental intervention on behalf of these two constituent groups. With these reforms permanently ensconced in the American political landscape through New Deal legislation, the Farmer-Labor Party's ability to advocate for significant reforms – and to present itself as an agent of change – became severely diminished by 1938.

It was this same self-interest of party members which also largely contributed to the movement's decline. The patronage issue – used frequently to grant jobs to party members and supporters – seemed like legitimate spoils to those who benefitted from such appointments. Such appointments also seemed to be justified by Farmer-Labor members by their economic grievances of the past. However, to the public at large, such use of state power appeared as an abuse of state power – which became an issue in itself by 1938, and one of the main reasons for the party's defeat at the polls that year.

In addition, almost ten long years of economic depression and over five years of government intervention via the New Deal and the statewide Farmer-Labor policies had led to a shift among voters by 1938. Both nationally and statewide, the voting public had shifted away from supporting greater government intervention in the economic sphere. This was manifested within Minnesota by the voters' severe rejection of Benson's run for re-election in 1938. On the national level, it was represented by the Republican gains in Congress in the 1938 mid-term elections. Politics is local as well as national – and this trend was firmly demonstrated in 1938.

Third party movements in America originate from dissatisfaction with some aspect of the status quo, and this dissatisfaction usually relates to economic domestic policy. They often emerge in instances where the two-party system has failed to effectively address issues raised by a significant constituency. Typically, third parties do not emerge to embrace the status quo. By their very nature, third party movements represent a protest against some aspect of the current economic system and the policies currently being offered up by the two major parties. Third party leaders, members, and voters often agree in broad terms on the issues that they oppose or support, but – like any major party – disagree on specific policy remedies, or the degree to which they should be pursued or applied. They may also disagree on leadership. Like any major party, a third party is composed of various factions which span a left-right spectrum (influenced by local concerns and other factors), which coalesce around various political leader figures. Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party was no exception to these trends.

It took considerable effort to create the Farmer-Labor Party as a viable third party entity within Minnesota. It was more difficult to take this budding third party movement and

make it into the main political opposition party within the state. Still more effort was needed to place its candidates in winning positions and to take control of the reins of state government. There were several instances of sudden and sweeping electoral changes (such as in 1922, 1930, and 1938). However most of the electoral patterns varied only gradually from election to election, curving in an arc either towards or away from the party's fortunes. The movement was not created overnight, nor did it decline instantly.

Even so, once the movement had reached its point of permanent decline, it did not simply vanish. The base of the party was too large to disappear after 1938, and too many figures needed the party as a base for their own political ambitions. Even when it became clear that the party would not rise again after 1942, the merger with the Democrats was tortuous and far from certain. It took a major concerted effort by national-level Democrats and the leadership of the Farmer-Labor Party in order to hammer out an acceptable political "marriage" between the two groups. The struggles for control of the new DFL Party from 1946 to 1948 demonstrate that the merger could indeed have led to the radicalization of the DFL Party in Minnesota and its disassociation with the national Democratic Party umbrella. If the Benson wing had won its battle for control of the DFL in the late 1940s, the state's political history – including the careers of its major stars – such as Hubert H. Humphrey and Walter Mondale – may have been quite different indeed.

In the decades since the success of the farmer-labor movement, so much has changed in terms of voter demographics and economic systems that many of the grievances of the 1920s and '30s would seem either outdated or irrelevant today. The percentage of the population who are small farmers in the United States has declined greatly since the 1920s, a long-term trend which many defenders of the yeoman tradition have bemoaned, yet one

which continued unabated into the early 21st Century. Even so, as American agricultural production became increasingly larger in scale, more productive and corporate (and, in some ways, a fulfillment of the ‘Country Life’ ideal of the early 20th century), federal subsidies to American farm entities not only continued but have grown substantially. These subsidies currently total about \$20 billion a year – and their continuation faces almost no serious political opposition from either Democrats or Republicans. This is the case despite the fact that the farm vote has contracted considerably since the 1920s, and the current political landscape often highlights questionable government spending as being scandalous.¹¹¹ This long-term shift represents a substantial political change from the 1920s. Then, small farmers were often struggling to make ends meet, and their demands for state or federal intervention on their behalf was often perceived as being audacious – even though the need for such intervention was apparently greater then. Today’s American farmers – only about 2% of the population – receive considerable federal government support in their enterprises. Even so, currently 97% of the 2.2 million farms in the United States are “operated by families – individuals, family partnerships or family corporations.” This would indicate that – at least on some level – the small farmer model has survived and is secure in its subsidization.¹¹²

Labor, on the other hand, has faced a different fate since the 1930s. Initially empowered by New Deal reforms in the 1930s, organized labor began to grow swiftly, with the American labor force reaching its peak of unionization in the 1950s (despite the check on unionization provided for by the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which curtailed at least some of the power and activities of unions in the United States). After several decades of relative

¹¹¹“Farm Subsidies: Milking Taxpayers,” *The Economist* (February 14, 2015), 26-28.

¹¹²Statistics from the American Farm Bureau Federation, <http://www.fb.org/index.php?fuseaction=newsroom.fastfacts>, accessed February 6, 2015.

stability, the percentage of unionized labor in America began to shrink by the 1980s as significant changes in the post-industrial economy reduced the need for factory and general labor. According to the most recent statistics available, union membership peaked just before 1960 when more than 30% of the American private work force was unionized. Today, a mere 6.6% of the private workforce is unionized.¹¹³ The decline of the American manufacturing sector starting in the 1990s also contributed to this trend. This shift from a general labor economy to a post-industrial service economy was not accompanied by a growth in unionization for most service industry workers. It is therefore easy to conclude that organized labor has lost much of its influence since the mid-20th century, and currently, trends are not favorable to extending unionization to other labor sectors. In recent years, the pendulum has swung more towards “right to work” laws in many states. Thus, the unionization of the American labor force is largely in retreat. This trend has spread out from general labor to include specialized unions such as government workers’ and teachers’ unions. Recent efforts by such figures as Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin to reduce the power of public employee unions is emblematic of this trend, as are the many “school reform” movements that seek to limit the power of teachers’ unions, or to eliminate them entirely.

Even so, much of the “safety net” created in the years of the New Deal remains secure. This includes not just Social Security, but also worker’s compensation, disability payments and unemployment insurance, guaranteed by both federal and state agencies. So, even though unionism is clearly in decline at this point in American history, much of the government system that supports the elderly, the unemployed, and the disabled remains firmly entrenched.

¹¹³“Organised labour and the law: Republicans v unions,” *The Economist*, March 7, 2015, 30-32.

The likelihood of a new and successful third party movement in Minnesota today would face significant – and likely insurmountable – challenges. In an era when “outsiders” can enter any party primary and run for endorsements (whether sanctioned by the party at large or not), the need to create an independent structure for alternative candidacies is minimal. In addition, the comprehensive and oppositional nature of today’s Republicans and Democrats makes it unlikely that major political issues will remain unaddressed. Today, large constituencies often have the ear of one of the major parties, and in some cases, both. While there may be a majority of voters who are dissatisfied with some major aspect of the existing system (a charge often heard repeated), there is typically no major movement or structure which can effectively recruit voters to the degree where they will support a third party movement to represent their views. The two-party system is alive and well within the United States, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Minnesota politics in the 1920s and 1930s was a major exception to that enduring trend.

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