

2011

The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis, 1934-1938

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THE POLITICS OF LABOR MILITANCY IN MINNEAPOLIS, 1934-1938

A Thesis Presented

by

KRISTOFFER O. SMEMO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2011

University of Massachusetts/ Five College Graduate Program in History

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DEDICATION

For my parents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Simply put, this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance, expertise, and support of an incredibly generous community of scholars. Chris Appy directed this thesis with patience and a keen eye towards refining both my arguments and writing. The insightful comments and critiques Jerry Friedman offered at every stage of the writing and research process were invaluable. Frank Couvares was always happy to listen as I worked out new ideas and also cleared up points of confusion. Peter Rachleff, and Dave Riehle readily answered my questions about Minneapolis labor history and pointed me towards a host of important archival resources. I owe a tremendous intellectual debt to Bruce Laurie. He urged me early in the early stages of this project to rethink the significance of the 1938 mid-term elections in tandem with the problems of labor factionalism. Since then I have benefited enormously from his incisive criticisms of my work and our many discussions about the politics of the New Deal. Fellow graduate students Richard Anderson and Gina Talley also graciously read through many dense (and painfully long) rough drafts of individual chapters. I also want to thank the University of Massachusetts History Department Graduate Studies Committee for funding this research. The staffs at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and at the Minnesota Historical Society were both exceedingly helpful handling my requests and answering my questions. Thanks also to Carol Strong of the Minneapolis Elections Office and Deb Bohler of the Hennepin County Elections for compiling and scanning election data. Finally, a very special thanks goes to Alanna Miki for all of her love and support.

ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF LABOR MILITANCY IN MINNEAPOLS, 1934-1938

SEPTEMBER 2011

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The militancy that helped prompt federal labor reform and the electoral incorporation of industrial workers exposed serious political fault lines within the so-called New Deal coalition. In particular, militancy and factionalism in the labor movement compromised the early electoral victories of the ruling Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota and New Deal Democrats nationally. Yet the landslide victory of Republican candidates in 1938 in Minnesota, as well as across the industrial North, was not a repudiation of the New Deal or the labor movement. These Republicans refashioned their party platform to accommodate key parts of the New Deal, including recognizing the legitimacy of collective bargaining. Liberal Republicans harnessed popular support New Deal social policy, but unlike Democrats they were free to criticize the supposed “excesses” of the New Deal- namely a militant and politicized labor movement. Minneapolis provides one case study to reconsider the impact of labor militancy on the development of New Deal liberalism.

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CHAPTER 1

LABOR MILITANCY IN MINNEAPOLIS

Minneapolis isn't like another city. Not like New York. It's not cosmopolitan. Nor is it like, say Detroit. Detroit is like a big company town- held down to the belt and the sales talk. Minneapolis is far more varied and more headstrong. Nor is it like Pittsburgh, which is crowded and smoky and tough like the steel it makes. Nothing like Kansas City, which has tried to be like Boston. Nor like Boston- St. Paul is proverbially the Boston of the Midwest. Minneapolis is like none of them. And yet, it shares the American common denominator with each of them.¹

During the Great Depression a deep current of social conflict coursed through every major US city and was, according to journalist Charles Walker, the “American common denominator.” Minneapolis was no different. Waves of strikes and protests throughout the 1930s wracked the city as unemployment skyrocketed and employers slashed wages. In 1934, Minneapolis became one of the flashpoints of a resurgent American labor movement. All too often, historians treat the bloody Minneapolis trucking strikes of that year either as an isolated event or part of an undifferentiated national trend of worker discontent. What these accounts typically ignore are the *politics* of labor militancy. There is a deeper and more complicated story beneath the trucking strikes that illuminates how significantly class struggle during the Depression reshaped the contours of mid-twentieth century American politics.

The immediate political ramifications of labor militancy in Minneapolis were multifold. The surge in labor militancy spurred by Section 7(a) of the National

¹ Charles Rumford Walker, *American City: A Rank-and-File History* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1937), 1.

Recovery Industrial Act of 1933 galvanized workers as a class in a diversity of workplaces. In Minneapolis, working-class protest took place in a unique political context. Most notably, a social democratic Farmer-Labor Party governed the state and a cadre of revolutionary socialist Trotskyists led the resurgent Minneapolis labor movement. The 1934 trucking strikes were therefore a tense moment when competing ideas about how to challenge the power of capitalism collided. In the wake of the trucking strikes, the Trotskyists hoped to translate their newfound organizational strength into political power within the Farmer-Labor Party. However, the Trotskyists' vision of transforming the Farmer-Labor Party into an outright labor party clashed with the Farmer-Labor leadership's efforts to build a strong cross-class electoral coalition. The militancy of the 1934 strikes also pitted insurgent labor radicals against the entrenched craft union leaders of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor. What divided the two factions was a deep-seated conflict over the political role of organized labor in modern industrial society. Organized labor clashed with the Farmer-Labor Party as well over the representation of the trade unions in party decision-making, a conflict made all the more problematical by the Farmer-Labor alliance with the Communist Party.

The internal conflict within the labor movement and the Farmer-Labor Party over the class character of electoral politics exposed the deeper and more complicated political loyalties of Minneapolis voters. Despite emerging political fractures within the Farmer-Labor Party and the labor movement, a coalition of workers, farmers, and middle-class professionals brought Farmer-Laborites into office by huge numbers in the 1936 elections. Insurgent, rank-and-file militancy

forged the disparate strands of worker protest into a social movement behind the policy initiatives of the New Deal. Labor militancy in Minneapolis and across the industrial North forced parties and the state to take the political demands of workers seriously. Many of those demands for economic regulation and expanded social welfare provisions resonated with members of other social classes. However, this powerful new electoral coalition centered on organized labor was a fragile creature. Throughout 1937 and 1938, labor factionalism divided workers and alienated crucial cross-class allies. These divisions foreclosed the social democratic possibilities of the New Deal, but not the longterm viability of liberal reform.

In 1938, only two years after the great triumph of liberalism, a landslide victory of Republican candidates drove Farmer-Laborites and progressive New Deal Democrats from office in the industrial North. Divided, dispirited, and reeling from a renewed bout of economic crisis, neither the Farmer-Labor Party nor the New Deal Democrats could reignite the urgency of the 1936 campaigns. These defeats, though, did not necessarily signal a repudiation of New Deal reform. The victorious Republicans were not rabid reactionaries committed to eviscerating the liberal, interventionist state. On the contrary, they refashioned their platforms to accommodate key elements of New Deal reform, including recognizing the legitimacy of trade unions and collective bargaining. Minnesota's Republican gubernatorial candidate Harold Stassen defined his campaign as a struggle against the twin forces of reaction and radicalism, thereby redefining his party as a *liberal* party. "New Dealized" Republicans like Stassen acknowledged that the political landscape had changed dramatically since 1933. They aligned themselves with the

popular support for New Deal social policy, but they remained free to criticize the “excesses” of the New Deal, namely a militant and politicized labor movement.

For the sake of space and scope, this study omits a number of factors otherwise central to a history of Minnesota during the height of the Depression. For one, this is specifically an urban study, and thus the political mobilization and class interests of farmers are dealt with only tangentially. Closely examining the basic antagonisms and conflicts of interest between farmers and workers could not be accommodated as the central arc of this study follows the largely urban issues that divided the Minneapolis labor movement and Farmer-Labor Party. Second, the history of Minneapolis’ twin city St. Paul is also largely ignored for two reasons. For one, despite being the state capital, St. Paul was not as important economically and politically as Minneapolis. Second, St. Paul in the 1930s looked dramatically different from Minneapolis. Paying sufficient attention to those differences would take additional chapters.

By focusing on Minneapolis, this thesis endeavors to provide a microcosmic example to understand the factors contributing both to the remarkable expansion and swift contraction of working-class politics in the 1930s. The organizational and political power of labor was critical to an enduring liberal realignment of American politics. Labor militancy put class antagonisms at the center of a powerful electoral coalition that was capable of fundamentally redefining New Deal liberalism. However, factionalism crippled the labor movement’s ability to press the state for more sweeping and even social democratic change at the national and state level from 1938 onward. This critical defeat of working-class politics foreclosed the labor

movement's ability to act as an engine of proto-social democracy, but it also reaffirmed a commitment to the basic tenets of New Deal liberalism among both Democrats and key segments of the Republican Party. Yet, as labor's political struggles in Minneapolis illustrated, another world was possible.

CHAPTER 2
CLASS STRUGGLE IN MINNESOTA

Introduction

The violent outbursts of labor militancy that shook Minneapolis in the summer of 1934 did not explode spontaneously. Nor were they merely the result of the economic crisis of the Depression. The unique political economy of Minneapolis, the metropolitan center of Minnesota and much of the upper Midwest, shaped a powerful form of social democratic politics that united agrarian protest with urban trade unionism. Beginning in the 1920s, Minnesota farmer-laborism railed against the merchants and bankers who ruled Minneapolis and laid a political foundation for the labor insurgency of the 1930s. This political context was complicated by the emergence of a committed corps of Trotskyist militants among the city's transportation workers. Thus, the 1934 trucking strikes were a tense moment when competing ideas about how to challenge the unchecked power of capitalism collided. Understanding the strikes and their impact on Minneapolis means parsing out the complicated politics of labor militancy.

The Political Economy of Transportation in Minneapolis

Straddling the Mississippi near its headwaters alongside Saint Paul, Minneapolis became the upper Midwest's major commercial and transportation hub west of Chicago. First by rail and then by highway, Minneapolis became the gateway for moving people and manufactured goods across the Great Plains. It was also the

distribution center for the agricultural products, timber, and mineral wealth of the west. Transportation made Minneapolis an important marketplace and financial center. This was especially true for agriculture, and the Minneapolis grain exchange became known (both affectionately and disdainfully) as the “Wall Street of the Northwest.”

In this developing world of corporate agribusiness, a bustling “craft economy” of urban commerce emerged clustered around the warehouses and wholesalers downtown where thousands worked loading and hauling goods throughout the city and the region.² Even before the Depression, the truck already displaced both the horse team and the railroad as the most efficient way to move products in, around, and out of Minneapolis.³ As journalist Charles Walker wrote:

... Minneapolis is at bottom a city of commerce and transportation, in fact as well as in spirit. Not only does the citadel of warehouses tell you that, but you breathe it in the atmosphere of her streets and her market place: those rows of semitrailers backed up to eight freight depots, the trucks on meat row and fish row, and the *fleets* of trucks loading at the city’s 991 wholesalers, or moving out of the city with everything from safety pins to cultivators to the villages and farms of the Northwest.⁴

The corporate consolidation of transportation and distribution, coupled with the mechanization of the teamsters’ craft, reinforced the drivers’ desire to retain a sense of dignity and independence as independent proprietorship gave way to wage labor. In Minneapolis as elsewhere, they looked to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) to help them reassert control over the work process and the terms

² For an insightful description of craft-based economies, see Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer’s Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3-10, 15-18, passim.

³ Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America’s Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 7.

⁴ Walker, *American City*, 2-3.

of their labor. The IBT considered drivers skilled workers on par with machinists or carpenters and organized them along strict craft lines depending on what kind of goods a driver handled. Under the leadership of Daniel Tobin, the IBT was a conservative, exclusive, and often xenophobic organization.⁵ The union's emphasis on strictly maintaining its distinction as a skilled craft often cut drivers off from other transportation workers like the "inside men" who loaded and unloaded the trucks.

While cities like Chicago developed a dense network of powerful craft unions, organized labor endured a stunted development in Minneapolis. Although drivers played a crucial role in the city's economy, the organizational structure and attitudes of the IBT limited the drivers' ability to challenge the authority of increasingly sophisticated employers. Confronting the drivers was the Citizens Alliance (CA), an association that represented a broad cross-section of Minneapolis employers to coordinate capital's resistance to organized labor. Formed in 1903, the CA was headed by the city's business elite and espoused a strident open-shop philosophy founded on "a defense of property and a defense of liberty... synonymous with the defense of the nation."⁶ The CA's economic clout directly influenced every branch of state government. In 1916 and 1917, the CA orchestrated the successful repression of a general strike called by the city's drivers

⁵ David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 61.

⁶ William 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), 15.

and warehouse workers and another called by the streetcar workers' union.⁷ Once the United States entered World War I, employers under the guise of the Minnesota Commission for Public Safety were able to assume nearly dictatorial power under the pretense of wartime emergency.⁸ Through its paramilitary arm the Civilian Auxiliary and with the aid of the Espionage and Sedition Acts, the commission effectively drove Minneapolis' only Socialist mayor from power in 1918.⁹ Through the legislature and the courts the power of labor was formally restricted; through the police, the National Guard, and Pinkerton agents, labor was forcibly beaten back.

The workers of Minneapolis could draw two competing, but not mutually exclusive lessons, from this formative period of working-class activism and labor repression. First, the overt class rule of the Citizens Alliance and the weakness of the craft unions convinced many workers of the need for independent political action to advance labor's cause. The election of a Socialist mayor indicated an emerging working-class consciousness among the city's workers. Yet the weakness of the Socialists' electoral coalition to withstand an assault from capital also highlighted the limits of class politics to win popular support. Moreover, the city and state's political institutions proved extremely susceptible to being seized or outflanked by capital. Second, workers realized they also needed powerful unions to act as autonomous organizations to defend themselves and their specific interests

⁷ "One Thousand Teamsters are Denied Rights," "City Council Hears Labor's Side of Story," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, June 16, 1916, 1; "Thugs and Gunmen Invade the City at Masters' Call," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, June 30, 1916, 1.

⁸ Paul L. Murphy, *World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States* (New York: Norton, 1979), 88-89.

⁹ Carol Jenson, "Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 43 (2) 1972: 43-57.

against employers and the state. The intertwined power of capital and the state proved to workers that winning even moderate concessions from employers would require a bitter and determined struggle. Yet too militant an action (like a general strike) could also provoke the full force of state repression. The preceding sketch of the Minneapolis political economy illustrates how the city's workers faced a problem endemic to the American labor movement: how to reconcile class-based electoral politics with "pure and simple" unionism. This problem would find a unique resolution in the revived surge of agrarian protest reshaping Minnesota's political culture.

Radical Farmers, Organized Workers

Even though men with names like Pillsbury, Crosby, Washburn, and Weyerhaeuser were still "bankers, or railroad directors, or the owners of the flour mills," by the mid-1930s Minnesota politics was dominated by people with names like Olson, Peterson, and Anderson.¹⁰ The movement that successfully challenged the political hegemony of Minneapolis' New England capitalists took shape in the 1920s as urban workers joined forces with farmers. David Brody argues that the rise of farmer-labor politics was a specific response to a steep decline in crop prices and the widespread postwar repression of organized labor. Crisis convinced both groups to renounce voluntarism, reconcile (or at least ignore) their intrinsic class differences, and seek a redress for their grievances through the state. However, once the federal government responded with limited farm subsidies and some

¹⁰ Walker, *American City*, 4.

protection for the railway brotherhoods in 1923 and 1924, both the AFL and its agrarian counterpart the Farm Bureau backed away from third party politics and radicalism in general.¹¹ While this is a convincing account from an elite perspective, Brody's analysis fails to address why farmer-laborism endured in places like Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Washington into the 1930s. Farmer-laborism was able to remain relevant beyond the mid-1920s wherever it could move beyond narrow economic interests and embrace a more expansive and malleable social democratic platform. A fluid definition of class politics united otherwise antagonistic social grouping together as "producers" against a parasitic elite to defend core American values against an exploitive and tyrannical status quo.¹² Farmers, workers, as well as the professional and intellectual fractions of the middle class rallied behind a program that allowed them to confront the agents of their exploitation and elect some of their own to high office.

Farmer-laborism in Minnesota emerged in the form of a mass social democratic party and won astounding early victories. In 1918, the state branch of the North Dakota-based farmers' association the Non-Partisan League (NPL) and the Working People's Nonpartisan Political League (WPNPL), the political arm of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor, cobbled together a third party out of a diffuse collection of groups that included disaffected progressive Republicans, socialists, prohibitionists, and isolationists under the "Farmer-Labor Party" (FLP) banner. The FLP advocated for state control over banks, mills, and grain elevators to check the

¹¹ David Brody, "On the Failure of U.S. Radical Politics: A Farmer-Labor Analysis," *Industrial Relations* 22 (2) 1983, 152-53.

¹² Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 16.

power of commercial and corporate agricultural interests based in Minneapolis and pledged to protect labor's right to organize. The FLP relied upon a democratic and decentralized party structure of membership branches. The basic units of the Farmer-Labor Federation (renamed the Farmer-Labor Association in 1925) were local Farmer-Labor clubs and affiliated economic organizations, chiefly labor unions. The FLP was organized as a bottom-up institution of farmers and workers that provided space for the divergent concerns of both groups.¹³ Following four years of party-building and organizing, the FLP went into the 1922 elections as a confident and insurgent party, winning both of Minnesota's US Senate seats, a Congressional race, and only narrowly losing the contest for governor.

From the onset, the Farmer-Labor Party was committed foremost to achieving electoral success and the leadership was fully prepared to compromise on its policies and politics in order to build the kind of broad-based coalition needed to win elections.¹⁴ According to its Declaration of Principles: "The Farmer-Labor movement seeks to unite into a political organization all persons engaged in agriculture and other useful industry and those in sympathy with their interests, for the purpose of securing legislation that will protect and promote the economic welfare of the wealth producers."¹⁵ Nevertheless, the FLP's principles and the

¹³ "How the Farmer-Labor Association Works," (St. Paul, MN: Education Bureau of the Farmer-Labor Association, 1936), 5, box 1, folder *American City* Farmer-Labor Party (Chapter 5), Conventions, 1934 and 1936, Charles Rumford Walker Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

¹⁴ Millard Gieske, *Minnesota-Farmer Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 32.

¹⁵ "Declaration of Principles," March 20, 1925, box 3, folder Educational Bureau Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, undated, 1925-1939, Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

party's very name differentiated the interests of farmers and workers from those of commercial and corporate concerns. The FLP directed farmer and labor discontent against specific capitalist institutions, such as mills, packinghouses, and the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, rather than capitalism itself. At its most effective, the FLP's "American concept of socialism" struck a difficult balance between the needs of farmers and workers.¹⁶ Both the FLP and the craft union leaders of the State Federation of Labor fully agreed with Selig Perlman's pronouncement that "labor needs the support of public opinion, meaning the middle class, both rural and urban."¹⁷ Farmer-Laborites effectively prefigured the central tenets of Keynesianism and advocated subsidies and price controls to aid farmers and collective bargaining to increase the purchasing power of workers. In a society wracked by economic inequality and crisis, a fluid (or ill-defined) conception of class conflict allowed the FLP to adapt its radicalism to suit the demands of shifting political realities to win elections in tough times.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression only added to the hard times of Minnesota's farmers and workers and expanded the appeal of farmer-laborism. The dynamic and charismatic Farmer-Laborite Floyd B. Olson was elected governor in 1930. Two years later, Olson was reelected and along with him were five US Congressional representatives and a working Farmer-Labor majority in the state house of representatives. Spurred by the deepening effects of the Depression and continued public discontent with the Republican Party, Olson

¹⁶ Arthur Naftalin, *A History of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1948), 73.

¹⁷ Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 160-61.

pushed the FLP further left. A member of the IWW while working odd jobs in the Pacific Northwest in his youth, he remade himself as a moderate liberal, first as a Democrat and then as the Farmer-Labor attorney of Hennepin County. As the Depression wore on he revived his radical reputation with fiery and vaguely anti-capitalist rhetoric. In a campaign speech assailing the Republicans in 1932, Olson avowed:

We are on the threshold of important changes in the social and economic structure and the foe is desperate. There is a new deal coming to the farmer, the worker, the masses generally who have been downtrodden throughout the ages. There is nothing that can prevent its coming- not even the Republican Party. The gods that this party has worshipped are beginning to fail them. That party has failed and is bankrupt because it has no vision of a new and fairer society.¹⁸

At the state convention of the Farmer-Labor Association in March of 1934, Olson famously declared: "I am not a liberal, I am what I want to be- a radical."¹⁹ Under Olson the Farmer-Labor Party advanced the idea of a "cooperative commonwealth" under which the state and federal government would own and operate public utilities and key industries along with producer and consumer cooperative management of the remaining large-scale enterprises.²⁰ Nevertheless, Olson's reforms fell rather neatly in line with those of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal, namely a state social security program, a partial moratorium on farm mortgages, and a progressive income tax. Even though the FLP's politics steered clear of

¹⁸ *Third Party Footprints: An Anthology from Writings and Speeches of Midwest Radicals*, James M. Youngdale, ed. (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1966), 250.

¹⁹ Quoted in Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 188.

²⁰ Speech by Vincent Day, no date (ca. 1934), box 2, folder Speeches by Vincent A. Day, undated, Vincent Alpheus Day Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

revolution, the distinctly radical components of farmer-labor rhetoric stuck out conspicuously during the first years of the Depression.

In this context, the precise political role of the labor movement was still an open question in the early years of Olson's administration. By the early 1930s, The Farmer-Labor Party had successfully mobilized both farmers and urban voters, but it now needed the critical support of organized workers to cement its political presence in Minnesota. Unions could provide candidates with campaign funding and volunteers, and especially the crucial electoral mobilization of workers. Organized labor, too, required the assistance of a sympathetic state to overcome the immense resources and concerted resistance of organized capital. The revitalization of organized labor still posed a number of interrelated problems for farmer-labor politics. If the FLP fought too aggressively to rebuild the unions, the party could be perceived as privileging labor's interests over those of farmers. If the party failed to assist in the establishment of successful unions, then urban workers would have little material incentive to continue to align with the FLP. While the Farmer-Labor leadership initially looked to the moribund AFL unions to rebuild the labor movement, a new culture of working-class activism was beginning to assert itself in opposition to conservative and exclusive craft union tradition. Under the aegis of the city's teamsters union, an insurgent labor movement in Minneapolis tested the Farmer-Labor Party's commitment to radicalism as well as its ability to act as an impartial arbiter of social conflict.

Roots of an Insurgency

While the Farmer-Labor Party was consolidating its political strength, the trade unions struggled to rebuild. In the aftermath of the 1916 teamsters' strike, the General Drivers and Helpers Local 574 settled into obscurity as a small union of only 100 odd members. Although the union never won a single strike until 1934, union membership did entitle a driver to slightly better wages working for one of the few unionized hauling firms in the city.²¹ However, Minneapolis' strict open shop economy made the union's bargaining position precarious and the leadership of both the local and international loathe to call strikes even in the face of drastic pay cuts.²² William Brown, the local's longtime president, described the dismal early years of Local 574 in 1937:

I joined the Drivers' Union in 1919. We had our regular meetings and the fellers would beef until two in the morning. I once proposed an organization campaign, but a couple of members got in an argument as to who'd moved the heaviest piano that day. That ended the discussion.... Finally for some reason or other, the Teamsters [Joint] Council [32] gave me the job of International Organizer in 1933. So I decided to work with a few guys who knew how to organize. We had dwindled down to ninety members. After the coal owners had refused us recognition, I proposed to the Teamsters Council that we strike. I said, "If we lose we're no worse off than we are, this is no union we've got anyway." The workers want to organize if they can get confidence in us. If we win the coal strike we can organize the whole trucking industry.²³

²¹ Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Monad Press, 1972), 38.

²² Letter from Daniel J. Tobin to Clifford Hall, April 23, 1930, Mss 848, box 15, folder 3, Farrell Dobbs Papers at the Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison.

²³ Walker, "A Militant Trade Union, Minneapolis: Municipal Profile," *Survey Graphic*, January 1937, 29, box 1, folder, Newspaper clippings and magazine articles, Local 574 strike 1934, Walker Papers. Brown's claim that there were 90 members falls between the estimates given by Teamster militants Jack Maloney and Farrell Dobbs, who put the total membership at around 175 and 75, respectively, before 1933. Maloney, it should be noted, acted as Dobbs' fact checker for his books on the Minneapolis teamsters. Jack Maloney interview, April 21-25, 1988, Twentieth-

Among those “few guys who knew how to organize” were Carl Skoglund and Vincent Raymond Dunne. Skoglund emigrated from Sweden to Minnesota in 1911 and shortly thereafter joined the Socialist Party and the IWW while working as an itinerant laborer. In Minneapolis, Skoglund, who considered himself first and foremost a revolutionary internationalist, was inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and helped found the state branch of the Communist Party (CP) in 1919. Vincent Dunne was also a Wobblie and a Socialist from the north woods of Minnesota and joined Skoglund in the CP. Both Skoglund and Dunne were active in the labor movement and the Farmer-Labor Association before being expelled in 1926 from the two organizations for being Communists.²⁴ The CP provided a platform for their radical activism and Dunne ran as the party’s candidate for the US Senate in 1928. Later that same year, however, Skoglund, Dunne, his two younger brothers Grant and Miles, and fifteen other comrades were driven from the party for supporting the “Left Opposition” of Leon Trotsky against Joseph Stalin.

The Dunne brothers and Skoglund joined the Left Opposition’s US wing, the Communist League of America (CLA), led by James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, and Martin Abern. The Dunes and Skoglund were particularly close with Cannon, a Midwesterner and former IWW organizer on the Iron Range, whom they met in 1924 when he was still a ranking member of the CP.²⁵ Trotskyism, Cannon explained, was the

Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project, Minnesota Historical Society, Oral History Division, 38; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 65.

²⁴ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 32.

²⁵ Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 248. Cannon was also responsible for helping to smuggle Trotsky’s *The Draft Program of the*

“restoration, the revival, of genuine Marxism as it was expounded and practiced in the Russian revolution.”²⁶ Trotsky argued that revolution was a struggle of working-class self-emancipation, both inside and outside Russia, whereas Stalin’s parochial and regressive idea of “socialism in one state” relied on authoritarian party bureaucracy to suffocate proletarian activism.²⁷ The Stalinists fought ferocious battles with their rivals on the left, as the Communists and Social Democrats did in Germany, rather than unite to defeat their enemies on the right. Horrified by these developments, Trotsky argued that the workers must lead the party, not visa versa. Under Stalin, he argued, the party was disconnected from the real struggles of the proletariat and concerned only with the consolidation of its own power. The American Trotskyists organized the Communist League as a vanguard party, composed of the most class-conscious elements of the proletariat, to guide the masses through the process of raising class consciousness, recasting defeats and ideological missteps as the formative experiences leading eventually to genuine proletarian revolution.

Trotsky’s interpretation of revolutionary socialism was fundamental to the organizing strategy of the Minneapolis militants. Trotsky advanced the concept of *permanent revolution*: “A revolution which makes no compromise with any single form of class rule, which does not stop at the democratic stage, which goes over to socialist measures and to war against reaction from without.”²⁸ Trotsky’s emphasis

Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals out of Russia after the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928.

²⁶ James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 1.

²⁷ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991).

²⁸ Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (New York: Progress Publishers, 1931), 22.

on militancy as the key to raising working-class consciousness resonated most deeply with the Teamster militants. “The essential task of the American Communist Left,” Trotsky counseled his US followers in 1929, “consists of direct action upon the revolutionary elements of the [working] class.”²⁹ While the Communists denounced organizing within the AFL as “trade union fetishism,” the Trotskyists opted to work within the mainstream labor movement. Cannon considered the CP’s brand of dual unionism to be wholly counterproductive because it isolated the revolutionary militant in “artificial and ideal unions of their own.” Instead the revolutionary needed “to plunge into the labor movement as it existed and try to influence it from within.”³⁰ This relationship to the labor movement underpinned the idea of “entryism,” burrowing within an institution to transform it into an organ of revolutionary activity, as a core principle of the Trotskyist movement. The trade union organizing united workers and revolutionaries together in a genuine mass working-class organization. For the revolutionary in the trade union the next step was preparing the workers for a militant confrontation with capital.

The Trotskyists made Minneapolis a base for the small breakaway communist sect and set to work building a following among the city’s drivers.³¹ Skoglund and the Dunnes chose to organize the trucking industry because of its extensive reach into nearly all aspects of the city’s economy and because Minneapolis was the central transit hub for goods being moved across the upper Midwest. Declining wages and longer hours also afflicted trucking and hauling; for

²⁹ Trotsky, “Greetings Sent to the Weekly,” *The Militant*, December 14, 1929.

³⁰ Cannon, *American Trotskyism*, 121.

³¹ Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 347-49.

example, drivers and warehouse workers put in fifty-four to ninety hour weeks just to earn twelve to eighteen dollars.³² The fact that leading members of the Communist League already worked as drivers made trucking an obvious entry point. Skoglund, blacklisted from most jobs, found work in the coal yards hauling heating fuel throughout Minneapolis during the city's brutal winters as an independent trucker. Dunne worked in the yards as a weigh master at a small coal firm owned by a family of sympathetic socialists. Organizing the coal yard drivers, the Trotskyists surmised, would require militant direct action to break through employers' rigid defense of the open shop.

The Trotskyists' organizing was both aided and compromised by the labor reforms enacted by the New Deal. Negotiating the role of state intervention posed theoretical and practical problems for the Trotskyist militants. Early New Deal labor reform acknowledged the rights of organized labor, but did little to ensure its enforcement. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) established by NIRA was designed to reduce "destructive competition" by having industries create "codes of fair competition" that would regulate prices and wages in order to stimulate economic growth. Federal legislation, especially Section 7(a) of 1933's National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), provided an important catalyst for the shop floor insurgency experienced throughout the US in the early 1930s.³³ Labor unions were considered a critical mechanism to keep firms in line with the codes and to increase the purchasing power of workers. Section 7(a) relied upon the

³² Walker, *American City*, 85.

³³ Michael Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency, Radical Organization, and New Deal Labor Legislation," *American Political Science Review* 83 (4) 1989: 1257-82.

voluntary compliance of employers to recognize unions, forcing unionists across the country to wage prolonged and often violent recognition strikes against the determined resistance of business. These strikes were directed almost equally against the government for its failure to uphold the labor provisions of the NRA.³⁴

The Trotskyists were initially willing to utilize the machinery of federal labor law because it offered a sense of legitimacy to union activities. Local 574 announced in July of 1933 that it would waive initiation fees for new members to take advantage of Section 7(a)'s provisions providing the right of workers to form and join labor organizations of their own choosing. The local also prepared to submit a code of wage rates for drivers to the district NRA commissioner.³⁵ As much as they deeply distrusted bourgeois reformism, the promised reforms of the New Deal provided a convenient avenue to begin channeling rank-and-file anger and frustration into the union. The obvious problem for revolutionary militants was how to utilize reformist measures like the NRA to advance the working-class struggle without becoming subsumed by reformism. They rationalized that in a city as viciously anti-union as Minneapolis federal reform alone could not win organizing drives. The Trotskyists girded the union for a prolonged and bitter struggle to win recognition.

Influenced by Marxist dialectical materialism, a sense of history guided the Trotskyist militants of 574. As staunch Marxist-Leninists, the Trotskyists perceived the Depression as moment of capitalist crisis that could only produce mass

³⁴ Colin Gordon, *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920-1935* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 213.

³⁵ "Free Initiation for Truck Drivers," *Minneapolis Labor Review* July 14, 1933, 1.

revolutionary consciousness through the leadership of a disciplined vanguard. The Communist League cadres “could fulfill this role in the trucking industry if they could link themselves with the militant workers through the trade union movement.”³⁶ How to make the connection between trade union work and revolutionary class struggle tangible for workers was a matter of making Marxist theory relatable to their daily experiences. However, simply appealing to the drivers and convincing them of the need not only for a union, but to fight for one, was the militants’ primary mission. Journalist Charles Rumford Walker sketched the political attitudes representative of the truck drivers he interviewed in 1933 and 1934 in preparation for his “rank-and-file history” of Minneapolis, *American City*. Walker found the typical Minneapolis trucker before the strikes to be nonunion and generally ignorant of or uninterested in politics or social concerns. Yet, he also found the working-class of Minnesota to be “more politically sensitive” given the presence of the “old Socialist movement, the long history of Populism, and revolt from the Non-Partisan League to the... Farmer-Labor Party.”³⁷ Walker sensed a nascent radicalism within the consciousness of the city’s workers underpinned by the political struggles that contributed to the rise of the Farmer-Labor Party. The abysmal conditions in the coal yards, as well as across Minneapolis and the entire country, provided the space for a reawakening of radical protest.

³⁶ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 52-53.

³⁷ Charles Rumford Walker, “Notes for Life Story of a Truck-Driver,” no date (ca. 1934), 2, box 1, folder *American City* Preliminary Prospectus and General Notes, Walker Papers.

Confrontation

1934 bore witness to 1,856 strikes that involved almost 1.5 million workers, the greatest demonstration of labor militancy since the end of the First World War. The series of trucking strikes in Minneapolis helmed by Local 574 bore close resemblance to similar labor uprisings in the auto parts plants of Toledo and the docks of San Francisco that same year. These three conflicts involved elements of leftist leadership, mass rank-and-file participation, and violent, confrontational tactics to win strike demands.³⁸ Moreover, all three strikes involved a significant measure of local resistance to the conservatism of the parent AFL union and altercations with state and local governments. The 1934 strike wave was an illustration of how ideas about class struggle took concrete form. While the outbreak of labor insurgency in Minneapolis was influenced by the same national trends that spurred strikes in Toledo and San Francisco, the political character of the trucking strikes was defined by unique local circumstances. The Trotskyists' application of Marxist theory to the complex daily struggles of workers directly confronted the political context shaped by the governing Farmer-Labor Party and employers organized in the Citizens Alliance. Since the trucking strikes themselves have been extensively scrutinized in other works, the point of this brief summary is to examine their political ramifications.³⁹ Specifically, this analysis will examine

³⁸ Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 100.

³⁹ Cf. Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, and Walker, *American City*, for the authoritative accounts of the 1934 strikes. Irving Bernstein's *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) remains the classic account of the surge in labor militancy throughout the 1930s. A more recent work, Philip Korth's *Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan

how the strikes shaped and reshaped the politics of working-class culture in Minneapolis.

At the beginning of 1934, 574's leadership prepared for action against the coal yard operators in the midst of a characteristically brutal Minnesota winter. Daniel Tobin and the IBT were adamantly opposed to any strike activity that would jeopardize the peaceful relations the local had carved out for the handful of drivers covered by contracts in the city's craft economy. In a letter to local president William Brown, Tobin bluntly wrote that without official sanction from the International the local would not receive any strike funds and would risk losing its union charter.⁴⁰ That same day, Tobin wrote an open letter to the membership warning of the difficulties of waging a strike and ominously reminded them "of the bitter experiences which organized labor has to encounter from the employers as well as from the prejudiced courts and the police force."⁴¹ He was also becoming increasingly frustrated by the local's radicals and reached out to the Minneapolis AFL establishment for assistance. A lifelong Democrat and strident anticommunist Tobin was, to use Bruce Laurie's term, a classic Samuel Gompers-style "prudential unionist" who explicitly rejected militancy and radicalism to avert state repression.⁴² He urged the city's Central Labor Union (CLU) to put greater pressure

State University Press, 1995), contains a host of interviews with participants on both sides of the picket line.

⁴⁰ Letter from Daniel J. Tobin to William S. Brown, January 6, 1934, Minneapolis Teamsters Strike, 1934: Selected Documents, 1928-1941 at the Minnesota Historical Society, Manuscript Collection Microfilm Call # M494, St. Paul, referred to hereafter as 574 Papers.

⁴¹ Letter from Daniel J. Tobin to Local 574, January 6, 1934, 574 Papers.

⁴² Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth Century America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 176-209.

the local leaders “and make the request that all individuals who sympathize with the Communist movement be eliminated from Local No. 574.” “There is a distinct difference,” Tobin continued, “between a Socialist of the old trade union type and the new type of Communists, whose theories and doctrines are founded on the revolution of the workers.”⁴³ For a prudential unionist like Tobin, talk of revolution only invited labor repression.

Tobin’s admonishments and pleas for help in the CLU did little to quell the drivers’ militancy. The teamster president, though, seriously misunderstood the mood of the workers. They reasoned that preserving Local 574 as an exclusive craft organization could no longer protect drivers as the economy bottomed out. In a last ditch effort to preserve peace, Tobin denied the local strike assistance on the technicality that not all members had been with the organization for the requisite six months.⁴⁴ But on February 7, 600 members of Local 574 voted to strike and the next day drivers picketed every coal yard in the city.⁴⁵ In an impressive display of disciplined militancy, the drivers effectively shut down the city’s coal industry. After two days the St. Paul-Minneapolis Regional Labor Board of the NRA issued a proposal guaranteeing a certification election to end the strike.⁴⁶ The aggressive and well-organized conduct of the strike pressured the board to move the certification election ahead of schedule in the hopes of stemming any further work

⁴³ Letter from Daniel J. Tobin to Roy Weir, January 4, 1934, 574 Papers.

⁴⁴ Letter from John Gillespie to Local 574, no date (ca. January 1934), 574 Papers.

⁴⁵ “Drivers Vote to Strike,” *Minneapolis Tribune* clipping, February 7, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 4, Dobbs Papers.

⁴⁶ St. Paul-Minneapolis Labor Board Ruling, no date (ca. February 9, 1934), Mss 848, box 15, folder 4, Dobbs Papers.

stoppages.⁴⁷ The employers, though, refused to recognize the union and cited General Hugh S. Johnson and Donald Richberg's official interpretation of Section 7(a) that "neither employers or employees are required by law, to agree to any particular contract, whether proposed as an individual or collective agreement."⁴⁸ The final agreement reached by the board secured a small wage increase for the drivers, but the employers refused to recognize the union.⁴⁹

Although the February coal strike won relatively little for Minneapolis drivers, Local 574 developed a newfound organizational cohesion that would prove essential in taking on the city's transportation industry. By March the voluntary organizing committee grew to include a host of new Communist League members including a young trucker from north Minneapolis named Farrell Dobbs, in addition to the Dunnes, and Skoglund. The militants considered the structure and ideology of the party to be crucial to building the union as well as working-class radicalism. James Cannon concluded that the coal yard strike succeeded because the strike leaders worked so closely with the Communist League.⁵⁰ The Trotskyists did not hide their political affiliations. When asked about their politics at membership meetings Dunne and Skoglund responded openly. "They were very frank," one union member recalled. "They made no bones about it that they were members [of

⁴⁷ Neil M. Cronin to Local 574, February 10, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 4, Dobbs Papers.

⁴⁸ "Citizens Alliance Bulletin," February 2, 1934; Trucking company form letter to employes [sic], February, 13, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 4, Dobbs Papers.

⁴⁹ St. Paul-Minneapolis Regional Labor Board Uniform Wage Scale Statement, February 26, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 4, Dobbs Papers.

⁵⁰ Cannon, *American Trotskyism*, 135.

the Communist League].”⁵¹ Dunne and Skoglund “used the Russian Revolution quite a bit to get workers to understand how to win fights and what they need, that they need to overthrow the capitalist system.”⁵² The Trotskyists’ trade union work embraced bread-and-butter bargaining as an initial step in forging revolutionary class-consciousness. Central to this work was the reinvention of Local 574 as a mass union representing workers across the transportation industry. The local’s organizing committee made liberal use of the local charter’s “general” designation to organize all workers associated with trucking (e.g. platform, shipping-room, drivers’ helpers, packers, and yard workers) into a single union. “Into this modernized machinery of class warfare,” Charles Walker commented, organized truck drivers could dramatically reshape the power dynamics of the city’s political economy. The individual driver, he remarked, was like a “sergeant in the strike army” capable of not only shutting down commerce and industry, but also coordinating the industrial actions of other workers on the streets.⁵³ Fighting for increased wages and improved working conditions was not reformist or trade union fetishism, but an object lesson in the power of workers united as a class to resist oppression and exploitation.

At first glance the FLP seemed to be a logical ally for 574. As the local prepared to confront the trucking companies, the Trotskyists reached out to the FLP for support. Olson was an early and vocal advocate of the teamsters’ organizing campaigns, but he also was wary of being too closely linked to the Trotskyists who

⁵¹ Maloney interview, 89.

⁵² Harry DeBoer interview, March 24, June 22, 1988, Twentieth-Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project, 4.

⁵³ Walker, “Notes for Life Story of a Trucker,” 3, Walker Papers.

were steadily becoming the most prominent figures in the union. Local 574 staged a mass meeting in April entitled the “The Right to Organize” that was to feature Olson as the keynote speaker. The governor balked at such an outright association with the local and sent his personal secretary Vincent Day to read a message on his behalf. In the message, the governor urged workers “to follow the sensible course and band together for your own protection and welfare.”⁵⁴ Olson’s pledge of solidarity with organized labor and Local 574 gave the campaign a great deal of prestige and helped attract thousands of drivers and warehouse workers to the union.⁵⁵ The governor, though, remained hamstrung by Section 7(a), leaving the state government and the Regional Labor Board without the leverage to compel employers united by the Citizens Alliance to recognize the union. In addition, the Trotskyists’ relation to the Farmer-Labor government was weighted by pros and cons. On the one hand, they reasoned that since Olson relied on union support, he would have to support the organizing drive and not bend to employer demands to break the strike. On the other, they feared that Olson and the FLP’s ties to the State Federation of Labor would mean that in the event of a larger strike, the governor would intervene to try and wrest control of the union from radicals and hand the organization over to AFL bureaucrats.⁵⁶

The Trotskyists of 574 appreciated the role of labor reform in provoking worker militancy and invoked reform provisions when advantageous, but they dismissed on principle the liberal reforms of the New Deal. Section 7(a) was a sop

⁵⁴ Letter from Floyd B. Olson to William S. Brown, April 13, 1934, 574 Papers.

⁵⁵ Both Dobbs and Walker claimed that membership climbed to 3,000 following the “Right to Organize” meeting. *Teamster Rebellion*, 65; Walker, *American City*, 91.

⁵⁶ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 45.

to the “labor statesmen” of the AFL and did nothing more than cement an elite, bureaucratic partnership between the state and labor leaders like Tobin at the expense of workers. The resolution of the coal yard strike demonstrated the labor mediation board’s inherent weakness. Citing code violations, employer discrimination against unionists, and the overall inability of the NRA to assist organizing drives, the Trotskyists concluded: “Only where labor has been powerfully organized and has struck with determination have labor’s rights been respected.”⁵⁷ A militant mass movement was necessary to challenge organized labor’s official complacency to demand the enforcement of the language of Section 7(a).

That spring Local 574 entered into negotiations with the Minneapolis trucking firms through the Regional Labor Board. Meetings between the union and the employers group, the General Advisory Committee (GAC), produced little worthwhile discussion since the GAC continued to refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Local 574. On May 7, the GAC claimed that 574 did not truly represent the drivers and broke off dialogue altogether.⁵⁸ Although the union was able to prove itself as the drivers’ rightful bargaining agent, subsequent talks collapsed since the Labor Board was powerless to get the GAC to seriously consider the union’s demands. To complicate matters, Tobin again denied strike authorization and asserted that local did not have jurisdiction over inside workers.⁵⁹

The combination of the militant February strike, the open affiliation of the strike

⁵⁷ “Labor and the New Deal,” *The Militant*, May 5, 1934, 3.

⁵⁸ Letter from General Advisory Committee to W.W. Hughes, May 7, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 5, Dobbs Papers.

⁵⁹ Korth, *Minneapolis Teamster Strike*, 88.

leaders with the Communist League, and the Trotskyists' sharp criticism of the NRA, caused Tobin and the state AFL, as well as Olson, to be wary of the growing power of the teamsters. The tension in Minneapolis was palpable as Local 574 prepared for an even larger strike action that spring.

On May 16, 5,000 teamsters went on strike, focusing their attention on the central commercial market district in downtown Minneapolis. The local organized a strike headquarters, replete with a garage, infirmary, and mess hall, to coordinate the dispersal of its motorized "flying squads" of pickets to intercept non-union trucks. As in previous strikes, deputized members of the CA's armed formations assaulted picket lines and protected convoys of non-union trucks and bolstered the city police force. In response to the violence unleashed against strikers, the local informed Olson that unless the police and deputies were reined in the union would withdraw from negotiations and "throw out a general call for every worker in Minneapolis and vicinity to assist us in protecting our rights and our lives."⁶⁰ Over two days, May 21 and 22, strikers in military formation routed the police and CA forces in the market district and took control over the city's streets, winning the so-called "Battle of Deputies Run." For the first time in Minneapolis, open class warfare turned in the workers' favor. Picket lines held firm and striking drivers famously directed traffic. The drivers were joined by some 35,000 workers from the building, iron, electrical, garment, and a slew of other trades on picket lines across the city in a massive wave of sympathy strikes.⁶¹ Olson, who had already mobilized the

⁶⁰ Letter from Local 574 to Floyd B. Olson, May 19, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 5, Dobbs Papers.

⁶¹ "Minneapolis Shows The Way," May 26, *Militant*, 1934, 1.

National Guard, moved troops into the market district to restore state control and on May 23 the local agreed to a truce outlined by Olson.⁶²

Further negotiations helmed by Olson with the aid of federal labor mediators brought the strike to an end on May 25. Olson's labor treaty provided for union recognition and a reaffirmation to the principles of Section 7(a) on the part of the employers. Since the agreement did not provide for a closed shop or even any signed agreement, the local would have to negotiate with each firm (a total of 166) individually. Without industry-wide bargaining there was no hope of recognition. Olson's original agreement stipulated that Local 574 was entitled to represent the contentious inside workers, but he ultimately relented to pressure from the CA and the IBT and decided the matter should be left to arbitration- a crucial point that Olson neglected to announce prior to the agreement. In the end the board agreed with Tobin that inside workers were not under Local 574's jurisdiction, undermining the union's position.

The end of the strike produced a flurry of responses as various factions attempted to turn the outcome of the city's most violent labor dispute to their own advantage. The leaders of the strike admitted to the workers that the agreement was a "compromise with the bosses," but one that at least laid the groundwork for eventual union recognition.⁶³ The Communist Party castigated the teamster leadership for again winning only meager concessions from the trucking firms. None other than William Dunne, the eldest of the Dunnes and a staunch Stalinist,

⁶² Letter from Trade Union Committee, Local 574 to Floyd B. Olson, May 23, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 5, Dobbs Papers.

⁶³ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 97.

blasted his brothers and their comrades for squandering a moment of real revolutionary potential.⁶⁴ The Communists declared that the unalloyed working-class militancy of the May strike had crystallized by the Battle of Deputies Run into revolutionary consciousness. The very act of taking control of the streets should have been the moment when the workers turned a mere labor struggle into a political struggle against capital. In sharp contrast, the jubilant State Federation of Labor heralded the defeat of the Citizens Alliance and diverted attention from the Trotskyists by celebrating Olson as the real hero of the strike. The craft unions emphasized the peaceable resolution hammered out by Olson as the real object lesson of the strike, not its militancy and violence. The *Minneapolis Labor Review* proclaimed the strike a victory for the governor as much as for the teamsters. Tellingly, the same issue that announced the strike's resolution also prominently advertised the opening stages of the FLP's campaign for the November election.⁶⁵

The Farmer-Labor Party wanted nothing more than to disassociate itself from the violence of the strike. Labor peace was essential to the Farmer-Labor campaign in order to downplay the radical image presented by Olson and to deflect characterizations of the FLP as a party stoking the flames of "class hatred." Olson's settlement was presented as evidence of the Farmer-Labor government's cool, deliberate, and even-handed ability to resolve tense social conflict. One campaign leaflet, for example, boasted of the congratulatory telegrams sent by Sen. Robert

⁶⁴ William F. Dunne and Morris Childs, *Permanent Counter-Revolution: The Role of the Trotskyites in the Minneapolis Strikes* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1934).

⁶⁵ "General Drivers Smash Lines of Citizens Alliance," "Governor is Peacemaker In Driver Strike," "Headquarters Open For F-L Campaign," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, June 1, 1934, 1.

Wagner to Farmer-Labor Sen. Henrik Shipstead, the federal mediators, and Olson for finding an amicable resolution to the strike.⁶⁶ No such telegram was sent to Tobin, who Wagner contacted at the height of the street fighting demanding to know what the teamster president was doing to end the strike. An undoubtedly mortified Tobin could only respond that the situation was beyond his control: "... the truckers had organized themselves and were making their own battle."⁶⁷ The apparent powerlessness of the labor movement over its own unions increased the political pressure on the FLP to step into the breach and bridle insurgent workers. The FLP needed a revived labor movement to serve its ideological and electoral ends, but an aggressive movement was a liability to the FLP's political campaign.

However, the weak settlement proffered by Olson served only to exacerbate the militancy of the teamsters and undermine the legitimacy of the NRA. As historian Thomas Dorrance points out, labor organizing under the NRA provides an excellent avenue to "examine those points of contact where individuals directly experienced the growth of a federal administrative state."⁶⁸ First and foremost, the workers recognized the superior power of direct action and agitation over that of government agencies with limited capacity to resolve immediate grievances. The members of Local 574 complained bitterly about the governor's arbitrated agreement. At a July 6 membership meeting local leaders registered their disgust

⁶⁶ Farmer-Labor campaign flyer, no date (ca. May 1934), Mss 848, box 15, folder 5, Dobbs Papers.

⁶⁷ "Washington Sized Up Truck Driver Strike," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, June 29, 1934, 2.

⁶⁸ Thomas F. Dorrance, "Remaking an Older Deal: Chicago Employment Policies, 1932-1936," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 7(1) 2010, 89.

with the inadequacy of labor reform. Emery Nelson, a union representative to the Regional Labor Board from the Milk Drivers union, stated in unequivocal terms:

From my experience with the Board you are going to have to be more militant than you were. You are going to have bigger organizations; all the strength you can gather together; just so much better will you go on. I want to say the employers are fighting more bitterly than ever before. They have stronger organizations. They are trying to calm that article 7-a of the National Recovery Act. The labor movement must likewise fight harder.

Roy Weir of the CLU agreed that Section 7(a) was worthless to labor as implemented by the government, but reminded 574's members of the governors in California and Kentucky who at the moment were "breaking the Longshoremen's... [and] coal miners strike[s]." "I just wanted to say that we have a Governor in the State of Minnesota who did not call out his militia to kill people and put fear in them."⁶⁹

The local's problems with the IBT mounted along with rank-and-file discontent towards the state and federal governments. Business agent Clifford Hall relayed to the IBT the local's dissatisfaction with the results of the May strike and appealed for assistance as the local prepared to resume the strike.⁷⁰ Thomas Hughes, the IBT's Secretary-Treasurer, denied the request because of outstanding initiation fees owed to the International.⁷¹ The citing of such technicalities could not mask the IBT's exasperation with the local's continued militancy. Tobin's embarrassment over his inability to restrain the Trotskyists, coupled with his own virulent anticommunism, fueled his tirades against the local. According to Tobin,

⁶⁹ Membership meeting minutes, Teamsters Local 574, July 6, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 6, Dobbs Papers.

⁷⁰ Letter from Clifford Hall to Thomas L. Hughes, June 21, 1934, 574 Papers.

⁷¹ Letter from Thomas L. Hughes to Clifford Hall, June 25, 1934, 574 Papers.

communists were “doing more to help place on the statute books adverse legislation against labor than all the enemies of labor combined.”⁷² In an editorial in the official IBT journal, widely reprinted by the CA, Tobin described the Trotskyist strike leadership as wolves in sheep’s clothing and urged loyal union officers to “stifle such radicals, because they do not belong in our union”⁷³

The second major trucking strike in three months began on July 16 with the employers still staunchly opposed to bargaining with the union and the Labor Board unable to enforce its own rulings. The Battle of Deputies Run and the outpouring of solidaristic action by fellow workers were a heady manifestation of independent working-class power. Such rank-and-file militancy helped the leadership of 574 secure the support of the CLU and the business agents of the building trades unions for the strike. The result was the repudiation of Tobin’s conservative unionism as well as Olson’s attempts at conciliation. The strike began peaceably and once again no trucks moved through the market district. After two days the trucking firms began moving goods under police escort. Neither the employers nor the police wanted a reprise of May street fighting. Minneapolis Chief of Police Michael Johannes reportedly informed his officers: “We’re going to start moving goods. Don’t take a beating. You have shotguns and know how to use them.”⁷⁴ On the afternoon of Friday, July 20, a heavily armed police contingent guarded the first truck moved into the market district as line of pickets looked on helplessly. As the

⁷² Quoted in Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton University Press, 1977), 163.

⁷³ Daniel J. Tobin, *Official Magazine of the I.B.T., C., S., and H. of A.*, July 1934, 13, 14, 574 Papers.

⁷⁴ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 124.

truck pulled away, a second truck from the union's flying squadron attempted to block the police convoy. The police officers responded by laying down a withering line of fire on the cruising pickets in the bed of the union truck as well as those massed on the street. In a matter of minutes, the police killed two and wounded sixty-seven unarmed pickets, turning the day into "Bloody Friday." The violence unleashed by the city police reinforced the local militants' skepticism of labor reform legislation and Olson's claim to be a friend of the worker, while reaffirming the need to maintain a militant line. In a speech honoring Henry Ness, one of the workers killed by the police, William Brown lamented: "He believed in the NRA and the New Deal and in the right of peaceful picketing, but to the dismay and disgust of all the people of Minneapolis he was shot down."⁷⁵ The forty thousand workers who marched in Ness' funeral procession were a vivid illustration of the rank-and-file solidarity.

After days of tumultuous and ultimately fruitless negotiations following the shooting, federal labor mediators E.H. Dunnigan and Father Francis Hass convinced Olson to threaten both sides with a martial law decree if the two could not agree to a final compromise. The Hass-Dunnigan plan met several key union demands and called for certification elections at all 166 trucking firms, the reinstatement of striking workers, and defined the establishment of uniform wage scale as a legitimate bargaining issue.⁷⁶ The union membership voted almost unanimously to accept the plan, while the CA's Employers' Advisory Committee rebelled once again

⁷⁵ Speech by William S. Brown, no date (ca. July 24, 1934), box 1, folder *American City* notes: Local 574 and strike, Walker Papers.

⁷⁶ Memo from Father Francis Haas and E.H. Dunnigan to EAC and Local 574 July 25, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 6, Dobbs Papers.

on the grounds that 574 was not the rightful bargaining agent of the workers and that its leadership was “Communitistic,” leaving Olson to take the initiative and declared martial law on July 26.⁷⁷ The Strike Committee of 100, the local’s rank-and-file steering committee, demanded that Olson withdraw the National Guard and allow for peaceful picketing.⁷⁸ The strike leaders called a mass meeting of pickets at strike headquarters scheduled for 4 a.m. on Wednesday, August 1, to organize a protest in defiance of the martial law order.⁷⁹ But just moments before 4 a.m., 800 troops descended upon strike headquarters and arrested 53 unionists, including William Brown and Miles and Vincent Dunne.⁸⁰ “For the first time in decades,” 574’s strike newspaper the *Organizer* seethed,

a trade union headquarters has been occupied by military forces and trade union leaders imprisoned in a military stockade. Not even in Toledo, where troops were called out by a Democratic Governor, nor in San Francisco, where they were called out by a Republican Governor, has such a monstrous violation of the rights of workingmen been perpetrated.⁸¹

Many in Local 574 felt Olson betrayed the FLP’s claim to be a working-class party by sending in troops to protect the employer’s property instead of the drivers’ picket lines. A letter to the editor of the *Organizer* noted: “I wish the Truck Drivers would

⁷⁷ Letter from William S. Brown to Father Francis Haas and E.H. Dunnigan, July 26, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 6, Dobbs Papers; Millikan, *A Union Against Unions* 280-81.

⁷⁸ Letter from Strike Committee of 100 to Floyd B. Olson, July 28, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 6, Dobbs Papers.

⁷⁹ “Pickets Will Mobilize for Auto Patrols,” *Minneapolis Tribune* clipping August 1, 1934, 1, box 1, folder Newspaper clippings: Local 574 Strike, June 1934, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Walker Papers.

⁸⁰ “700 of Militia Sent Back to Fair Grounds,” *Minneapolis Tribune* clipping August 2, 1934, 1, box 1, folder Newspaper clippings: Local 574 Strike, June 1934, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Walker Papers.

⁸¹ “Local 574 Issues Call for a Protest General Strike,” *Militant*, August 4, 1934, 1.

have received such cooperation of this famous Farmer-Labor Governor as the bosses do.”⁸²

In defending the arrests and seizure of strike headquarters, Olson claimed “the guard had no alternative” and that clamping down on unlawful pickets was the only response.⁸³ Fearing public backlash and the alienation of his base in the labor movement, he issued a statement defending the crackdown on the strikers as a way to protect the strike and the general public.⁸⁴ To compensate for the seizure of strike headquarters, Olson ordered the National Guard to raid the Citizens Alliance headquarters and confiscate intelligence about employers’ anti-strike tactics, but it produced little information thanks to CA informants within the National Guard. The symbolic use of troops against employers was largely an attempt to restore Olson’s credibility as an impartial arbiter in the eyes of the general public.

Olson closely watched the public’s reaction to the strike developments as he prepared for reelection in November. In a memo to Olson, his personal secretary Vincent Day explained that most people were very much in support of the strikers and agreed with their demands. However, “The public is against the strike weapon. It annoys, irritates, and frightens the consumers, but that is the extent of their opposition. The strike as a remedy for labor difficulties is senseless, stupid.”

Prefiguring the impetus for the Wagner Act, Day continued that the FLP needed to push for the institution of “a strong labor code containing a real guarantee of the

⁸² I. Hoberman Letter to the Editor (*Organizer*), August 21, 1934, Mss 848, box 15, folder 7, Dobbs Papers.

⁸³ “Troops Arrest Pickets,” *Minneapolis Tribune* clipping no date (ca. August 2, 1934), box 1, folder Local 574 Strike, Walker Papers.

⁸⁴ “Troops Will Not Be Used Break Strike,” *Minneapolis Labor Review*, August 3, 1934.

right of collective bargaining” in order to ensure labor peace.⁸⁵ Labor peace was central to farmer-laborism’s electoral strategy as well as its ideological makeup. Like the first British Labour government, the Farmer-Labor Party “had no hostility to strikers, only strikes.”⁸⁶ To win the continued support of cross-class allies, political scientist Adam Przeworski argues, a social democratic party must remain committed to the legal democratic process and not be tempted to substitute mass action for a legislative mandate. The social democrats’ choice to wield the “political weapon” meant that they must forgo extra-parliamentary tactics like strikes to achieve political results.⁸⁷ The FLP was eager to dispel any public perception that the party was aiding and abetting the teamsters’ industrial action against the capitalist class of Minneapolis. However, Olson could not abandon his core urban constituency, particularly since their demands had nonetheless generated popular support.

Over the next three weeks a “war of attrition” was waged as Olson, the strike leaders of 574, and the CA hashed out a series of proposals and counter-proposals.⁸⁸ Once again establishing labor peace was crucial for the FLP as election season drew nearer, but this time Olson was committed to negotiating a settlement that would placate the militant drivers. The violence of Bloody Friday, the political fallout of the martial law decree and the arrest of the strike leadership, and the unbridled

⁸⁵ Memo from Vincent A. Day to Floyd B. Olson, no date (ca. August 6, 1934), box 2, folder Memoranda to Gov. Olson, 1934, Day Papers.

⁸⁶ Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), 109-10.

⁸⁷ Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 15.

⁸⁸ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 173.

militancy of the membership, compelled Olson to finally take a hard-line against the employers. In a sharp rebuke, Olson wrote to the CA: "The agencies of government do not belong to you.... They belong to all the people and I propose to use the governmental agencies under my jurisdiction, including the national guard, for the protection of all the people of the city of Minneapolis."⁸⁹ Finally on August 21, after Olson requested the personal intercession of Roosevelt, the trucking firms agreed to the provisions of the original Hass-Dunnigan plan, securing for 574 official recognition, a uniform minimum wage, and the right to represent all of its members.

Aftermath

For the members of Local 574, the strikes provided an object lesson in the power of militant and radical unionism to effect real change. As Howard Kimeldorf argues in his study of San Francisco dockworkers during the Depression, revolutionary language in tandem with social action could forge a militant rank-and-file class-consciousness.⁹⁰ Yet the process of radicalization produced its own unique set of tensions that animated the struggle for union recognition. The bloody strikes waged by Local 574 throughout 1934 to introduce organized labor to Minneapolis succeeded because of working-class militancy. The strikes represented a moment where labor repression was overcome by united labor action. Crucial to this victory were the Trotskyist teamsters, labor militants who were neither outside agitators nor actors willed into being by the unique historical phenomenon of the Depression alone. The victory of the teamsters in Minneapolis sent shockwaves through the IBT

⁸⁹ Quoted in Walker, *American City*, 178.

⁹⁰ Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*

and the city's business community. The Citizens' Alliance continued to hammer away at the local, but its agitation yielded few results as employers lined up to sign union contracts with their workers. By May of 1935 the entire trucking industry in Minneapolis operated under a closed shop agreement. The militancy of the strikes and the radicalism of Local 574's leadership deeply unnerved Tobin and conservative business unionists in the AFL. Thus, in the ensuing years many of Local 574's most bitter battles would not be waged employers, but conservative opponents in the labor movement.

Olson managed to navigate his way through the strikes with most of his political credibility intact but the FLP would pay a price for its involvement in the drivers' labor dispute. Vincent Day reminded Olson the day before the election that the "real issue in Minneapolis is the truck strike" and that the governor needed to carefully explain his handling of the situation to the voters.⁹¹ Campaign literature pointed out that the governor maintained law and order while also supporting the strikers.

Governor Olson is the first governor in America to call out the militia during a strike for the purpose of protecting all the people and not the as an agency to break up a strike by shooting unarmed workers fighting for an American standard of living. He handled a major strike by placing a city under martial law without the shedding of blood.⁹²

The FLP slate won the 1934 elections, but the fault lines in the party's coalition were starting to appear. Olson won reelection, but he beat his Republican challenger by

⁹¹ Memo from Vincent A. Day to Floyd B. Olson, November 1, 1934, box 2, folder Memoranda to Gov. Olson, 1934, Day Papers.

⁹² "Bread or Straw: The Issues of the Campaign," Olson for Governor All-Party Volunteer Committee, no date (ca. 1934), box 1, folder Correspondence and Other Papers, undated 1930s; 1930-1935, Susie W. Stageberg Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society.

only 70,000 votes compared to the almost 200,000 vote difference he enjoyed two years earlier.⁹³ The strikes crippled the FLP's support in rural communities. For instance, in 1932 Olson handily won 46 of the state's 84 rural counties, but in 1934 he lost 95 percent of those same counties.⁹⁴ Given this reversal of fortune, the fact that he was still able to win is quite astounding. Olson and the FLP consolidated its strength in urban areas and counted a rejuvenated labor movement as an important voting bloc. Nonetheless, the 1934 trucking strikes convinced Olson that party could not afford to become entangled in another labor dispute of such magnitude. The future of Farmer-Labor politics would depend on its ability to harness the political resources of the trade unions while maintaining a safe distance from its disputes.

The radicalism of the strike and the repression meted out against the strikers marked a decisive moment in shaping working-class consciousness in Minneapolis. Charles Walker noted in his composite description of a Minneapolis trucker that certain communist ideas about class exploitation resonated with Minneapolis workers after the strikes. For instance, the idea of the state as an instrument of class domination "gibed quite perfectly with his own experience when the State of Minnesota called in [the] militia to break the drivers' strike, so that he believes that principle passionately, and talks on that point like a Communist." Yet, the typical driver "still votes for Olson, denies being a Communist, and has even beaten up a

⁹³ Bruce M. White, et al., *Minnesota Votes: Election Returns by County for Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Governors, 1857-1977* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), 192-195.

⁹⁴ Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The American Political Economy and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 117.

few in his day.”⁹⁵ The Trotskyists proved their worth as organizers throughout 1934 and tapped into a strong undercurrent of working-class radicalism amongst Minneapolis workers. The strikes helped to awaken this tradition and radicalize workers through solidaristic action, even if the demands made by the strikers were themselves not inherently radical. The next major challenge for the Trotskyist teamsters was to find a way to translate their newfound organizational power into political power. This process would divide the city’s labor movement, strain its ties to the Farmer-Labor Party, and dramatically reshape the political landscape of Minneapolis.

⁹⁵ Walker, “Notes for Life Story of a Trucker,” 2-3, Walker Papers.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICS OF MAKING MINNEAPOLIS A UNION TOWN, 1935-1936

Introduction

The near-insurrectionary trucking strikes of 1934 gave organized labor its first real foothold in the political economy of Minneapolis. By the time another wave of violent strikes rolled through the city in the summer of 1935 General Drivers and Helpers Local 574 was the largest and most influential union in the state, winning concessions from employers in the workplace and pressuring political parties and the state to take the demands of workers seriously. Labor militancy also exposed serious divisions between conservative union leaders and radical rank-and-file activists. Local 574's clashes with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the AFL threatened to split the urban labor vote crucial to the electoral success of Minnesota's governing Farmer-Labor Party. The newfound power of Local 574 made the Trotskyists influential figures in Farmer-Labor politics. Like their Communist Party adversaries, they too opted to embrace electoral politics and downplay the rhetoric of revolution in order to expand the appeal of socialism. In 1935, the Trotskyists spearheaded a militant mobilization of working-class forces and simultaneously aligned themselves with reformist electoral party politics. Similarly, the Farmer-Labor Party, much like the New Deal Democrats, attempted to solidify the loyalty of workers and integrate the political demands of the labor movement without alienating sympathetic class fractions from the party. Despite emerging political fractures, a coalition of workers, farmers, and

middle-class professionals returned the Farmer-Labor Party by huge numbers in the 1936 elections. Understanding how the especially volatile labor movement emerged as a cohesive bloc by 1936 means exploring the political context and political choices made by labor militants like the Trotskyist teamsters in Minneapolis.

Local 574 in Exile

The strikes of 1934 for the AFL, according to political scientist Michael Goldfield, “signified the existence of an emerging mass-based labor movement led by radicals, completely outside their control.”⁹⁶ The militancy of the early 1930s swelled labor’s depleted ranks, but militancy brought a new body of radical leaders into positions of union leadership who challenged the cautious conservatism of the AFL.⁹⁷ Whatever the hopes for a cooperative relationship between 574 and the international union, they were shattered by the local’s persistent defiance of IBT president Daniel Tobin’s orders throughout the tumult of the 1934 trucking strikes. The subsequent election and appointment of Trotskyist activists Farrell Dobbs, Carl Skoglund, and Vincent, Grant, and Miles Dunne to key union posts brought tensions with the IBT to a head in mid-April of 1935. In a letter to IBT Secretary Treasurer Thomas Hughes, an apoplectic Tobin declared the Minneapolis local “purely and

⁹⁶ Goldfield, “Worker Insurgency,” 1273.

⁹⁷ Cf. Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Philip Korth and Margaret Beegle, *I Remember Like Today: The Auto-Lite Strike of 1934* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1988); Charles P. Larowe, *Harry Bridges: The Rise and Fall of a Radical Labor Leader* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1977).

without question controlled by Communists.”⁹⁸ Tobin, hesitant to predicate his assault on the local’s Trotskyist leadership entirely on political grounds, forced a confrontation by citing the local’s failure to pay outstanding per capita taxes on membership dues owed to the international as well as a host of unspecified “violations of the [IBT] Constitution.”⁹⁹ To strengthen his position, Tobin demanded the Minneapolis Central Labor Union sever its ties to 574 or else he would instruct the AFL to revoke its charter as well.¹⁰⁰ For its part, the local pleaded poverty in the wake of the 1934 strikes and felt entitled to a reprieve because it received no strike support from the IBT. Moreover, the leadership saw that the demand for overdue taxes was little more than a ploy to topple its militant leadership.¹⁰¹ Tobin roundly rejected any pleas for clemency and castigated the local’s leaders for their recklessness and disobedience. In a letter to Dobbs, Tobin wrote:

What we do know is that you practically defied not only our International Union but the entire Labor Movement, by refusing, in the first place, to request the sanction of the International for your strike; by going out and attempting to call a General Strike, by soliciting money in our name when the strike was unauthorized and not approved and in many other ways violating the contract your local entered into with the International Union when the charter was issued, which, in substance, is that your local union would be subject to all the laws of the International and would abide by its rulings and its decisions.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Letter from Daniel J. Tobin to Thomas L. Hughes, April 12, 1935, series 1, box 35, folder 2, Staff Correspondence Hughes, Thomas L., 1930-1940, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen, and Helpers of America Papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

⁹⁹ Letter from Thomas L. Hughes to Farrell Dobbs, April 15, 1935, 574 Papers.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Daniel J. Tobin to Emery C. Nelson, April 15, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Local 574 to Thomas L. Hughes, April 20, 1935, Mss 848, box 5, folder 1, Dobbs Papers.

¹⁰² Letter from Daniel J. Tobin to Ferrell Dobbs, April 22, 1935, 574 Papers.

Tobin's own prudential unionism and personal ambition informed his view of organized labor as a stabilizing force in American society during times of economic turmoil. Tobin's own animus towards strikes dated from his participation in a failed and violent 1896 Boston streetcar workers strike.¹⁰³ Militancy and radicalism, Tobin argued, would only strengthen employer's opposition, turn public opinion against unions, and, as happened after the First World War, bring out the repressive apparatuses of the state against labor. He hoped that electoral politics could rehabilitate organized labor's flagging postwar fortunes, shifting his support from the American Labor Party in 1919 to the independent candidacy of Robert M. La Follette in 1924, before becoming involved in the Democratic Party with the candidacy of Al Smith in 1928.¹⁰⁴ The IBT president's malleable partisan attachments and contingent alliance with the Democratic Party were characteristic of what historian Julie Greene calls the "pure and simple politics" of the AFL.¹⁰⁵ As the devastation of the Depression bolstered the party's political fortunes, Tobin moved solidly into the Democratic camp. He developed a close relationship with Roosevelt during the 1932 elections while serving as chairman of the Democratic National Committee's Labor Bureau (a post he would hold until 1944). Tobin was one of the only major labor leaders to actively campaign on behalf of Roosevelt that year, but his emphasis on elite lobbying and negotiation with top party leaders

¹⁰³ Transcript from NBC radio program "I'm an American!," September 14, 1941, series 1, box 44, folder 5, Staff Correspondence Tobin, Daniel J., 1917-1945, IBT Papers.

¹⁰⁴ Philip Taft, *The A.F. of L. In the Time of Gompers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 478; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 8: Postwar Struggles, 1918-1920* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 256-74.

¹⁰⁵ Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 285.

meant his efforts probably contributed little to the strong showing of Democrats among working-class voters. If anything, Tobin's campaign work was a rather naked attempt to secure the post of Secretary of Labor, a job he nevertheless lost to Frances Perkins.¹⁰⁶

Tobin desperately wanted to compensate for his inability to rein in the Trotskyists during the trucking strikes and protect his reputation in Washington as a guardian of labor peace by taking a hard stance against the local. To reassert authority in Minneapolis, he sent in a delegation of IBT officials to charter Local 500 as the official bargaining agent for the city's drivers. He hoped that disaffiliation would prompt employers to tear up their contracts with the radicals of Local 574 and sign on with the responsible business unionism of Local 500. Tobin failed to recognize that it was militant direct action, not business unionism, which ensured union recognition and the enforcement of signed agreements in the trucking industry. Fearing a reprise of the previous year's strikes, few companies dared renege on their contracts with 574. Those employers that did attempt to take advantage of the internal teamster dispute to go back on or not renew contracts were subjected to showpiece job actions that demonstrated the union's newfound control over trucking.¹⁰⁷ Thus, during March and April, when 574 appeared to be at its weakest, no major trucking firm broke, or failed to resign, a contract with the local.

¹⁰⁶ Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 511; Taft, *The A.F. of L. From the Death of Gompers to the Merger* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 453.

¹⁰⁷ Maloney interview, 104.

The revocation of 574's charter exiled the local teamsters from the IBT and the AFL's "House of Labor," but the local enjoyed an outpouring of support in Minneapolis. Farrell Dobbs' was not boasting when he informed IBT Vice President John Geary, "When you leave here with our charter under your arm, you rest assured you have got the charter, but we have got the men."¹⁰⁸ Dobbs later estimated that of Local 574's roughly 5,000 members, only 50 joined the rival local.¹⁰⁹ Local 574 continued to announce its allegiance to the AFL and reiterated its eagerness to rejoin the labor federation, while the local remained steadfast in its condemnation of the IBT's political attack on militant unions. Tobin, the Trotskyist leadership charged, was a "splitter" for undertaking a politically motivated attack on the hard-won labor solidarity of the Minneapolis labor movement.¹¹⁰ The effectiveness of the Trotskyists' direct action tactics and their eagerness to assist other unions assured Local 574 the allegiance of the local labor movement. Despite being barred from participating in any AFL organization, the CLU vigorously backed 574.¹¹¹ Delegates from the CLU, the IAM, and the Building Trades Council unsuccessfully fought to get the Minnesota State Federation of Labor convention to urge Tobin to return the local's charter or to give the floor to representatives from

¹⁰⁸ Maloney interview, 104.

¹⁰⁹ Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 76.

¹¹⁰ "A False Rumor," *Northwest Organizer*, May 8, 1935, 2.

¹¹¹ "Mpls. Central Labor Union Supports Drivers Local 574," *Northwest Organizer*, April 16, 1935, 1; "Central Labor Union Votes Unanimously to Back Recommendation of Special Committee to Restore 574's Charter," *Northwest Organizer* May 8, 1935, 1; Citizens Alliance of Minneapolis Special Weekly Bulletin, May 14, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

574.¹¹² The Saint Paul Trades and Labor Assembly and a host of local unions likewise adopted resolutions calling for the reinstatement of 574 into the IBT and the AFL.¹¹³ Prefiguring the abandonment of the party's ultra-revolutionary Third Period, the Minnesota section of the Communist Party even went so far as to commit its cadres to assisting the local's return to the AFL for the sake of restoring labor unity.¹¹⁴

Why the local fought to remain within the fold of these two conservative labor organizations and in the face of such hostility on the surface appears at odds with the local leadership's radicalism. This position was consonant with the emerging Trotskyist strategy of entryism, burrowing within a reformist institution to transform it into an organ of revolutionary activity. An article in the Trotskyist newspaper the *New Militant* applauded Local 574 for "attempting correctly to exist within the framework of the general labor movement represented by the AF of L."¹¹⁵ Trotsky ordered his followers to enter existing, organic working-class organizations in order to clarify the unfocused militancy of workers into revolutionary action.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *Proceedings of the Fifty-third Convention of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor, Red Wing, Minn., August 19-21, 1935*, 42, 62-63.

¹¹³ Trades and Labor Assembly minutes, May 8, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers; letter from I.A.M Local 382 to Daniel J. Tobin, June 10, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers; letter from Hillard Smith to the Secretaries of All Local Unions of the A.F. of L. and all Railroad Brotherhoods, August 8, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers; letter from J.M. Dropok to Hillard Smith, August 17, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers; minutes of Trade Union Conference Called to Demand Restoration of Local 574 Charter, September 30, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

¹¹⁴ "To Members of Local 574," no date (ca. May 1935), Mss 848, box 15, folder 16, Dobbs Papers.

¹¹⁵ "Local 574 Under Fire Again," *New Militant*, May 4, 1935, 4.

¹¹⁶ Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section, 1935-1936* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), 58.

“The most important of all prerequisites for the development of a militant labor movement,” James Cannon counseled, “is the leaven of principled communists.”¹¹⁷ Despite being a bulwark of conservative craft unionism, remaining a chartered local of the IBT connected the Trotskyists to one of the nation’s most powerful unions. From within the IBT Trotskyist activists hoped to cultivate rank-and-file protest and over time put pressure on Tobin to adopt a more militant stance or even seize control of the entire union. Rather than retreat to insular dual revolutionary unions like the Communists, the Trotskyists’ theorized that carving out a place in a genuine mass organization like the IBT was essential to facilitating the revolutionary development of the working class.

The Trotskyists’ attempted to build upon the organizational structure of Local 574 to construct a working-class political base led by a Leninist vanguard party and independent of, but not antagonistic to, the FLP. The alarming of victory of fascism in Germany convinced Trotsky that a “united front” between revolutionary and reformist parties was necessary to defend working-class organizations and advance revolutionary politics. The united front was based on a conditional alliance with bourgeois and reformist parties to confront the menace of fascism, but its success depended on the revolutionary leadership of the workers over other social classes. The petit bourgeoisie and the peasantry, Trotsky argued, “can have no policy of its own” because its “economic situation” would be defined either by the proletariat or the bourgeoisie.¹¹⁸ Trotsky outlined a policy of “critical support” to prevent the subordination of the workers’ revolutionary initiative to the

¹¹⁷ “Learn from Minneapolis!” *New Militant*, May 26, 1934, 1.

¹¹⁸ Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section*, 36.

parliamentary politics. “The united front,” Trotsky wrote, “does not renounce parliamentary struggle, but utilizes parliament above all to unmask its impotence.”¹¹⁹ Electoral politics were not to be dismissed, but they meant little without a powerful mass movement of workers.

The Minneapolis Trotskyists attempted to consolidate the local’s political autonomy by recruiting militant rank-and-file union members into the Communist League of America. Historian Constance Myers argues that the rigid chain of command in the vanguard party alienated workers who fought against “industrial hierarchies and bureaucratism on the job.” Moreover, the party’s dogmatism silenced internal criticism and produced a “less intense, less creative rebellion against and critique of capitalist values.”¹²⁰ Even after the upheavals of 1934 few workers signed up with the CLA. The majority of the 100-odd members in the Communist League’s Minneapolis branch were almost exclusively committed to trade union work, and rarely, if ever, attended general party meetings.¹²¹ The CLA’s few party workers focused on the party apparatus.¹²² The creation of the Workers Party (WP) out of a merger of the Communist League with AJ Muste’s American

¹¹⁹ Trotsky, *Crisis of the French Section*, 59.

¹²⁰ Constance Myers, *The American Trotskyists, 1928-1941* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1974), iv-v.

¹²¹ Grace Holmes Carlson interview, July 9 and 14, 1987, Twentieth-Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project, 14, 38-40; Maloney interview, 92. Trotskyist activist Grace Holmes Carlson, a psychology professor at the University of Minnesota and for a time the wife of the local’s lawyer, recalled: “A lot of these people didn’t really have a truly basic interest in Marxism; their interest was what the Marxists could, so to speak, do for them in the trade union movement.” Perhaps the two most notable delinquents from party work were none other than Grant and Miles Dunne, the younger brothers of the local’s chief ideologue Vincent Dunne.

¹²² Carlson interview, 16-17.

Workers Party (AWP) did little to expand the appeal of Trotskyism among the city's workers.

The Trotskyists initiated a policy of critical support for the FLP, backing the party's candidates while sharply criticizing the "dangerous illusions of Farmer-Laborism."¹²³ Workers, Trotsky argued, voted reluctantly for reformist candidates and thus it was the task of the revolutionary to provide alternative leadership.¹²⁴ Although the Trotskyists admitted that the FLP was an organic manifestation of working-class struggle, its heavily petit bourgeois social base posed serious problems for labor. Without an effective network of party workers the local's Trotskyist leaders leaned more heavily on the union itself to influence the politics of the Farmer-Labor Party. Through Local 574 the Trotskyists advanced a form of what historian Rosemary Feurer identifies as "civic unionism," connecting workplace conflicts with those facing the working-class communities.¹²⁵ They intended to use the local's sheer size, organizational wherewithal, and prestige to mobilize workers behind pro-labor candidates and to pressure the FLP to expand relief benefits, pay union scale on all state WPA projects, and to appropriate idle factories as state-run enterprises. Moreover, without a nucleus of party activists working outside the labor movement, the Trotskyists' brand of civic unionism almost exclusively stressed issues of specific concern to trade unions. Critical support for the FLP was geared to protect and advance the interests of organized labor rather than push the party further left.

¹²³ Dobbs, *Teamster Politics* (New York: Monad Press, 1975), 64; "W.P. Supports Election Battle Against Mpls. Reactionaries," *New Militant*, May 18, 1935, 1.

¹²⁴ Trotsky, *Fascism, Stalinism, and the United Front* (London: Bookmarks, 1989), 45.

¹²⁵ Feurer, *Radical Unionism*, xvii, xviii, 57-58, 67, 74, 90-92, passim.

In its first major foray into FLP politics, the local supported the candidacy of labor attorney and former Socialist Thomas Latimer for mayor of Minneapolis in June of 1935. The incumbent Republican mayor, A.G. Bainbridge, formerly a prominent official in the State Federation of Labor, was widely despised by the city's workers for the police violence unleashed against pickets during the July 1934 trucking strike.¹²⁶ A victory for Latimer would be an opportunity for organized labor to have some real influence within the corridors of City Hall for the first time since the Socialist administration of Thomas Van Lear almost fifteen year prior. At a membership meeting of Local 574 in April, Latimer was given a standing ovation with "thunderous applause" from the 1,000 drivers who came to hear him speak.¹²⁷ The local pressed what few resources it still had available to assist the Latimer campaign, but more importantly Local 574 put its reputation among the city's workers behind the Farmer-Labor candidate. Headlines in the *Northwest Organizer*, Local 574's weekly newspaper, exhorted workers to "Remember Bloody Friday" and demanded "Bainbridge and Bloody [Chief of Police] Mike Johannes must go!"¹²⁸ The local implored workers to vote a straight FLP ticket, and warned in no uncertain terms: "The immediate future of the labor movement is at stake!"¹²⁹ Latimer defeated his Republican challenger with solid working-class support, but not in significant enough numbers to leave him politically beholden to the labor movement.

¹²⁶ Cf. petition to the City Council of Minneapolis to remove Mayor A.G. Bainbridge from office, no date (ca. September 1934), Mss 848, box 15, folder 6, Dobbs Papers.

¹²⁷ "F-L Committee Asks Unions Represented," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, April 14, 1935, 1.

¹²⁸ "Support the Farmer-Labor Candidates," *Northwest Organizer*, May 1, 1935, 1.

¹²⁹ "Defeat the Citizens Alliance Candidates," *Northwest Organizer*, May 25, 1935, 1.

Latimer was deeply uncomfortable with the teamster leadership's radicalism and worried that friction between the militant new direction of the labor movement and the hard-line antiunionism of firms organized by the Citizens Alliance would spark another round of violent strikes. National developments in labor law gave the new mayor reason to be concerned. In May, the Supreme Court's decision in *Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States* ruled the NRA unconstitutional. The tortured career of the NRA had already convinced a number of New Dealers to rethink the role of unions as agents of economic recovery empowered by federal labor law.¹³⁰ Passed three days after the *Schechter* decision and prompted by the on-going militancy of the labor movement, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), better known as the Wagner Act, established a formal legal procedure for the recognition of trade unions.¹³¹ Roosevelt's own belated interest in giving labor the right to collectively bargain was intended to clamp down on the industrial disturbances "burdening or obstructing commerce."¹³² Although labor's right to organize was enshrined in law, employers continued to fiercely resist New Deal labor law under the assumption that Wagner too would be ruled unconstitutional. In Minneapolis, the Citizens Alliance urged its members to resist Wagner's incursion

¹³⁰ Gordon, *New Deals*, 200.

¹³¹ The argument that mass labor protest prompted the passage of the Wagner Act has proven controversial. For a breakdown of the debate see Theda Skocpol, Kenneth Finegold, and Michael Goldfield, "Explaining New Deal Labor Policy," *American Political Science Review* 84 (4) 1990: 1297-1315.

¹³² William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Colophon Books 1963) 150-151, 336; quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 298.

into the affairs of business.¹³³ Nationally, workers organized themselves to confront employers and in the mass production industries rallied around the newly formed Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO).¹³⁴ In this same spirit, 574 began an organizing drive to bring the closed shop to all Minneapolis trucking firms while also assisting the recognition drives of unions in other industries.¹³⁵ In this heated atmosphere, Latimer authorized the purchase of machine guns, tear gas, and six armored cars, ostensibly to thwart bank robberies, but Vincent Dunne protested the police department's new acquisitions by pointing out "they can be used to break strikes too."¹³⁶

In the summer of 1935 another strike wave shook Minneapolis. In mid-July, IAM Local 1313 struck the Flour City Ornamental Iron Works, aided by secondary boycotts and sympathy strikes coordinated by 574.¹³⁷ Just as the Olson administration proudly announced the establishment of a publically owned and cooperatively managed rural electrification program, the new Farmer-Labor mayor of Minneapolis deployed police against striking workers.¹³⁸ Then, on the morning of July 26, Latimer personally led a detachment of 68 police officers and some 30

¹³³ "Citizens Alliance of Minneapolis Special Weekly Bulletin," May 14, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

¹³⁴ Robert Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 29-39.

¹³⁵ "Organization Drive On All Fronts Begun By Local 574," *Northwest Organizer*, May 15, 1935, 1.

¹³⁶ Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 89; Maloney interview, 117.

¹³⁷ "Local No. 1313 Fights Injunction," *Northwest Organizer* July 24, 1935, 1; Letter from Robert Happ to Vincent Day, September 17, 1935, box 1, folder Misc. correspondence: Robert Happ, 1935-1936, Day Papers.

¹³⁸ "F-L Launches Vast Rural Electric Plan on Cooperative, Public Ownership Basis," *Minnesota Leader*, July 20, 1935, 1.

strikebreakers across union picket lines and into the Flour City works.¹³⁹ Rightly appalled by Latimer's brazen disregard for labor solidarity, the *Northwest Organizer* demanded that the mayor make "a partial restitution" to organized labor by shutting down the factory as a "menace to the public peace."¹⁴⁰ Latimer ignored Local 574 and police continued to protect strikebreakers from increasingly hostile strikers incensed by the mayor's actions. Violence on the picket lines peaked when police fired into a crowd of workers gathered to protest the company's housing of replacement workers in the plant, killing two bystanders.¹⁴¹ Alongside Flour City, a strike raged among the hosiery workers at the Strutwear Knitting Mills.¹⁴² The Strutwear firm was even more determined than Flour City's management to prevent unionization, and, at the urging of the Citizens Alliance, locked out the workers and shut down the plant.¹⁴³ Here too, Local 574 played a crucial role in providing tactical assistance and strike support for the picketing workers.¹⁴⁴ The Strutwear strike was nearly as violent as Flour City and, most infamously, Vincent Dunne was pulled by police from the knitters' picket line and savagely beaten.¹⁴⁵

Latimer's hostility towards militant labor shocked and enraged Local 574, but the mayor stood committed to restoring labor peace through force and with the

¹³⁹ "Metal Workers Strike Is Solid," *Northwest Organizer*, July 31, 1935, 1-2.

¹⁴⁰ "Close the Plant, Mayor Latimer," *Northwest Organizer*, July 31, 1935, 2.

¹⁴¹ "Two Massacred When Police Protect Lawless Flour City Co.," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, September 13, 1935, 1.

¹⁴² "Strike Ranks Growing Fast At Strutwear," *Northwest Organizer* August 21, 1935, 1; "Union Strutwear Knitters Stop Production," *Minneapolis Labor Review* August 23, 1935, 1.

¹⁴³ Millikan, *A Union Against Unions*, 294-95; Mayer, *Floyd B. Olson*, 276.

¹⁴⁴ Lois Quam and Peter J. Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open-Shop Town: The Citizens' Alliance in the 1930s," *Minnesota History* 50 (3) 1986, 110-17.

¹⁴⁵ "Strike Ranks Growing Fast," 1.

assistance of conservative labor leaders. In a closed-door conference in the mayor's reception room with officials from the Minnesota State Federation, Latimer agreed to back Local 500 and declared that police would be used against striking workers not represented by AFL unions.¹⁴⁶ Latimer also announced the creation of a city Employer-Employee Board to supplement the federal labor bureaucracy. The board, composed of representatives of labor and employers appointed by the mayor, was authorized to arbitrate industrial disputes and declare any work stoppage illegal.¹⁴⁷ 574's executive board emphatically rejected Latimer's offer to have one of its officer's sit on the board, claiming this "artificial agency" was "usurping the legal rights of union organizations."¹⁴⁸ The local in turn confronted the FLP over Latimer's efforts to repress militant labor. "Is this the future accepted policy of the Farmer-Labor Party? Was this part of the platform he was elected on?" asked an editorial in the *Northwest Organizer*. The local pointed to the 10,000 workers critical to Latimer's election who were organized into unions independent of the AFL.

We demand that the Farmer-Labor Party clarify its position in regard to so-called 'outlaw unions.' If they do not want the support of workers in these unions then let them say so plainly. Our future political course will be largely guided by their actions.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ "Tobin Agents Meet Latimer; Plan Betrayal of Strikers," *Northwest Organizer*, August 21, 1935, 1-2.

¹⁴⁷ "Mayor Latimer Attempts to Introduce Compulsory Arbitration in Local Labor Disputes- Reactionary Union Leaders Aid," *Northwest Organizer*, September 11, 1935, 1-2.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Executive Board General Drivers Union Local 574 to the Hennepin County Central Committee of the Farmer-Labor Party, the Minneapolis General Labor Union, All Trade Unions and Railroad Brotherhoods, September 20, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

¹⁴⁹ "A Question to the Farmer-Labor Party," *Northwest Organizer*, August 21, 1935, 2.

The local garnered the support of key FLP ward clubs in Minneapolis. A resolution presented by the Fifth Ward Club to the Hennepin County Central Committee asserted that the FLP was “dependent upon the support of all bonafide [sic] labor organizations regardless of whether or not they are affiliated to the American Federation of Labor.”¹⁵⁰

To complicate matters in both strikes, a group of influential Communist activists in the Minneapolis IAM locals and among the unemployed challenged the Trotskyists’ preeminent position among militant workers. The Minnesota CP’s return to organizing in the mainstream labor movement was a tacit admission of the failure of the Third Period’s hard-left sectarianism. Nonetheless, this revived activity in the AFL unions only further strained solidarity as violent resistance from employers and the city government intensified.¹⁵¹ Anticipating the international Communist movement’s official turn to reformism, the Stalinists reached much the same conclusions as their Trotskyist adversaries: revolutionary politics needed to be tempered to attract wider support for socialism.¹⁵² The CP called on the Minneapolis FLP administration to uphold its campaign pledges to protect the right of workers to picket without police interference, increase relief benefits, ensure a

¹⁵⁰ Resolution of the Fifth Ward Farmer-Labor Club of Minneapolis, no date (ca. September 1935), Mss 848, box 15, folder 16, Dobbs Papers.

¹⁵¹ “Local 574 Leaders Try To Stop Unity,” *United Action*, August 1, 1935, 1; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 186.

¹⁵² The Minnesota CP was not alone in discarding the “purity” revolutionary isolation prior to the formal adoption of the Popular Front, but the Minnesota section made this shift later than many of their Midwest comrades who engaged in genuine coalition building as early as 1931-1932. Feurer, *Radical Unionism*, 41-42; Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981) 75-76; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 263-64

union pay scales on all public works projects, and investigate labor-endorsed aldermen who supported Latimer's strike-breaking policies.¹⁵³ The CP also proposed to lead the FLP rank-and-file and the trade unions behind a "United Labor" banner to force the Farmer-Labor leadership to adopt a "class struggle program."¹⁵⁴ In late summer of 1935 the Communists' critical approach to the FLP was almost identical to that of the Trotskyists. Politically, the two unions were at odds over the appropriate relationship of a revolutionary party to the Farmer-Labor Party. At a public debate between the Trotskyists and the Communists, CP stalwart Harry Mayville of the machinists contended that the Farmer-Labor Party "could be transformed into a party of class struggle." Vincent Dunne of the teamsters retorted that political reliance on Farmer-Laborism without a labor movement committed to militant direct action would be a retreat into reformism.¹⁵⁵ Any chance of a partnership, though, was out of the question as both groups vied to become the vanguard of Minneapolis' "masses and toilers."

Under pressure from the labor movement and the Minneapolis FLP establishment, Latimer worked to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the strike wave. Through the Employer-Employee Board the mayor ordered the Flour City plant shuttered. Flour City management was forced to recognize the union and agreed to demands for wage increases and overtime pay, ending a nearly three

¹⁵³ "What Minneapolis Workers Expect of F-L Administration," *United Action*, August 1, 1935, 3.

¹⁵⁴ "Rumblings Are Heard in F-L Party Ranks Over Betrayals," *United Action*, August 1, 1935, 3, 7. Walter Frank, "Why I Was A Candidate For Alderman of the 11th Ward," *United Action*, August 1, 1935, 1-2.

¹⁵⁵ "Dunne Blasts C.P. in Debate," *New Militant*, June 15, 1935, 2.

month-long strike. Olson's role in the resolution of the strike remains unclear.¹⁵⁶ If he personally pressured Latimer to close the plant it seems likely that he would have stressed the political importance of recasting the FLP's role in resolving the strike. The FLP was eager to rehabilitate its reputation among its working-class base while also reassuring its rural and petit bourgeois adherents that the party was even-handed in its mediation of social conflict. Yet, in a survey of the city's working-class wards the FLP estimated that only 30 percent of worker voters "were class conscious and for the strikers."¹⁵⁷ While not an insignificant degree of support, the limited salience of the strike among the mass of working-class voters no doubt reassured FLP leaders anxious to avoid thrusting the party into the middle of a labor dispute. As a result, neither the governor nor the FLP publically repudiated the mayor. Instead, Latimer was chastised for his lack of "statesmanship" and for being so easily manipulated into violent confrontation by the intransigence of the CA and radical strike leaders.¹⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the strike at Strutwear dragged on until April 1936. Latimer's request for Olson to send in the National Guard to close the factory led Strutwear management to bring suit in federal court claiming the governor exceeded his authority. By the time Olson removed the troops from Minneapolis,

¹⁵⁶ George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951), 275. Olson, no doubt still reeling from being tarred a "strikebreaker" during the 1934 trucking strikes, was leery about being too closely associated with a mayor actively involved in breaking a strike.

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Robert Happ to Vincent Day, August 23, 1935, box 1, folder Misc. correspondence: Robert Happ, 1935-1936, Day Papers.

¹⁵⁸ "Strike Deaths Rouse Demand to Oust Latimer," *Minnesota Leader*, September 21, 1935, 1.

the workers and management reached a settlement that recognized the knitters union.¹⁵⁹

Surprisingly enough AFL President William Green interpreted Olson's actions as an endorsement of militant and radical labor. In response, Green took advantage of the internal dispute within the IBT to begin an all-out campaign against militancy and radicalism within the AFL. The upsurge in labor militancy throughout the AFL over previous two years, prompted Green to write, "[we must] prevent control of our movement lodging in the hands of Communists."¹⁶⁰ To Green, the mêlée within the IBT over Local 574 was emblematic of a larger problem with radicalism faced by the entire AFL. The secretary of the State Federation of Labor appeared in October before the AFL Executive Committee to provide the federation with information regarding the extensive network of "Communists" active in the Minneapolis labor movement, in particular 574 and IAM Locals 382 and 1313.¹⁶¹ Green then dispatched his lieutenant Meyer Lewis to coordinate a so-called "Red drive" to root radicals out of the Minnesota labor movement.¹⁶² Lewis' mission to expose undercover radicals was highly unpopular in Minneapolis, leading many otherwise moderate and conservative unionists to resent the AFL's intrusion into

¹⁵⁹ Mayer, *Floyd B. Olson*, 276-77; "Strutwear Plant Reopens," *Northwest Organizer*, April 8, 1936, 1; "Details Strutwear Settlement," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, April 10, 1936, 1.

¹⁶⁰ Letter from William Green to Paul J. Smith, October 4, 1935, Mss 848, box 15 folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

¹⁶¹ Minutes of American Federation of Labor Executive Council Meeting, October 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers

¹⁶² Letter from William Green to Meyer Lewis, October 28, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

local affairs and side with Local 574.¹⁶³ Green's decision to target radicals was not even unanimously supported in the AFL, especially not amongst industrial union leaders in the CIO who were coming to rely heavily upon radical organizers. David Dubinsky of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union described Lewis' handling of the Red drive as futile and self-destructive in a telegram to Green: "Methods he pursues will not rid the movement of communists, if there are any, but will destroy the [organized] labor movement."¹⁶⁴ Dubinsky feared that a witch-hunt in Minneapolis would only undermine labor solidarity and fuel employers' antiunion polemics.

The ongoing crisis in the labor movement between conservative union leaders and militant rank-and-file insurgents threatened to destroy the viable political coalitions made possible by labor unity. In fall 1935, reports to Olson's office described the politically disastrous fallout of a continued rift between 574 and the IBT and the AFL. Tobin, one Farmer-Labor advisor reasoned, could only defeat 574 with Latimer's help. If the IBT president continued to antagonize the local and if the FLP remained neutral, the Trotskyists would run their own ticket in the 1936 elections and cut into the FLP vote in Minneapolis' working-class wards.¹⁶⁵ Robley Cramer, the editor of the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, telegrammed Farmer-Labor US

¹⁶³ Letter from Meyer Lewis to William Green, no date (ca. October 1935), Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers; Meyer Lewis speech at the University of Minnesota, November 12, 1935, Minneapolis Teamsters Strike Documents; "Flore Shows Growth International Union," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, November 15, 1935, 1. "Lewis Routed in Assembly," "Local 574 Goes to College; Lewis Gets It on the Chin," *Northwest Organizer*, November 20, 1935, 1-2, 1,3.

¹⁶⁴ Telegram from David Dubinsky to William Green, November 13, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

¹⁶⁵ Letter from Robert Happ to Vincent Day, September 1, 1935, box 1, folder Misc. correspondence: Robert Happ, 1935-1936, Day Papers.

Senator Henrik Shipstead in Washington to explain the gravity of the situation: "... a split in labor movement will mean [a] split in [the] political movement and disaster all along the line."¹⁶⁶ US Congressman Dewey Johnson and several FLP ward clubs and committees demanded an end to the Red drive in order to restore labor's political unity.¹⁶⁷ The Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Central Committee followed suit and adopted a resolution in support of 574's reinstatement into the AFL- even though only two months earlier the committee had refused to censure or in any way officially condemn Latimer for his role in the Flour City strike shootings.¹⁶⁸

With the grassroots Farmer-Labor units in support of the Trotskyist teamsters and the state party still silent on the issue, the FLP's longstanding relationship with the Minnesota State Federation of Labor seemed on the verge of deteriorating. George Lawson of the State Federation of Labor blamed labor's "factional strife" on unionists who deviated from strictly economic issues in favor of "plans and isms."¹⁶⁹ Lawson also urged Shipstead to accept the AFL's position that communists had no legitimate place in the trade unions and push the FLP to come out more forcibly against militant labor.¹⁷⁰ Aside from Latimer (the only Farmer-Laborite to address the 1935 state labor convention), the craft federation leaders

¹⁶⁶ Telegram from Robley Cramer to Henrik Shipstead, November 12, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

¹⁶⁷ "Warns of F-L Drift to Right," *Northwest Organizer*, October 30, 1935, 1; "Third Ward F-L Club Opposes Meyer Lewis," "Junior Farmer-Labor Club Condemns Lewis," *Northwest Organizer*, November 13, 1935, 2.

¹⁶⁸ "Henn. F.L.P. Group Hits at 'Red Purge,'" *Northwest Organizer*, December 11, 1935, 1; "Another Reformist Betrayal," *Northwest Organizer* October 23, 1935, 2.

¹⁶⁹ *Proceedings of the Fifty-third Convention of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor*, 16.

¹⁷⁰ Letter from George W. Lawson to Henrik Shipstead, November 15, 1935, Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

found most of the FLP to be too soft on communism and considered its left-of-center politics too radical. “The bureaucrats of the A.F. of L.’s Internationals are as much opposed to a Farmer-Labor Party as they are to the Communists,” wrote an FLP advisor to Olson’s secretary Vincent Day.¹⁷¹ Lawson lashed out at the Farmer-Labor newspaper the *Minnesota Leader* for criticizing the Red drive and rebuked the FLP for interfering in labor’s affairs.¹⁷² Olson was left on shaky ground as the Minneapolis FLP stood solidly behind the Trotskyist teamsters while the AFL was leaning on the state party to take decisive action against labor radicals.

The continuing crisis in the labor movement forced the Trotskyist teamsters to reevaluate their connection to the FLP. In September, William Brown, the local’s president, had publically dismissed the FLP as “dead” and threatened to create “a real producer’s party” if Olson continued to tolerate Latimer’s collusion with Tobin.¹⁷³ The Workers Party even went so far as to declare that workers should withdraw en masse from that FLP.¹⁷⁴ Such threats rang hollow, and the local demanded to know why the FLP simply stood by as one of the key components of its coalition was being torn apart by the interference of the AFL. The Red drive, the local concluded, was poised to eviscerate the very unions responsible for so much of the FLP’s urban support. “The FLP,” the *Northwest Organizer* pointed out, “has its base in the unions.”

¹⁷¹ Letter from Robert Happ to Vincent Day, September 17, 1935, box 1, folder Misc. correspondence: Robert Happ, 1935-1936, Day Papers.

¹⁷² “Geo. Lawson Hits Out At FLP Paper,” *Northwest Organizer*, November 27, 1935, 1, 3.

¹⁷³ Letter from Happ to Day, September 17, 1935, Day Papers.

¹⁷⁴ “MPLS. W.P. Shows True Role of F-L Party,” *New Militant*, November 9, 1935, 1, 4.

Most of its support comes from the unions. The Green drive will lop off the Farmer-Laborite unionists just as quickly as it attacks other groups. If [the FLP] stands aside, the Green Machine will cut it to pieces. It must take a firm stand against the tactics of Meyer Lewis and aid the progressive unions in defeating him.¹⁷⁵

The local argued that the FLP was at its core a labor party, with a mandate to follow the direction of the trade unions. For the Trotskyists, a labor party was a concrete expression of what Rosa Luxemburg referred to as the inseparability of trade union and parliamentary struggle in the development of revolutionary consciousness.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, the labor party idea seemed the best possible compromise to accommodate the necessity of backsliding into class-collaborationist politics.

Without support from either the local labor movement or from the FLP, the AFL's Red drive collapsed. So too did the IBT's efforts to force out 574's Trotskyist leadership. With the support of its rank-and-file, the Minneapolis labor movement, and influential figures and institutions in the FLP, no employer was prepared to provoke 574 by signing new agreements with 500. Although Local 574 was committed to advancing industrial unionism, its real priority was to re-affiliate with the IBT and the AFL.¹⁷⁷ The Trotskyist leadership was adamantly opposed to fomenting any further division within the labor movement by attempting to move into the newly formed CIO. Pleas for labor unity did not keep local leaders from meeting in early 1936 with CIO organizational director John Brophy. Brophy

¹⁷⁵ "What About the Farmer-Labor Party?" *Northwest Organizer*, November 6, 1935, 2.

¹⁷⁶ Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, Dick Howard, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 263, 269.

¹⁷⁷ "Demand Industrial Union," January 29, *Northwest Organizer* 1936, 1; CLU resolution in favor of industrial unionism, no date (ca. September 1936), Mss 848, box 15, folder 9, Dobbs Papers.

advised against seeking a CIO charter for fear of exacerbating tensions with the AFL and the local's leaders agreed with his advice. Joining the fledgling CIO would have decimated the local's sole base of consistent support among the local AFL unions in the Minneapolis CLU.¹⁷⁸

In July of 1936, an emissary from Tobin contacted the local about beginning reconciliation talks. After three weeks of negotiations between the IBT president and the local leadership Locals 574 and 500 were merged together as Local 544.¹⁷⁹ The result was an uneasy truce between the newly minted 544 and the IBT whereby officials from Local 500 would be integrated into the local leadership as members on the executive board and as vice president and secretary treasurer.¹⁸⁰ Despite the presence of Tobin's allies in a few union leadership posts, the merger itself was a major concession on the part of Tobin and the AFL. In effect, the creation of 544 legitimized a local organized and led by a cadre of radicals.

Organized labor was faced with a number of crucial choices by 1936, but abstaining from involvement in the political process was no longer one. Two years of militant struggle were beginning to make the union shop and collective bargaining concrete realities for thousands of Minneapolis workers, but maintaining this new system of industrial relations hinged upon active government support of organized labor. The initial problems with ensuring compliance with labor law, coupled with organized labor's lingering discomfort with relying on state intervention, meant that labor needed to continue taking an aggressive stance

¹⁷⁸ Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 113.

¹⁷⁹ "Union of 574-500 Thrills Workers," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, July 17, 1936, 1.

¹⁸⁰ Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 123-25.

against employers. Labor militancy had proved practical on the picket line and it forced the state to take seriously both the shop floor and political grievances of workers. In this context, the appeal of voluntarism and strict nonpartisanship was beginning to wane. Having beaten Tobin and survived Green's Red drive, the local did not abandon Farmer-Labor politics. Rather, the increased political profile of militant labor reinforced the Trotskyists' vision of increasing the power of trade unions over the FLP. At the same time, the turmoil within the Minnesota labor movement led the FLP to begin a critical reevaluation of its political relationship with organized labor. Fearful of future fragmentation in the labor movement, not to mention the estrangement of rural and middle-class voters from the Farmer-Labor banner, the FLP's leadership attempted to limit the political intervention of organized labor.

The Farmer-Labor Party and the Popular Front

Throughout 1935, the international Communist movement was in a moment of transition. In Minnesota and elsewhere, party members slowly shed the strictures of the Third Period with a return to collaborating with liberal, reform-oriented working-class organizations. In response to the failure of the CP's ultra-revolutionary approach to attract working-class support, the "Popular Front" was officially inaugurated at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1935 to build broad cross-class alliances with socialist and liberal bourgeois parties and trade unions in common cause against the

rise of fascism.¹⁸¹ Under the Popular Front the CP sought to enter the mainstream of American politics as the left wing of the New Deal coalition. The CP, General Secretary Earl Browder proudly declared, “became the most single-minded practical reformist party that America ever produced.”¹⁸² Internally the CP remained a rigidly hierarchical vanguard party driven by ideological dogmatism, replacing the fetishization of revolution with the fetishization of liberal reform. The “political turn” of the Popular Front embraced electoral politics and the gradual reform of capitalism, relinquishing any pretense about being a revolutionary party. The planks of the Popular Front’s program was essentially a left-leaning variation of what the New Deal ultimately achieved, e.g. public works projects, relief for farmers, and collective bargaining.¹⁸³ Communist cadres returned to the AFL unions and most significantly surged into CIO organizing campaigns in the mass production industries. Initially, Popular Front Communists were opposed to the Democratic Party and eagerly sought entry into state-level third party politics.¹⁸⁴ Progressive, labor, and farmer-labor parties in Wisconsin, New York, and Minnesota, the CP

¹⁸¹ The term Popular Front refers specifically to Leon Blum’s coalition government of socialists and Communists in France from 1936-1937, but the term has come to be the blanket historical term for this period in international Communism. The CP in the US first dubbed this new spirit of cooperation the “United Front” and also used slogans like the “People’s Front” and the “Democratic Front” before the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939. Cf. Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, eds., *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) and Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents* (London: Routledge, 1971).

¹⁸² Quoted in Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,” *American Communist History* 2 (2) 2003, 152.

¹⁸³ Cf. Earl Browder, *What Is Communism?* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1936), 115-117.

¹⁸⁴ Kenneth Walzer, “The Party and the Polling Place: American Communism and an American Labor Party in the 1930s,” *Radical History Review*, Spring 1980: 104-29.

reasoned, were the ideal platforms to launch a national and more authentically working-class alternative to the Democrats.¹⁸⁵

Prior to the official shift in international Communist strategy, the Minnesota CP had already begun moving into the FLP. In a resolution passed by the Communist Party Central Committee in August 1935, the party leaders claimed a sharp “class differentiation” was emerging in Minnesota between the “leftward moving” workers and small farmers and the “official leaders, trade union reformists, and the bourgeois politicians” of the FLP. While the resolution noted that workers and farmers were not yet ready to accept the Communist Party outright, the new platform ordered party members to work within the FLP to isolate its reactionary leadership as well as “demagogues” like the Trotskyists.¹⁸⁶ By September Communists were joining the FLP and from within the organization denounced Latimer and Olson.¹⁸⁷ The growing influence of the CP troubled the Farmer-Labor leadership. At a meeting organized by the CP to protest the police killings during the Flour City strike, an FLP advisor estimated that over half of the more than 400 people in attendance were “active rank-and-file members of our own party.”¹⁸⁸ The next month, Olson met with Earl Browder and the governor agreed to secretly allow CP members back into the FLP.¹⁸⁹ The CP ceased its attacks on Olson and stopped

¹⁸⁵ John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15.

¹⁸⁶ “The Tasks of the Party In Carrying Through the CC Resolution on the Labor Party in Minn. and Northwest,” *United Action*, August 15, 1935, 5.

¹⁸⁷ Letter Robert Happ to Vincent Day, September 21, 1935, box 1, folder Misc. correspondence: Robert Happ, 1935-1936, Day Papers; “Governor Olson’s Leadership Of the Farmer-Labor Party,” *United Action*, September 16, 1935, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Letter from Happ to Day, September 21, 1935, Day Papers.

¹⁸⁹ Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New

running its own candidates for office in Minnesota. Although the CP was very small in Minnesota- one estimate put membership at only 1,000 in the 1930s- these cadres became some of the most diligent and dedicated members of the FLP.¹⁹⁰ The influx of disciplined and hard-working CP cadres loyal to Olson helped the governor strengthen his position against the FLP's competing factions.¹⁹¹

The Communists reentered Farmer-Labor politics just as Olson was struggling to keep labor factionalism from dulling the party's electoral edge. As much as the revival of the labor movement in Minneapolis mobilized workers behind the FLP, the movements' militancy appeared to undermine Farmer-Laborism's claim to be advocating "peaceful and orderly change."¹⁹² Olson was most concerned with how to make left-of-center politics appealing to a diversity of class fractions and not strictly workers. However, the FLP's 1934 losses in rural counties and slipping numbers in key urban wards made keeping the party's base in organized labor intact an urgent matter for the party as a whole. As the labor movement was splintering over 574's feud within the IBT, the AFL's Red drive, and Latimer's handling of the 1935 strike wave, Olson realized that the coordinating body of the FLP's statewide party, the Farmer-Labor Association, needed to be insulated from labor factionalism. This was problematic because trade unionists

York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 259. Olson's accord with Browder proved wrong Trotsky's 1932 prediction that, given the CP's failure to wed itself to the embryonic farmer-labor movement in the early 1920s, "it would have less possibility in the new phase of an analogous movement." Trotsky, "On the Labor Party Question in America," *Class Struggle*, August 1932.

¹⁹⁰ Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 16.

¹⁹¹ Naftalin, *A History of the Farmer-Labor Party*, 238; Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 216.

¹⁹² Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 194-95.

comprised the bulk of the association's membership. Before 1933, 6,000 to 8,000 trade unionists were dues paying members of the Farmer-Labor Association when total membership was only about 10,000. Even when membership grew to 20,000 in 1934 and the number of union members in the Farmer-Labor Association remained static, the unions were still the association's most organized grouping.¹⁹³

The CP's relative isolation from the controversies in the local labor movement made the Communists an even more attractive partner for Olson. The tremendous growth of the CP nationally and in Minnesota through the 1930s was accompanied by a steady deproletarianization as middle-class professionals progressively began to outnumber industrial workers.¹⁹⁴ Despite party pronouncements (echoing those of the Trotskyists) calling for the transformation of the FLP into "real class struggle party" led by the militant trade unions, the Minnesota CP had no formal authority over any major Minneapolis trade union.¹⁹⁵ The party's historic inability to construct a leadership network on the shop floor no doubt influenced the Popular Front's turn towards reformist electoral politics.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Paul S. Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association: Minnesota's Party Within a Party," *Minnesota History*, 38 (7) 1963, 303.

¹⁹⁴ Nathan Glazer, *Social Basis of American Communism* (Westport, CT: Glenwood Press, 1974), 114, 147, 149, 159. The CP's working-class base in the 1920s was in the immigrant foreign language sections, groups that the party leadership nonetheless disparaged in favor of appealing to native-born workers. After 1934 and with the advent of the Popular Front, the CP turned against the foreign language groups and embraced sympathetic fractions from the middle class. By "middle class" the CP referred to petit bourgeois professionals (e.g. teachers, clerks, and lawyers). For example, see, "Symposium on Role of Professional, Intellectual," *United Action*, October 1, 1935, 2.

¹⁹⁵ "Build the Farmer-Labor Party!" *United Action*, December 13, 1935, 8.

¹⁹⁶ Nelson Lichtenstein, "The Communist Experience in the Trade Unions," *Industrial Relations* 19 (2) 1980, 129; Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," 152.

The lack of a mass base made the party entirely dependent on an FLP leadership that did not want to publicize their connections to the CP. The alliance with the FLP, one Communist organizer grumbled, “was more or less a relationship with the top, very secretive not only to the masses at large, but even to our membership and sympathizers.”¹⁹⁷ The CP’s disciplined and efficient organization afforded the party privileged access to the FLP and even remade some party members into Farmer-Labor elites. Despite such influence, the CP was in no position to stake out an independent political course. The CP’s longstanding practice of democratic centralism in decision-making and the Popular Front’s ideological fealty to reformism meant that the Communists generally deferred to FLP policy. Furthermore, since the Communists relied almost exclusively on sympathetic Farmer-Laborites for support and protection, they could not easily defy their patrons.

With the approval of Olson, Communists moved into the ward clubs and county and district committees of the Farmer-Labor Association that had been neglected by the “pure and simple” AFL trade unionists and the Trotskyists.¹⁹⁸ These small and often understaffed organs offered the Communists and their liberal allies a perfect entry point to assume control over powerful Farmer-Labor Association structures like the Hennepin County Central Committee.¹⁹⁹ Olson was willing, if not eager, to integrate the CP into the FLP because as a disciplined core of

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 19.

¹⁹⁸ Although neither the CLA nor the WP banned membership in the FLP outright, the emphasis on “true party work” meant that no Trotskyist activists were members of Farmer-Labor Association ward clubs in Minneapolis. Carlson interview, 16-17.

¹⁹⁹ Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 258.

operatives Communist cadres could help advance the governor's policies within the Farmer-Labor movement at the all important district and state conventions. In effect, Olson's recruitment of the CP was an effort to transform the FLP organization from a mass-based party into a constituent party "neither structured nor widely perceived as a cohesive policy link between voters and officials."²⁰⁰ Although union members were still a sizeable group in the Farmer-Labor Association, according to Article IV of the association's constitution the maximum number of delegates a trade union or other affiliated group could send to party conventions was pegged at three in order to prevent any one group from commandeering the proceedings.²⁰¹ Communists and Popular Front liberals in turn remade standing associations into front groups and created whole new paper organizations, such as the Bulgarian-Macedonian Workers Club and the Rosa Luxemburg League, to outflank trade union opposition. Local 544, with its three delegates for 5,000 members, was, to say the least, seriously underrepresented at Farmer-Labor conventions.

Olson's alliance with the Communist Party highlighted the problem of labor factionalism. While Olson could have looked to farm groups to help minimize union power, that would have only exacerbated divisions in the Farmer-Labor movement between rural and urban voters. Warren Creel, Secretary of the Farmer-Labor Association's Educational Bureau, claimed that Communist cadres were in a unique position to drive the unions out of the Farmer-Labor Association while cementing the loyalty of union voters for FLP candidates. Speaking from the clubs and

²⁰⁰ Walter Dean Burham, *Critical Elections and the Mainspring of American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970), 9.

²⁰¹ *Constitution of the Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota* adopted March 20, 1925.

committees of the Farmer-Labor Association, Communists and Popular Front liberals urged union workers to demand the disaffiliation of their trade unions from the Farmer-Labor Association as a protest against petit bourgeois and antilabor politicians like Latimer. The CP's alternative was for the trade unions to create separate political committees to endorse progressive Farmer-Labor candidates and mobilize union members on election days.²⁰² Such proposals carried little weight among the rank-and-file and organized labor did not desert the Farmer-Labor Association en masse until after the defeats of 1938. The integration of the CP spelled out the Farmer-Labor leadership's revised attitude towards organized labor: the function of the unions was simply to get workers to the polls, not to dictate policy and risk the balkanization of the FLP. Without a trade union base, the Communists implicitly seconded Olson's stance that the political role of workers was at the ballot box, voting for progressive Farmer-Labor candidates.

In the last months of 1935 and throughout most of 1936 the CP was still quietly establishing itself within the FLP, but the Trotskyists understood the FLP's tentative move into a Popular Front coalition as a threat to their own political influence. The Trotskyists agreed in part with CP that the widening gap between organized workers and the career-minded petit bourgeois FLP politicians was the party's real problem.²⁰³ Instead of engaging directly in FLP politics like the Stalinists, the Trotskyists attempted to shore up their position of leadership within

²⁰² Warren Creel, "The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party," *Fourth International*, March 1946, 7 (3), 77-81.

²⁰³ "Law and Order," *Northwest Organizer*, September 3, 1936, 4.

the labor movement by forming an organized left bloc in the CLU.²⁰⁴ The Trotskyists also returned to building a political base outside the FLP as James Cannon negotiated the mass entrance of Workers Party members into the decaying Socialist Party.²⁰⁵ The Trotskyists' expectation that a rejuvenated and radicalized SP could pressure the FLP further left, but hopes for this plan were quickly dashed. The state SP chapter forcefully resisted the assimilation of the WP, crippling the Trotskyists' ability to appropriate and revive the dormant Socialist organization.²⁰⁶ Once again, the Trotskyists were left to rely almost solely on the local union to influence Farmer-Labor politics.

The fundamental difference between the politics of the Trotskyists and the Communists was not ideological, but over how to gain access to institutions of power. The CP, with Olson's blessing, rose through the FLP's grassroots organizational networks to wield influence over party policy while the Trotskyists' focused on the trade union affiliates to the Farmer-Labor Association. For the time being, this difference in political spheres of operation contained the conflict between the CP and the Trotskyists. The defeat of the AFL's anti-radical purges solidified the political position of the Communists and the Trotskyists while also making both groups aware of the need to close ranks behind the FLP to stave off conservative counterattacks. Political unity for organized labor appeared to be at hand.

²⁰⁴ "The Left Wing," *Northwest Organizer*, June 3, 1936, 4.

²⁰⁵ Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 236.

²⁰⁶ Position of the Majority Group Minneapolis Socialist Local. RE: Admission Workers Party Members, March 7, 1936; O.F. Hawkins to the N.E.C. of the Socialist Party of America, March 10, 1936, box 5, folder Correspondence and Other Papers, January-April, 1936, Oscar Hawkins Papers.

The Apogee of Farmer-Laborism

The divisions within the Farmer-Labor movement were clear: craft and industrial unionists, New Deal Democrats, Republicans, Communists, Socialists, a slew of other radicals and militants, and a growing rank-and-file largely new to electoral politics.²⁰⁷ In a few years time these elements would carve the labor movement up into competing factions. However, in 1936 the extent of labor's successes on the shop floor, in statehouses, and in Washington was still so new and shocking that existing tensions were dwarfed by the extraordinary political possibilities before organized labor. Rumbblings for a national farmer-labor or labor party to challenge the Democrats were quieted in 1936 as the various agents of working-class politics joined together to support Roosevelt's bid for reelection. The possibility of a retrenchment of liberal progress, animated by fears of homegrown populism and fascism, united these groups behind the New Deal Democrats and their third-party allies at the state level. In Minnesota, the multifaceted struggle to solidify collective bargaining in Minneapolis exposed the internal and external forces that could lay waste to the labor movement and the FLP. The 1936 campaign was a moment when the key actors in labor and on the left united behind a drive to stem a conservative backlash against the New Deal.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1965); Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 251-89; Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class American: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 153-95; Kristi Andersen, *The Creation of a Democratic Majority, 1928-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

The election campaign began with the fanfare typical of previous election seasons, but this campaign was about protecting the liberal reform of the past four years from a rearguard assault.²⁰⁸ Olson described the contemporary political climate as a contest between liberals and reactionaries. “In politics,” he wrote, “the liberal logically belongs with parties seeking the establishment of a new social order.” The reactionary, on the other hand, “refuses to admit that conditions have undergone a radical change” and insists upon reestablishing an outmoded social order. Real liberal change, Olson declared, could only be achieved by radicalism, confronting the problems of society at their roots (the *radix*) in order to create a more just and equitable world.²⁰⁹ Reactionaries were nothing more than harbingers of fascism because their politics reinforced the hierarchies of the old society while repressing the social forces straining to create a new society. Olson’s left-leaning interpretation of liberalism was distinct from Marxist interpretations of class struggle. In an interview with journalist Charles Walker, Olson complained that the left failed to grasp the essential conservatism of American political culture. “The problem 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.”²¹⁰ Farmer-laborism, Olson contended, was the ideal combination of progressive liberalism, acknowledging the

²⁰⁸ “F-L Party Launches State Campaign,” *Minnesota Leader*, February 1, 1936, 1.

²⁰⁹ Letter from Floyd B. Olson to J.A. Blomgren, May 21, 1936, box 2, folder Memoranda to Gov. Olson, 1934, Day Papers.

²¹⁰ Walker, “The Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, Part II: Governor Olson’s Last Interview,” *The Nation* March 20, 1937, 319, box 1, folder Magazine articles, Farmer-Labor Party and Floyd B. Olson, 1933, 1937, Walker Papers.

need for radical change while moderating demands for social upheaval to fit within the political institutions of capitalist democracy.

Olson announced in January of 1936 his decision to run for the US Senate. The battle for the FLP's gubernatorial nomination was set between urban Popular Front liberals and rural agrarians. Elmer Benson, the former state Commissioner of Securities who Olson appointed to serve out the remaining term of an open senate seat, was the favorite of the party's progressive and Popular Front factions. Benson, a relative unknown who had never held an elected office, was a close ally of the governor, enjoyed the support of the FLP's weekly newspaper the *Minnesota Leader*, and enthusiastically welcomed a partnership with the CP.²¹¹ His opponent was Hjalmar Petersen, a country newspaper editor who rose through the FLP ranks to become lieutenant governor to provide a rural balance to Olson's ticket. Although Petersen represented the FLP's more conservative rural wing suspicious of militant urban labor, he nevertheless went along with Olson's decision to align the FLP with the CP.²¹² The nominating convention was expected to be highly contentious since Olson, suffering from stomach cancer, would not be in attendance to moderate the proceedings.

Blaming an overly ambitious social democratic agenda for the setbacks of the 1934 elections, the 1936 state convention gutted the much of the party's radical platform while nevertheless giving radicals a voice in the deliberations. Despite grumblings by many Farmer-Laborites, forty CP delegates, complimented by

²¹¹ Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 18-20.

²¹² Steven J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), 149.

another hundred Popular Front liberals, were seated and constituted a sizeable bloc in a convention of 667 delegates. In vain, a livid Thomas Laitner bemoaned the replacement of “old-time Farmer-Laborites” by communist agents.²¹³ The trades and labor assemblies of Duluth and St. Paul shared Latimer’s frustration and demanded that 574’s two delegates not be seated at the upcoming state FLP convention because the local was not a part of the AFL and for the leadership’s ties to “Communism.”²¹⁴ In the end 574’s delegates were seated with little protest, but proposals put forth by Trotskyist delegates calling for an FLP endorsement of a WPA workers’ organizing drive and a plan for the state to appropriate idle factories for unemployed workers were both roundly rejected.²¹⁵ Standard FLP support for the public ownership of industry and natural resources was excised and replaced by an intentionally vague scheme known as “Planned Plenty” to downplay the FLP’s socialist roots.²¹⁶ The convention sidestepped the contentious issue of creating a national farmer-labor party to challenge Roosevelt, a core Communist issue, by refusing to take a stand one way or another on the matter.²¹⁷ The state convention’s revisions of party certainly frustrated the FLP’s leftwing, but it also demonstrated the extent of the Trotskyists and Stalinists commitment to accepting the

²¹³ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 216, 218.

²¹⁴ “FLP State Body Moves Against 574,” *Northwest Organizer*, March 18, 1936, 3.

²¹⁵ “The FLP ‘Red Scare,’” *Northwest Organizer*, March 25, 1936, 4.

²¹⁶ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 218.

²¹⁷ “The Coming F-L State Convention,” *United Action*, February 14, 1936, special supplement; Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 218-19.

compromises inherent to parliamentary politics. Both groups left the convention prepared to fully support the FLP platform and candidates.²¹⁸

A relative unknown when he entered the convention, Benson proved popular among the delegates thanks to Olson's endorsement and managed to win the nomination for governor.²¹⁹ Benson's campaign toned down the radical rhetoric previous campaigns and actively connected the FLP and the New Deal after Olson publically endorsed Roosevelt.²²⁰ Benson reminded working-class voters of the need for increased state intervention in economic and social policy to tackle the Depression. "Our workers," he avowed, "want to know whether the government will solve for them and for their children the nightmare of economic insecurity, with its threat of hunger, want, and degradation."²²¹ Benson applauded New Deal reforms, especially those won for organized labor, but he warned workers: "If we lose this Election, then our cause will be lost for many years."²²² The FLP platform attacked Republican plans to institute a state sales tax and denounced the incursion of chain stores into the state economy. The specter of fascism was ever-present in the

²¹⁸ "Olson, Benson Endorsed," *Northwest Organizer*, April 1, 1936, 1; Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 18.

²¹⁹ Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen*, 130.

²²⁰ Mayer, *Floyd B. Olson*, 295-98. For more on the national third party question, cf. Eric Leif Davin, "The Very Last Hurrah? The Defeat of the Labor Party Idea, 1934-1936," *"We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s"*, Staughton Lynd, ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 117-71; Zieger, *CIO*, 39-41; Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 206-08; Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, 95-105; David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 220-21.

²²¹ Elmer Benson, radio address transcript, October 23, 1936, box 3, folder Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, Oct.-Dec., 1936, Elmer Benson Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

²²² "An Appeal to Union Men," Benson campaign letter, October 28, 1936, box 3, folder Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, Oct.-Dec., 1936, Benson Papers.

Benson campaign to underscore the seriousness of the election. "It is but a step from the reactionary philosophy of the Republican Party," Benson warned, "to reactionary dictatorship."²²³ American fascist groups like the Black Legion and the Silver Shirts, the FLP alleged, were expanding their ranks and even preparing for a *putsch* against a victorious liberal administration.²²⁴ The stakes in 1936 were higher than ever, Benson and the FLP claimed, because the opposition fully understood the strength of progressive liberalism and would stop at nothing to see such a powerful coalition crushed.

The death of Floyd Olson from cancer in August did not derail the momentum of the FLP campaign; if anything it only contributed to its forward surge. Over 150,000 Minnesotans came out to mourn the late governor as he lay in state in St. Paul.²²⁵ In death Olson was practically canonized as the patron saint of the FLP, transforming a complicated and ambitious politician into a popular (and pliable) icon for the left. To workers, Olson *was* the Farmer-Labor Party, and even harsh critics like the Trotskyists made the tactful and politically judicious decision to honor the late governor. The *Northwest Organizer's* obituary for Olson made no mention of the 1934 strikes, and instead praised him "as an unswerving champion

²²³ Elmer Benson speech, no date (ca. August 20, 1936), box 3, folder Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, Oct.-Dec., 1936, Benson Papers.

²²⁴ "Gun Gang Attack on F-L Party Is Urged by Fascists," *Minnesota Leader*, March 7, 1936, 1, 6; "Reveal Black Legion Drive in Minnesota," *Minnesota Leader*, May 30, 1936, 1; "Silvershirts Plot Armed Fascist Revolt in Autumn, Chieftain Reveals," *Minnesota Leader*, June 27, 1936, 1.

²²⁵ "150,000 People Pay Tribute to Governor Olson At Last Rites," *Minnesota Leader*, August 29, 1936, 1.

of the underprivileged and exploited.”²²⁶ Olson’s death further accentuated the Trotskyist teamsters’ steady move away from outspoken revolutionary politics towards a greater accord with the FLP. The Trotskyist leadership of the local warned against any “unprincipled struggle for the crown of the dead leader” to prevent the Republicans or the Democrats from taking advantage of party dissension.²²⁷ The need for labor and political solidarity was not lost on the Trotskyists, who once again swallowed their revolutionary principles and accepted Farmer-Laborism out of political necessity.

Still the *Northwest Organizer* issued a highly qualified endorsement of the FLP in September of 1936. “In Minnesota the abstract question of how workers should vote is a simple one.” The political duty of workers was to support “whatever political movement most closely represents his economic needs” and in turn “mold it into a weapon” to “fight in the interests of the exploited.”²²⁸ The editorial urged the readership, who “no doubt range from Communists to Republicans,” to vote a straight FLP ticket. Even if the FLP lacked the credentials of a genuine working-class party, at the very least it was “a political party to which labor unions are directly affiliated.”²²⁹ Still smarting from the betrayals of the Latimer administration, the Trotskyists urged workers to vote Farmer-Labor while pointedly reminding the party that working-class support depended upon the actions of its elected representatives. The Trotskyists hoped that in the election the

²²⁶ “Whole State Mourns As Floyd B. Olson Passes,” *Northwest Organizer*, August 26, 1936, 1,3.

²²⁷ “Olson and the Party,” *Northwest Organizer*, August 26, 1936, 4.

²²⁸ “The Worker Voter,” *Northwest Organizer*, September 17, 1936, 4.

²²⁹ “The Labor Vote,” *Northwest Organizer*, October 15, 1936, 4.

trades unions could bring enough voters to the polls to pressure the Farmer-Laborite to live up to its campaign promises and in turn increase union power within the FLP.

The FLP under Benson as under Olson was also wary of the political intervention of organized labor. Benson and the party's other candidates were sensitive to Republican charges that the FLP was a radical labor party responsible for the strikes and industrial turmoil that shook the state over the preceding two years. "The answer that the Farmer-Labor Party should make to this dastardly conniving," the *Northwest Organizer* declared, "is to come out wholesale in support of striking workers and answer the slander of the reactionary politicians by saying openly that the Farmer-Labor Party DOES support the economic organization of the workers."²³⁰ But, as in 1934, the FLP adamantly resisted accusations that it was a front for organized labor. Its candidates paraphrased the preamble to the Wagner Act by stating that only legally sanctioned collective bargaining could end present state of "industrial war."²³¹ It was the continued opposition of employers and the GOP to collective bargaining that was the root cause of labor disputes, forcing workers to assume a more militant stance to win their legal right to union representation.²³² Instances of labor violence were the result of capital's senseless resistance to unions; it was employers who provoked labor "riots" by using hired

²³⁰ "Labor and Elections," *Northwest Organizer*, October 8, 1936, 4.

²³¹ "Gov. Petersen Takes Lead In Effort For Strike Settlement," *Minnesota Leader* October 3, 1936, 3; "Lundeen Demands Adequate Social Security Legislation," *Minnesota Leader* October 17, 1936, 2,

²³² "Benson Attacks Nelson Refusal to Reveal His Tax Plan," *Minnesota Leader*, September 26, 1936, 2.

thugs and, if possible, the police to disrupt peaceful pickets.²³³ Labor militancy was the inevitable outcome of reactionary politics, and the only option for peace was to accept the reality of class conflict and mediate it through the state institutions.

In an attempt to convince conservative Farmer-Laborites and moderate Democrats to vote Republican, Minnesota Republicans described themselves as the only liberal party in the state, blasting the New Deal and painting unions as the incubators of communist revolution.²³⁴ The FLP retorted that Republicans were merely classical liberals interested only in advancing the interests of the capitalist class.²³⁵ “The issue in Minnesota is not communism, nor is it socialism,” the *Minnesota Leader* explained. The real issue of the election was the Republican Party’s eagerness to compensate for the failures of Hoover by adopting the trappings of fascism.²³⁶ Republican Red-baiting failed to gain traction in large part because the base of the FLP as well as its leading figures were united behind the party’s candidate for governor. In this context Republican attacks rang hollow because they did not resonate with serious divisions lingering within the FLP’s ranks or among liberal voters. Organized labor stood united behind the AFL and the State Federation Labor convention in September passed resolutions endorsing the entire FLP slate and Roosevelt.²³⁷ In exchange for the FLP’s support of Roosevelt, the state’s Democratic candidates for governor, the senate, and congress bowed out

²³³ “Labor ‘Rioting,’” *Minnesota Leader* October 3, 1936 4.

²³⁴ “G.O.P. Plays Its Last Card, the Red Scare,” *Minnesota Leader* October 24, 1936, 1, 5.

²³⁵ “Republicans as ‘Liberals,’” *Minnesota Leader* February 27, 1936, 4.

²³⁶ “The Issue Is ‘Republicanism,’” *Minnesota Leader* October 24, 1936, 4; “Benson Repudiates Communism; Blames G.O.P.,” *Minnesota Leader* October 31, 1936, 1, 5.

²³⁷ *Proceedings of the Fifty-fourth Convention of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor, Cloquet, Minn., September 21-23, 1936*, 66-67.

of the election to prevent splitting the liberal vote.²³⁸ The CP reversed its opposition to Roosevelt and gave up on a third party campaign, but avoided explicitly endorsing the president and instead the party directed its invective against the Republican Party.²³⁹ Therefore, the unity of organized labor, the surrender of the state's Democrats, the collapse of a national farmer-labor party foreclosed the major potential rifts in the urban Farmer-Labor coalition.

The Democratic landslide across the country reelected Roosevelt by more than eleven million votes. The president was accompanied back into office by a solid contingent of New Dealers in the House and Senate as well as governors in key industrial states like Michigan and Pennsylvania. Trade unions became more than simply economic organizations as labor protest helped to mobilize political action behind "latent working-class sentiments."²⁴⁰ Democratic politics linked working-class interests with those of other class fractions, minimizing the effect of class polarization on the Democratic vote, but issues most relevant to labor occupied much of the campaign agenda.²⁴¹ Heightened labor militancy greatly increased the political profile of industrial workers and convinced Roosevelt to reach out to the burgeoning CIO and the nearly four million workers it was organizing into industrial

²³⁸ "Curtis and Delaney Quit Race in Order to Unite Liberals," *Minnesota Leader* October 10, 1936, 6; Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 170.

²³⁹ Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, 97-98.

²⁴⁰ Richard Oestreicher, "Urban and Working-Class Political Behavior and Theories of American Electoral Politics, 1870-1940," *Journal of American History* 74 1988, 1282.

²⁴¹ David Plotke, *Building A Democratic Political Order, Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 132-34.

unions leading up to the 1936 elections.²⁴² The creation in 1936 of the CIO's political arm, Labor's Non-Partisan League (LNPL), mobilized millions of workers behind the Democrats, in many cases for the very first time. William Leuchtenberg argues that the LNPL was essential to bringing Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania out for Roosevelt and the Democrats.²⁴³ New Deal Democrats were the logical allies of industrial mass production workers because after the passage of the Wagner Act the Roosevelt administration appeared willing to at least nominally incorporate working-class organizations in the political project of reviving the economy.²⁴⁴ The labor upheavals of the early 1930s proved to workers and labor leaders alike that unions could be constructed from "below," but not sustained without some kind of assistance from the state.²⁴⁵

Along with the resounding reelection of Roosevelt, the November elections brought the FLP its most sweeping victories thanks also to organized labor. In the governor's race Benson trounced his Republican opponent by 250,000 votes, at that time the largest margin of victory for any governor in Minnesota history. Benson won big in the Twin Cities' counties of Hennepin and Ramsey and on the Iron Range, but he also picked up a significant number of votes in rural areas that had rejected

²⁴² Mike Davis, "The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party," *New Left Review* 124 (1980), 53.

²⁴³ Leuchtenberg, *Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 189.

²⁴⁴ Steve Fraser, "The 'Labor Question,'" *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 56.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1993), 332.

Olson in 1934.²⁴⁶ For the first time the FLP won decisive control of the state house of representatives, and both US senators and five of the state's nine US representatives were Farmer-Laborites, with a sixth missing by only 300-odd votes.²⁴⁷ For the FLP, the election results signified "a revolution... achieved in America through the ballot- a bloodless revolution carried out in the truest and noblest traditions of this country."²⁴⁸ The progressive turn in New Deal legislation, coupled with the fear of rightwing backlash against Roosevelt, led the FLP to downplay its socialistic planks, renounce its national third party aspirations, and unite organized labor. The once apprehensive State Federation of Labor enthusiastically endorsed Roosevelt and the entire FLP slate at its annual convention.²⁴⁹ The Trotskyist teamsters urged voters to "Keep faith with Floyd" and staged mass rallies on behalf of Farmer-Labor candidates. After the elections, though, they counseled workers to remain watchful of the FLP and remain steadfast in adhering to a militant trade union policy.²⁵⁰ At the end of day, though, the local and indeed the labor movement as a whole, was left with no choice but to continue to endorse the FLP.

²⁴⁶ White, et al., *Minnesota Votes, 193-96*; "Farmer Labor Party Wins By Landslide," *Minnesota Leader* November 7, 1936, 1.

²⁴⁷ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 229.

²⁴⁸ "The Meaning of It All," *Minnesota Leader*, November 7, 1936, 4.

²⁴⁹ *Proceedings of the Fifty-fourth Convention of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor, Cloquet, Minn., September 21-23, 1936*.

²⁵⁰ "Official F.L.P. State Ticket," *Northwest Organizer*, October 22, 1936, 1; "FLP Mass Rally In Union Hall On October 29," *Northwest Organizer*, October 22, 1936, 3; "The New Regime," *Northwest Organizer*, November 19, 1936, 4.

Conclusion

1935 was a year of victories for the Trotskyist teamsters and the Minneapolis labor movement. Insurgent, rank-and-file militancy galvanized the disparate strands of worker protest into a social movement, but this new movement was also exposed to array of new political pressures. The Trotskyists, isolated from the mainstream labor movement and frustrated by their lack of success in creating a political alternative to the FLP, were reluctantly compelled to rely on sympathetic Farmer-Laborites in the face of overt hostility from the IBT, the AFL, and Mayor Latimer. Fearful of future fragmentation in the labor movement, not to mention the estrangement of other social groups and class fractions from the Farmer-Labor banner, the FLP's leadership sought to limit the political intervention of organized labor. However, from 1935 to 1936 the Farmer-Labor Party, like the New Deal Democrats, successfully managed to keep schisms in the labor movement from compromising the party's winning electoral coalition. Two years later the FLP and the Democrats would find themselves both overcome by an unraveling of the very forces responsible for such spectacular wins. The fall of the Popular Front-aligned FLP was precipitated by the outbreak of a "civil war" between the AFL and CIO, exacerbated by intensifying internal party conflicts between the Trotskyists and the Communists. Into the breach stepped a new variety of liberal Republicans willing to accommodate key aspects of New Deal social policy, including legal protections for collective bargaining, while rallying voters against the militant and politicized labor movement responsible for much of the New Deal coalition's early electoral success.

CHAPTER 4

THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF LIBERALISM

Finding Labor's Place in the Second New Deal

The two years following the landslide reelection of Roosevelt and the success of New Deal Democrats and their allies in the Minnesota FLP defined the longterm meaning of the New Deal. At stake in 1937 and 1938 was the very nature of New Deal reform. After 1936 a new order in American politics was emerging, torn somewhere between liberal and social democratic politics. Building a Democratic political order, according to political scientist David Plotke, required a major mobilization of diverse social groupings and organizations united by “a durable configuration of institutions and discourses.”²⁵¹ The early fluidity of New Deal politics opened a space for radicals and liberals to intermingle, allowing the latter to freely criticize the capitalist social order and the former to pursue social reform.²⁵² The experimental nature of New Deal reforms gave the Democrats a flexible platform from which to appeal to the votes of a “a cross-class coalition of ideologically contradictory elements.”²⁵³ The elections of 1932 and 1936 cemented a realignment of American politics in favor of the Democrats, but what remained disputed was exactly how the New Deal coalition would reshape national politics. Although the key legislation of the second New Deal (the Wagner Act, Social Security Act, etc.) was passed prior to November 1936, the mobilization of social forces for

²⁵¹ Plotke, *A Democratic Political Order*, 45, 47-48.

²⁵² Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 104.

²⁵³ Oestreicher, “Urban and Working-Class Political Behavior,” 1285.

and against liberal reform must be given closer scrutiny in the aftermath of the general election.²⁵⁴ It was the *political* conflict between labor and capital (and their respective intra-class conflicts) in the industrial north in 1937 and 1938 that determined each side's longterm ability to alter the Democratic political order for the next 30 years

The crisis of the Depression opened the space for innovative new political strategies to put working-class politics at the center of the New Deal. Organized labor's entry into mass politics, especially through the CIO, represented an insurgent social movement of northern industrial workers competing against other organized social forces for state-level influence, specifically corporate industrial capitalists.²⁵⁵ Yet the labor movement was at odds with itself over how to wield its newfound political influence. The expulsion of the CIO unions from the AFL in 1936 underscored the rival ideological foundations of craft and industrial unionism in the midst of the New Deal. As historian Christopher Tomlins notes, "the decisive role in constructing the United States' modern industrial relations regime belonged to the liberal bureaucratic-administrative state."²⁵⁶ The AFL's enduring commitment to craft distinctions, anti-statism, and a decentralized organizational structure, ensured the federation's unwillingness to abandon nonpartisanship by establishing

²⁵⁴ Fraser, "The 'Labor Question,'" 68.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 13-14.

²⁵⁶ Christopher Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 102.

institutional ties with the ruling New Deal Democratic Party.²⁵⁷ The CIO embraced the social Keynesians who advocated a national labor relations regime to foster unionism and increase the purchasing power of workers and in the broader context of a welfare state. Nevertheless, despite the “organic” relationship between the CIO and the second New Deal, the relative weakness of the new industrial unions meant that the CIO needed Roosevelt and the Democratic Party far more than either needed the CIO.²⁵⁸ The labor movement was split at precisely the moment when it could have exerted the most pressure on a New Deal state still in the process of finding its bearings. Organized labor’s pivotal place in the New Deal coalition was divided into two competing interests with conflicting organizational needs and ideological underpinnings.

This tension was expressed most clearly at the state level in the industrial north where labor protest and political organization initiated a new reform-oriented political order. Triumphant New Deal state governments tried hard to keep together the vital working-class voting bloc at the core of the new realignment, but these efforts to reconcile labor factionalism often appeared to privilege insular, often jurisdictional struggles between competing factions of the labor movement. The result strained the New Deal’s relationship with the other social classes and class fractions that made the victories of 1936 possible. Although the industrial heartland continued to vote in large numbers for Roosevelt in 1940 and 1944, the cross-class coalition that elected the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, the Progressive Party in Wisconsin, and New Deal Democrats in Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania

²⁵⁷ Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 273; Phelan, *William Green*, 169.

²⁵⁸ Fraser, “The ‘Labor Question,’” 68, 70.

splintered and paved the way for Republican victories in 1938.²⁵⁹ Nevertheless, by the late 1930s the working-class politics at the heart of the New Deal achieved a social salience beyond industrial workers. The discord rending the labor movement and the New Deal Democrats and their third party allies did not shatter the widespread support for the New Deal. The Republican Party reversed almost a decade's worth of political defeats in the industrial north by accommodating the statism of the New Deal and marginalizing hard-line anti-New Dealers. Accepting aspects of the New Deal gave Republicans entrée into Democratic industrial strongholds by appealing to urban voters who favored a restrained form of New Deal-styled state intervention. This moderate liberalism also gave the GOP the ability to criticize the supposed excesses of the New Deal, principally its strong connection with an insurgent, politicized labor movement. In this new order, though, liberal Republicans made astounding ideological concessions, like acknowledging the legitimacy of organized labor, which sustained the basic thrust of New Deal liberalism. The midterm elections 1938 became a critical moment to define the New Deal as a program and an idea. A fruitful way to unpack this complex process is by looking at the political context of individual industrial states. With a ruling left-of-center Farmer-Labor Party and a politicized labor movement with strong radical leadership, Minnesota offers an extreme, but no less revealing, example of how organized labor's internal and external conflicts shaped the course of New Deal liberalism at the crucial juncture of 1937 and 1938.

²⁵⁹ Two exceptions are the victories of Wendell Wilkie in Michigan in 1940 and Thomas Dewey in Wisconsin in 1944.

Farmer-Laborism Divided

In Minnesota newly elected Governor Elmer Benson interpreted the landslide of 1936 as an opportunity to move state politics in a more radical direction. Benson's ambitious legislative goals included the creation of state-owned cooperatives, a state planning board, a ban on the use of strikebreakers, repeal of the World War One-era criminal syndicalism law, and a sharply increased progressive income tax to "soak the rich."²⁶⁰ It was clear that Benson's radical convictions were considerably more sincere than those held by his predecessor. "Floyd Olson used to say these things," exasperated Minneapolis industrialist John S. Pillsbury allegedly fumed, "but this sonofabitch *believes* them."²⁶¹ Nevertheless, like Olson before him, Benson remained nervous that the majority of Minnesota voters would support a legislative agenda further to the left of the New Deal. The governor and his advisors reasoned the FLP's left wing needed to neutralize conservative opposition and ensure greater party discipline in order to make a compelling case for an explicitly social democratic program. Significantly, Benson not only continued but also expanded the FLP's alliance with the Communist Party, effectively remaking his administration into a Popular Front government.²⁶² He was deeply impressed both by the program of the Popular Front and the cadre of young, well educated, and hard-working CP members who immersed themselves in the daily work of the FLP. He appointed Communists to posts in numerous state

²⁶⁰ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 238-39.

²⁶¹ Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen*, 143.

²⁶² Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 261.

agencies, giving the new governor a loyal and energetic cadre and the Communists real bureaucratic power.²⁶³ At Communist Party General Secretary Earl Browder's insistence, Communist Farmer-Laborites were instructed not to act as an independent bloc but strictly as a loyal, pro-Benson caucus within the FLP.²⁶⁴ The Communists exercised their newfound power as partisans first and foremost against the governor's critics in the party, particularly those in the trade unions where the CP still lacked a genuine base.

Animated by left sectarianism, intense internal party conflict erupted as the trade unions and Popular Front Farmer-Laborites attempted to assert their authority over the FLP's powerful Hennepin County Central Committee. In early March 1937, the Central Committee organized a nominating convention to find a candidate to replace the unpopular incumbent Thomas Latimer in the upcoming Minneapolis mayoral election. Mayor Latimer thoroughly polarized the Minneapolis FLP with his efforts to repress the 1935 summer strike wave, a fact not lost on representatives from the 96 trade unions and railroad brotherhoods in attendance at the convention.²⁶⁵ Even though the majority of the assembled delegates were solidly opposed to Latimer, the recent election of a Popular Front bloc to the county organization's executive committee galvanized a minority faction around the embattled incumbent against the marginalization of labor by "Communist

²⁶³ Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 140-41.

²⁶⁴ Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 19-20.

²⁶⁵ Delegate list, no date (ca. March 1937), box 3, folder Farmer-Labor Party Convention and Campaign, 1937, Violet Johnson and Allen Sollie Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

infiltrators.”²⁶⁶ Forced to choose between participating in a convention run by Popular Fronters or link arms with Latimer, the Trotskyists opted to back Latimer. The Latimer faction announced the formation of rump convention at the Central Labor Union hall, bringing together the Trotskyists with their erstwhile enemies in the State Federation of Labor and the rightwing of the FLP at the head of 400 mostly labor delegates.²⁶⁷ A committee sent to the CLU hall at Benson’s behest was met with a caustic rebuke from Trotskyist Miles Dunne who stated that the rump convention would not compromise with the “reactionary policies of political adventurers.” Dunne went on to denounce the governor’s secretary Roger Rutchick, as well as the chair and vice-chair of the CLU and the co-chairs the Hennepin Central Committee, as “Communist stooges.” The rump convention unanimously nominated Latimer and passed a motion to withdraw all delegates from the Central Committee until the body could be reorganized “on a basis of true representation.”²⁶⁸

The Trotskyists’ about-face on Latimer helped smooth over a deep rift between militants and conservatives in the city labor movement, but the challenge was how to justify the protest against the Minneapolis FLP to the rank-and-file of the labor movement. The obvious problem was how to convince workers that backing a known strikebreaker like Latimer and prompting a fissure in the FLP was

²⁶⁶ Report of the Education Committee, Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Association, June 30, 1937, 1, box 1, folder Correspondence and Other Papers, April-July, 1937, Stageberg Papers.

²⁶⁷ Report of the Education Committee, 1, Stageberg Papers; Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 143. No doubt in a naked attempt to cement the support of Local 544, Latimer even went so far as to join the Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky. Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 24.

²⁶⁸ “Farmer-Labor Party Split As Trade Unionists Shake Off Grip of Adventurers,” *Northwest Organizer*, March 18, 1937, 1-2.

in their best interest. To avoid being forced to deepen their public connection to Latimer or surrender to the Hennepin Central Committee, Local 544 sidestepped the issue by endorsing Vincent Dunne's run for mayor on the Socialist Party ticket.²⁶⁹ Even though the Trotskyists had rallied the trade unions against the Central Committee around the issue of increasing labor's voice in the FLP, they now urged organized labor to assume a non-partisan position in order to avoid worsening the fracas in the Central Committee. "The turning of the Central Labor Union into a debating society for the Farmer-Labor party," an editorial in the *Northwest Organizer* intoned, "is a real crime against the labor movement."²⁷⁰ The Trotskyists' new political position laid the basis for an unlikely alliance of the State Federation of Labor, right wing Farmer-Laborites, and the anti-Stalinist left. How exactly this rather clumsy politicking could compel the FLP to guarantee greater political power for the trade unions remained unclear.

The revolt of the trade unions was an embarrassment for Benson who found himself unable to restore party unity. Still stinging from the rump convention's accusations of Communist penetration into the Hennepin Central Committee, the FLP needed to find a candidate for mayor who was in no way tied to either faction.²⁷¹ Benson reached out to the head of the state's pension board and former All-American football player Kenneth Haycraft. At the reconvened regular convention the Central Committee pledged its full support to the Haycraft campaign

²⁶⁹ "V.R. Dunne Files For City Mayor," *Northwest Organizer*, April 22, 1937, 3. The Trotskyists were at this point still pursuing a policy of entryism in the ranks of the SP to try and affect a leftward shift in the party of Norman Thomas.

²⁷⁰ "The Central Labor Union," *Northwest Organizer*, April 1, 1938, 4.

²⁷¹ Millikan, "The Red-Baiting of Kenneth C. Haycraft: A Minnesota All-American," *Minnesota History* Winter 1994, 180.

and reprimanded the “outlaw” convention’s endorsement of Latimer.²⁷² The battle between the rival mayoral candidates now spread into the ward clubs, effectively paralyzing the ability of the Minneapolis FLP’s grassroots campaign network to promote a candidate.²⁷³ In the primary each candidate received roughly 25,000 votes, with Haycraft edging out Latimer by only 236 votes in the final tally.

However, in comparison to the 50,000 votes won by Republican nominee George Leach, the FLP was in a seriously fractured state going into the general election.²⁷⁴

Rather than attempt to appease the Latimer faction, Haycraft’s campaign defiantly called the sitting mayor the “crown prince of reaction.”²⁷⁵ Latimer and the trade unions begrudgingly endorsed Haycraft, but the mayor and his allies in the labor movement waited until almost the eve of the election to publically urge workers to perform their “duty” at the polls.²⁷⁶

Haycraft lost the election by almost 18,000 votes while still carrying seven of Minneapolis’ 13 wards in a race where overall voter turnout rose by 6 percent.²⁷⁷

Despite the vicious internal feuding the FLP managed to retain its majority on the

²⁷² “Minneapolis F-Ls Open Offices for Haycraft Drive,” *Minnesota Leader*, April 3, 1937, 8.

²⁷³ Executive Committee of Hennepin Co. Central Committee of the Farmer-Labor Assn. of Minnesota vs. Thomas Latimer, summons in Hennepin Co. District Court, Apr. 26, 1937, 5, box 1, folder Correspondence and Other Papers, April-July, 1937, Stageberg Papers.

²⁷⁴ Report of the Education Committee, 2, Stageberg Papers.

²⁷⁵ “Haycraft Sounds Keynote; States Labor Position,” *Minnesota Leader*, April 10, 1937, 5; “Harmony Seen At Dinner for F-L Nominees,” *Minnesota Leader*, May 22, 1937, 3; Haycraft campaign flyer, no date (ca. June, 1937), box 3, folder Farmer-Labor Party Convention and Campaign, 1937, Johnson and SOLLIE Papers.

²⁷⁶ “Vote the Farmer-Labor Ballot; Elect Haycraft; Down Reaction,” *Northwest Organizer*, June 10, 1937, 1; “Latimer Urges Haycraft’s Election,” *Minneapolis Labor Review*, June 4, 1937, 1.

²⁷⁷ The final election figures put Leach at 89,809 votes to Haycraft’s 71,904. General city elections recapitulation, June 14, 1937, Minneapolis Elections Office.

city council, but the actual number of workers who voted Farmer-Labor dwindled. Bourgeois voters solidified their opposition to the FLP and an increasing number of the lower middle and working classes also turned out for the Republicans. Leach's chief bastion of support came from the city's affluent Eighth and Thirteenth Wards, the so-called "silk stocking" districts, where he drew almost 19,000 votes alone.²⁷⁸ Politically, Leach was an outright conservative, but his campaign slogan "Independent, Non-Partisan, Progressive," sought to place him above the divisive party conflicts and class politics that marred the FLP campaign.²⁷⁹ Leach certainly benefited from the interparty strife and the GOP made real advances in FLP strongholds. In the city's working-class Third Ward, for instance, Haycraft outpolled Leach by only 1,200 votes, while two years earlier Latimer (with the enthusiastic endorsement of the unions) beat his Republican challenger by over 5,000 votes.²⁸⁰ This performance marked a serious reversal of fortune when compared to the November gubernatorial election in which Benson beat his Republican challenger by over 10,000 votes in the same ward.²⁸¹ In the more socioeconomically mixed wards that Haycraft won, he did so by much narrower margins than those achieved by Latimer in 1935 and nowhere close to those of Benson's in 1936.²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Report of the Education Committee, 3, Stageberg Papers.

²⁷⁹ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 247.

²⁸⁰ To provide further context, in the Third Ward's 1935 aldermanic race, teamster president William Brown fell only 1,108 votes shy of a seat on the city council. City general elections recapitulation, June 14, 1937, June 10, 1935.

²⁸¹ County general elections recapitulation, November 3, 1936, Hennepin County Elections Office.

²⁸² Yet another stark example was in the Tenth Ward which Latimer's handily won by nearly 6,000 votes and Benson by nearly 8,000, compared to Haycraft's mere

While the primary feud no doubt helped to dent Haycraft's numbers, the labor politics at the core of the dispute demonstrated the class polarization evident in the election results. The broad appeal of working-class politics marshaled so effectively by the FLP in 1936 was significantly narrowed to reflect the specific political interests of trade union leadership during the battle over control of the Hennepin County Central Committee. In a postelection report, the Popular Front-aligned and Communist-chaired Hennepin County Educational Committee argued that the urban petit bourgeoisie voted Republican because the split organized by the "reactionary" Latimer forces fatally undercut the ability of the "progressive" Hennepin Farmer-Laborites to lead an effective cross-class coalition.²⁸³ Although conservative Farmer-Laborites like Latimer and his supporters in the craft union leadership stood in stark ideological opposition to the Trotskyists, their unlikely coalition was nonetheless based on an appeal to workers as a *class*. The Trotskyist and Latimer forces structured their opposition to the Popular Front bloc as an aggressive maneuver to assert the primacy of organized labor's politics in the Minneapolis Farmer-Labor Party. The resulting electoral defeat was an illustration of what Adam Przeworski identifies as the "permanent tension between the narrow interests of unions and the broader interests of parties."²⁸⁴ Historically labor politics are not intrinsically exclusionary, but parties and unions must articulate

1,000-vote margin. City general election recapitulation, June 10, 1935 and June 14, 1937; county general election recapitulation, November 3, 1936.

²⁸³ Report of the Education Committee, 4, Stageberg Papers.

²⁸⁴ Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, 14.

those politics to be of immediate interest to other social classes in order to win electoral support.²⁸⁵

In the public imagination, the revolt of the trade unions against the Central Committee effectively branded the FLP as either a “workers” party in the narrowest sense or a hive of Communism subversion. The trade unionists failed to convince voters that their struggle with the FLP was more than a fight over party influence, but in fact a worthwhile battle over preserving the voice of working people in party affairs. The Republican campaign eagerly capitalized on the vicious infighting in the Hennepin County Central Committee and Leach courted voters uneasy with the radicalism of the FLP by highlighting the class antagonism that animated the inner-party turmoil. To complicate matters further, the disputes fracturing of the FLP’s 1936 coalition spilled over directly into a politically motivated jurisdictional dispute between the AFL and the nascent Minnesota CIO.

Labor Factionalism in Minneapolis

The debacle of the mayoral election made Benson increasingly excited by the political opportunities of allying with the CIO to combat opposition from the AFL and the Trotskyists. He hoped that the explosive national growth of the CIO would carry over into Minnesota to supplant the AFL and infuse the state labor movement with a renewed commitment to progressive political action on his terms. The governor enthusiastically supported the CIO’s organizing campaigns in the mines and logging camps of northern Minnesota, meatpacking in Saint Paul and small rural

²⁸⁵ Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Politics Against Markets: The Social Democratic Road to Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 8.

communities, at Ford's Twin Cities Assembly Plant, and in the Minneapolis textile, machine assembly, and electrical shops.²⁸⁶ For its part, CIO reached out to a sizeable swath of workers, most of whom lived and worked outside the state's metropolitan center, unrepresented by the State Federation of Labor, to build the basis for a rival labor organization. Ideologically the CIO's social democratic tendencies gelled neatly with those held by the FLP's leftwing and Benson also saw the great potential of harnessing the CIO's political machinery to the FLP. The governor pledged himself to the industrial union movement and shaped his labor legislation agenda around its needs. The centerpiece was a proposal for the creation of a state-level Wagner Act to augment federal provisions protecting the right of workers to organize and bargain that was identical to legislation endorsed by the CIO across the industrial north.²⁸⁷

Benson's sympathies for the CIO and close working relationship with the CP reintroduced the corrosive element of labor factionalism to the Minneapolis labor movement. At first the CIO's movement into Minnesota was of little consequence because none of its organizing drives, often in industries violently opposed to unions like mining and timber, won any significant victories. Nonetheless, the state's craft union leaders defended the AFL's hard-line stance against the CIO. George Lawson of the State Federation of Labor claimed that the suspension of the CIO was not a repudiation of industrial unionism, but a censure of the Committee's "organizational methods," specifically the targeting of workers already organized

²⁸⁶ Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 126.

²⁸⁷ "State Wagner Act To Remove Strife Urged By Benson," *Minnesota Leader*, July 3, 1937, 5.

into craft unions.²⁸⁸ To assuage the AFL, the CIO stated that its efforts in Minnesota were solely to “organize the unorganized” and not to raid craft unions.²⁸⁹

Nevertheless, Minnesota labor leaders in 1937 complied with the national leadership of the AFL and barred the CIO from the State Federation of Labor and from the Minneapolis CLU.²⁹⁰

Although the industrial union upsurge was an ideal entry point for the Communists already ensconced in the FLP to build a genuine base in the unions, party activity only further aggravated ideological tensions in the labor movement. In August of 1937, the state committee of the Minnesota Communist Party “openly [declared] its full support to the historic work of the CIO,” and pledged its members and resources to strengthen organizing drives across the state.²⁹¹ Although John L. Lewis could cynically claim the Communists he recruited to organize CIO unions were simply his functionaries, such insouciance neglects the wider impact of the tumultuous ideological struggles spawned by the presence of Communist unionists.²⁹² The CP’s move into the CIO directly antagonized the AFL unions that only months earlier revolted against Benson’s Popular Front allies in control of the Hennepin County FLP. Benson awkwardly waded into this open-ended conflict by announcing himself as a “labor governor” unwilling to be dragged into the quagmire

²⁸⁸ “Lawson Says AFL Does Not Condemn Industrial Unions,” *Minnesota Leader*, May 1, 1937, 1.

²⁸⁹ “No Fight Against Crafts, Says CIO,” *Minnesota Leader*, May 22, 1937, 5.

²⁹⁰ “C.L.U. to Appeal Disassociation CIO,” *Minneapolis Labor Review*, August 20, 1937, 4.

²⁹¹ Draft Resolution of the State Committee: *Building the Communist Parry for Trade Union Unity and an All-Inclusive Farmer Labor Party*, August 1938, 2, call #HX544.D73 folio, Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁹² As Lewis infamously asked: “Who gets the bird? The dog or the hunter?” Quoted in Zieger, *The CIO*, 83.

of the AFL-CIO controversy.²⁹³ The Trotskyists and the State Federation of Labor interpreted Communist-led CIO organizing drives as an intrusion into their rightful jurisdictions and an attempt to sap their political clout.

Labor factionalism flared into open conflict in September 1937 when Communist unionists in three Minneapolis IAM locals led 5,000 machinists into two newly established locals of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers (UE). Like the Trotskyists in Local 544, the CP cadres in the machinist locals eschewed hard-line revolutionary rhetoric in favor of militant industrial unionism and clashed repeatedly with the conservative national IAM leadership while earning the respect of the rank-and-file. Moving the machinists into the CIO and the Communist-led UE gave the Minnesota CP its first genuine foothold in the Minneapolis labor movement. The Minneapolis machine shops became the center of the new statewide Industrial Union Council, linking the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) campaign on the Mesabi Iron Range with newly formed locals representing meatpacking workers in southern Minnesota.²⁹⁴ Led by executive officers who were all Communists or at least sympathetic to the Popular Front, the Minnesota CIO effectively became an organ of the CP.²⁹⁵ The defection to the UE also moved a number of Communist machinists into influential positions in the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor apparatuses. The “capture” of the machinists provided the leftwing Hennepin Farmer-Laborites with a trade union base to counter the Trotskyist-State Federation of Labor alliance in interparty clashes. Nevertheless, the state CIO was

²⁹³ “Benson for Labor Unity,” *Minneapolis Labor Review*, July 16, 1937, 4.

²⁹⁴ Haynes, “Communists and Anti-Communists in the Northern Minnesota CIO, 1936-1949,” *Upper Midwest History* 1 (1) 1981: 55-73.

²⁹⁵ Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 27.

only a fraction of the size of the State Federation of Labor in Minneapolis and across the state. Given the forward momentum of CIO unions across the country, the FLP's Popular Front bloc was confident that the Industrial Union Council could easily out-organize the State Federation of Labor.

At the helm of the most powerful union in Minneapolis, if not the state, the Trotskyist teamsters feared that any Stalinist inroads into the labor movement via the CIO would curtail the political power of the AFL in the FLP. Their response to the IAM local's defection was emblematic of a deepening alliance with the State Federation of Labor. Predictably, the Trotskyists lashed out at the "irresponsible leadership" of the Stalinist for undermining the labor unity that made the growth of the IAM locals possible.²⁹⁶ They considered the raid on the machinist locals little more than a naked grab for political power by the Communist Party.²⁹⁷ "We repeat," the leaders of Local 544 announced, "the Minneapolis crisis is not a CIO question, not an industrial union question. This is the question: Is the Minneapolis labor movement to be split up and clubbed into the dirt, all for the purpose of feeding the appetites of the self-seeking Stalinist clique?"²⁹⁸ The CLU came out in support of the few hundred machinists who remained in AFL locals and condemned the "trickery" of the Communists for blatantly raiding established locals.²⁹⁹ The Trotskyists put

²⁹⁶ Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 101-2; "The Machinists' Locals Go CIO, What For?" *Northwest Organizer* September 2, 1937, 1, 3.

²⁹⁷ Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 100.

²⁹⁸ "CLU Endorses AF of L Machinists," *Northwest Organizer*, September 30, 1937, 1.

²⁹⁹ "C.L.U. Supports A.F.L. Machinists," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, October 1, 1937, 1-2.

the point more bluntly in saying the Minnesota CIO “declared war on the rest of the union movement.”³⁰⁰

As the competing factions in the labor movement grew more intransigent, Benson foundered as a peacemaker. Delegates to the 1937 State Federation of Labor Convention in September put forward 13 resolutions calling for labor unity, but continued AFL hostility to the CIO also evident on the convention floor. In a pointed reference to the CIO’s reliance on NLRB elections to win union recognition, State Federation President T.E. Cunningham reasserted the AFL’s anti-statism and snidely remarked, “The right of organization of working men is not granted by legal action.”³⁰¹ On the convention floor Farrell Dobbs spoke in favor of industrial unionism while denouncing the CIO’s ties to Stalinism and penchant for “labor splitting.”³⁰² In his speech to the convention, Benson implored the labor movement to resolve its internal controversies and to restore labor unity in order to avoid the fates that befell the German and Italian labor movements.³⁰³ Although the governor’s address was greeted with applause, Representative John Bernard, the Farmer-Labor congressman who represented the Iron Range, was prevented from speaking because of his work as an organizer for SWOC.³⁰⁴ After the convention Benson struggled to repair the rift in labor’s ranks and for his efforts won fresh

³⁰⁰ “Who Is Aided by Union Split,” *Northwest Organizer*, October 1, 1937, 1.

³⁰¹ *Proceedings of the Fifty-fifth Convention of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor, Hibbing, Minn., September 20-22, 1937*, 69-73, 20.

³⁰² “State Federation Convention Passes CIO-AFL Resolution,” *Northwest Organizer*, September 30, 1937 3.

³⁰³ “State Federation Appeals for United Labor Movement,” *Minnesota Leader*, September 25, 1937, 1, 3.

³⁰⁴ “Benson Given Great Ovation at Convention,” “Bernard Says Topic Was to Be ‘Unity,’” *Minneapolis Labor Review*, September 24, 1937, 1.

scorn from the labor movement. He personally met with 75 business agents and labor officials from the AFL in the state senate chambers who dismissed outright the governor's pleas to enter peace negotiations with the CIO.³⁰⁵

The tense atmosphere in the Minneapolis labor movement was only exacerbated by the assassination of Teamsters Joint Council chair Patrick Corcoran outside his home on the night of November 17. Corcoran's death became a flashpoint in the AFL-CIO crisis as both sides' concocted stories involving the Soviet secret police and gangsters to smear their opposition. Corcoran's own funeral nearly devolved into a bloody showdown before an armed man and alleged CIO representative was removed.³⁰⁶ The violent death of a leading AFL union official in the midst of a contentious jurisdictional dispute should have convinced Benson to act the impartial arbiter, but again he proved unwilling or unable to transcend his pro-CIO sympathies. In a letter to Tobin, Dobbs noted, "There seems to be considerable hesitancy on the part of the administrative forces to really delve into this case on an energetic basis."³⁰⁷ With no arrests or strong leads the investigation ground to halt and wild accusations swirled, stoking animosity between the State Federation of Labor and the CIO and their Farmer-Labor allies. Publically, the labor movement was tainted with an unsavory connection to murder, with the implication of gangsterism and corruption as the presumed motive. Similarly, Benson and the FLP appeared either as accomplices in a cover-up or radical provocateurs unable to

³⁰⁵ "Business Agents Tell Benson of Machinist Split," *Northwest Organizer*, October 1, 1937, 1.

³⁰⁶ Letter from John S. Picago to Thomas Hughes, November 29, 1937, Mss, 9/1, series 1, box 43, folder 5, O'Neil, Mary, 1916-1940, IBT Papers.

³⁰⁷ Letter from Farrell Dobbs to Daniel J. Tobin, December 2, 1937, Mss 848, box 5, folder 1, Dobbs Papers.

maintain law and order.³⁰⁸

Minnesota's labor governor was actively contributing to the factionalism eating away at his party as national economic crisis struck at the gains made by organized labor. In this worsening atmosphere, Benson reiterated the dangers of discord in the labor movement for the FLP. "Our opponents," Benson explained to the Ramsey County Farmer-Labor Association convention, "seek by every means they can grasp to break up our movement, to make it small, narrow, divided, sectarian, exclusive- and ineffective."³⁰⁹ But the governor's own behavior exacerbated the sharp organizational and ideological divisions pitting organized labor against itself. His unyielding loyalty to the Communist bloc in the FLP sparked one nearly catastrophic revolt during the Latimer-Haycraft primary and his preferential treatment of the CIO was set to ignite another. To make matters worse, these political rifts in the labor movement coincided with the crippling outbreak of an economic recession. Workers fought desperately to protect their gains in the workplace, but from the spring of 1937 until the outbreak of World War Two the labor movement were squarely on the defensive.³¹⁰ 1937 was a militant year as the number of strikes more than doubled nationally as employers seized an opportunity to flout national labor law and violently resist the gains won by unions.³¹¹ The recession hit the industrial unions especially hard and the militant march of the CIO

³⁰⁸ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 253.

³⁰⁹ "Text of Benson Speech At Ramsey County F-L Conference," *Minnesota Leader*, December 4, 1937, 5.

³¹⁰ Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 137-38.

³¹¹ Florence Peterson, "Review of Strikes in the United States," *Monthly Labor Review*, 46 (5) 1938, 1066.

ground to a halt. As a divided organized labor movement dug in for a protracted fight with capital, a conservative coalition was taking shape in Congress against an embattled Roosevelt administration. In Minnesota, as elsewhere in the industrial North, labor factionalism undermined the political effectiveness of organized labor as well as the broad appeal of working-class politics.

The Contested Terrain of Liberalism

Despite the multifaceted divisions in the Farmer-Labor Party in the labor movement, this period marked an ascendance of working-class politics. Militant labor coalesced around a broad-based Farmer-Labor movement to substantively reshape the political environment of Minnesota. This process took place alongside similar transformations across the industrial north with the New Deal Democrats. Although the labor movement was divided, trade unions and working-class politics were responsible for the momentous political realignment behind New Deal liberalism. The leftward drift of national politics in 1936 was by no means uncontested, but scholars have almost exclusively framed opposition to the New Deal in starkly reactionary terms. Regularly overlooked is the history of influential segments of the Republican Party in northern industrial states that accepted the New Deal as the bedrock of a new political reality in the United States. The prewar resurgence of a liberal GOP was nonetheless founded on a sharp critique of the New Deal's incipient social democratic tendencies and a clear desire to curb the strides made by urban industrial workers and their politically mobilized trade unions. In short, the intertwined insurgency of organized labor and the triumph of New Deal

class politics belied a subtle, yet deeply significant, conflict over the shape and direction of mid-twentieth century liberalism.

Recent scholarship highlights the limits of New Deal liberalism as the result of internal struggle within the Democratic Party and the difficulties for American political institutions and culture to embrace more dynamic reform regimes. Reactionary Southern Democrats are routinely cited as the primary impediment to the vaguely social democratic aspirations of the New Deal. “The South,” Sean Farhang and Ira Katznelson argue, “possessed a structural veto over all New Deal and Fair Deal legislation at a time when Republicans alone could not sustain an effective opposition.”³¹² The “Southern veto” of Southern Democrats to legislation promoting labor organization and national economic planning delimited organized labor’s political integration into the state, thereby forestalling a transition from liberalism to social democracy.³¹³ In addition to placating the racist and reactionary Bourbons of the party, New Deal reformers relented in the face of mounting business opposition. Following the 1937 recession and especially during the Second World War, New Deal elites, Alan Brinkley argues, underwent a “confused and contentious process of adjustment” to reach an accord with corporate business autonomy.³¹⁴ David Plotke is less convinced that reformers surrendered to capital to the extent that Brinkley contends, but maintains that the New Deal order itself

³¹² Sean Farhang and Ira Katznelson, “The Southern Imposition: Congress and Labor in the New Deal and Fair Deal.” *Studies in American Political Development* 19 (1) 2005, 1.

³¹³ Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger, and Daniel Kryder, “Limiting Liberalism: The Southern Veto in Congress, 1933-1950,” *Political Science Quarterly* 108 (2) 1993, 301-2.

³¹⁴ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 7.

lacked the ideological and institutional capacities to become a social democratic political order.³¹⁵ Nick Salvatore and Jefferson Cowie go even further and dismiss the New Deal as a “historical aberration” that could not overcome America’s diverse and divisive racial, ethnic, and religious background nor reconcile itself with the individualism at the center of American political culture.³¹⁶

The basic insight of these varying interpretations is that the New Deal was a composite political order of competing social elements. Although basically correct, this summation relies on three assumptions: that the New Deal was incapable of social democracy, that the defining moment of conflict was the 1940s, and that Republican opposition by the late 1930s was resolutely anti-New Deal. However, a closer and more nuanced look at the industrial North requires two correctives to these assumptions. One emphasizes the tenuous nature of the New Deal’s electoral coalition. The other follows Brinkley’s timetable but moves the critical period of conflict to 1937-1938, in particular the defeat of New Dealers during the mid-term election season. As Alan Ware points out, even though the Democrats appeared to be the national “majority coalition,” the party never actually established a stable majority. “Marginal” northern urban voters, including many erstwhile Republicans, were consistently lured by the initiatives of the New Deal in the economic crisis, but never permanently embraced it.³¹⁷ The dislocations of the Depression allowed the Democrats to take advantage of the crisis to pass legislation far beyond what a

³¹⁵ Plotke, *Building a Democratic Order*, 47-48.

³¹⁶ Nick Salvatore and Jefferson Cowie, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008), 5-6.

³¹⁷ Alan Ware, *The Democratic Party Heads North, 1877-1962* (New York Cambridge University Press, 2006), 171.

national majority might otherwise have consented to.³¹⁸ Yet, the powerful new coalition that emerged in 1936 was, as the Roosevelt administration soon discovered, difficult to control and unify.³¹⁹ The Depression did not hand American politics over to the Democrats, but it did dramatically reshape the political terrain of the industrial North and made New Deal liberalism a broadly appealing idea. Given the strength and fragility of the Democratic majority in the north, it is essential to consider also the shape of opposition to New Deal liberalism.

To better understand the opposition to the New Deal requires reevaluating the resurgence of the Republican Party in the late 1930s. Scholars have struggled to situate conservatism in a period of so-called liberal consensus in large part because the general thrust of these accounts emphasizes the rise of an explicitly anti-New Deal rightwing.³²⁰ This means broadening urban politics, the “revolt of the city” in the 1930s described by Samuel Lubell, to include a more diverse array of oppositional voices.³²¹ The standard history contends that the Republican Party “sought to ‘conserve’ an America which they believed existed before 1933.” Their opposition to the New Deal, historian James Patterson claims, initially took place on

³¹⁸ Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocopl, *State and Party in America's New Deal* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 72.

³¹⁹ James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 257.

³²⁰ Cf. George Wolfskill, *The Revolt of the Conservatives: A History of the American Liberty League, 1934-1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945* (New York: , 1976); Robert F. Burk, *The Corporate State and the Broker State: The Du Ponts and American National Politics, 1925-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

³²¹ Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), 6.

a wide spectrum extending from the very moderate to the reactionary before the Republicans became a resolutely anti-New Deal minority party in response to Roosevelt's leftward turn in 1936.³²² This newfound coherence was achieved, historian Clyde Weed argues, because the party's eastern elite successfully drove out any moderate or liberal dissenting voices.³²³ The party's lingering Progressive wing in the west either sided with the Democrats or hardened into vocal opponents of the New Deal because of their profound distrust of centralized state power and interest group bartering.³²⁴ This analysis of the reconciliation of an east-west GOP schism under conservative colors gravely ignores urban Republicans in eastern and western states like Minnesota, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin who blended a desire for liberal reform with a conservative critique of New Deal class politics. Such urban Republicans found a natural constituency in those marginal voters who supported the New Deal, but remained skeptical of an increasingly powerful New Deal state underpinned by a politicized labor movement. By 1938, the tenets of liberal Republicanism appeared very persuasive to a wide range of urban voters.

Across the country an embattled Roosevelt administration and a divided labor movement left the Democrats weak and vulnerable in the very northern urban industrial centers that had become their key bastions of support. At the apex of its power the progressive, even radical, base of the New Deal in the labor movement was fraying just as elite reformers were beginning to seriously doubt the efficacy of

³²² Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism*, vii-viii.

³²³ Clyde P. Weed, *The Nemesis of Reform: The Republican Party During the New Deal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 73.

³²⁴ James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1983), 240-268.

social Keynesian policy. The outbreak of what quickly became known as the “Roosevelt Recession” made clear that the New Deal had not ended the Depression and threw into question the underpinnings of social Keynesian economic theory. Roosevelt’s proposed reorganization of the Supreme Court in early 1937 enraged his opponents and unnerved many supporters who saw an executive overreaching his constitutional authority. In addition, resurgent labor militancy, sparked by the sit-down strikes in the rubber and auto plants and the countervailing brunt of violent employer repression especially among the “Little Steel” firms, posed two interrelated problems for New Dealers. If the New Deal labor relations regime could not secure industrial peace, then government sanctioned collective bargaining was doomed. Similarly, attempts by workers to meet repression with more aggressive strike activity underscored the powerlessness of the New Deal state. Labor strife exposed the very usefulness and legitimacy of New Deal politics to close and unflattering scrutiny. By 1937-1938, the Republicans had a choice to either lead a frontal assault on the New Deal or colonize it by co-opting its most popular components.

Remarkably, the Minnesota Republican Party’s response to the flagging fortunes of the FLP and the New Deal was to co-opt much of its reform agenda and jettison its own strident conservatism. This was by no means a gradual evolution in party thinking, but the outcome of a power struggle between the party’s archconservative “old guard” and a new generation of activists. Following Leach’s election in the summer of 1937, the *Minnesota Leader* excitedly reported a developing fissure in the state GOP. On one side was a caucus of hard-line

conservatives, unswerving in their opposition to the FLP and the New Deal, who called themselves the Committee for Republican Action. On the other, the Young Republican League of Hennepin County warned that the party was falling into the hands of a clique of "Fascists."³²⁵ Led by an ambitious and hardworking young county attorney named Harold Stassen, the Young Republicans wanted to shed the party's unpopular image as agents of reaction and big business. In 1934, as violent class conflict raged on the streets of Minneapolis, Stassen was elected chairman of the Young Republicans and declared, "we favor the beginning of a political party from which will be excluded those selfish interests which seek to use wealth of extensive corporate holdings as the key to improper influence; a party which will present an aggressive, intelligent and fair minded opposition to those now in office."³²⁶ The liberal movement led by Stassen, political scientist Ivan Hinderaker wrote, was to be a "revitalizing" force in the Republican Party that recognized the new set of economic, social, and political factors reshaping daily life. Stassen and his followers consciously wanted to build upon the reforms begun by the FLP and New Deal Democrats while tempering their radical implications.³²⁷

The unique political background of his St. Paul upbringing deeply informed Stassen's brand of liberalism. Growing up a Republican in Irish Catholic St. Paul, the Democratic Party's lone Minnesota stronghold, impressed upon Stassen the value of

³²⁵ "Warring Groups in GOP Threaten to Split Party," *Minnesota Leader*, June 26, 1937, 1.

³²⁶ Quoted in H. Henry Southworth, "Harold Stassen and the Rebirth of the Republican Party," unpublished term paper, 1963, box 1, folder "Harold Stassen and the Rebirth of the Republican Party," H. Henry Southworth, 1963, Harold Stassen Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Archives and Manuscripts Division, St. Paul.

³²⁷ Ivan Hinderaker, "Harold Stassen and Developments in the Republican Party in Minnesota, 1937-1943," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1949, iii.

honing an eclectic political platform to appeal to a diverse electorate. His close friend and law partner, conservative Democrat Elmer Ryan, a budding politician who was elected to the US Congress in 1934, helped guide Stassen's early forays into St. Paul politics. His links to the Democrats also reflected his own ideological sympathy for labor. Stassen touted his working-class background in the city's stockyard neighborhoods and proudly announced his two brothers' as members of AFL unions. The rise of the FLP and the crisis of the Depression further influenced Stassen's liberal Republicanism as Dakota County District Attorney, a position formerly held by Floyd Olson. In 1933 he ingratiated himself to both the Olson administration by prosecuting the South St. Paul Armour packinghouse for blacklisting striking workers and the AFL by helping to discredit the strike's Communist leadership.³²⁸ In addition, Stassen made a name for himself during the packinghouse strike and the experience was decisive in shaping his critical liberalism. Later campaign literature outlined how "[h]e conferred daily with the strike leaders" and convinced the strikers to repudiate the "outside communists [who] attempted to incite violence and prevent arbitration."³²⁹ He was a "Republican who praised the American Federation of Labor," but he rejected voluntarism in favor of strict legislation to resolve labor disputes and drastically

³²⁸ As one formerly blacklisted meatpacker wrote, "We workers know that Stassen is our friend." Anonymous handwritten deposition, box 1, folder, Notes and Correspondence Relating to Armour Packing House Strike, 1933, Stassen Papers.

³²⁹ "His Labor Record," Stassen campaign pamphlet, no date (ca. 1938), box 1, folder Notes and Correspondence Relating to Armour Packing House Strike, 1933, Stassen Papers.

limit the ability of workers to strike.³³⁰ Despite accepting the legitimate role of trade unions in a modern economy, Stassen's solid commitment to using the state to curtail the ability of unions to act as autonomous agents of working-class power defined the authenticity of his Republican credentials.

In late 1937 and early 1938, the GOP struggled to find a nominee to challenge Benson for the governorship two years after the FLP landslide. Stassen's name came up as a potential sacrificial lamb for the party even though many in the Republican establishment found him far too liberal. He surged ahead in a crowded field of established conservative candidates (including Mayor Leach) and won the nomination in a primary election that witnessed the number of Republican votes increase by 25 percent.³³¹ Stassen defined his campaign as a struggle against the twin forces of reaction and radicalism, thereby redefining the Minnesota GOP as a liberal party. The GOP's gubernatorial candidate described the party's new liberal direction in an announcement to campaign volunteers: "You are enrolled in a crusade to drive racketeering, radicalism, masquerading under a liberal label, out of our state Capitol, and to replace it with a truly liberal, constructive administration."³³² Stassen put forward a thoroughly New Deal-influenced platform that included support for the 1935 Social Security Act and the need to increase the purchasing power of workers. Key to this liberal reinvention of the Republican Party was his avowed support for the rights of organized labor. "We shall never

³³⁰ Southworth, "Harold Stassen and the Rebirth of the Republican Party," 14, Stassen Papers.

³³¹ Southworth, "Harold Stassen and the Rebirth of the Republican Party," 7-8, Stassen Papers; Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 265.

³³² Call to All Stassen for Governor Volunteers, 1938, box 4, folder 1938 Gubernatorial Campaign- Misc. Correspondence and Related Papers, Stassen Papers.

permit the National Guardsmen's bayonets to be used as an employer's weapon to crush those who labor," Stassen announced. "Neither shall we give to the irresponsible leftwing of the labor the support of the state government in its attempt to undermine the sound labor movement."³³³ His position was designed to resonate with the conservative, pure-and-simple politics of the AFL while denouncing militant and politically active unions like Local 544 and those in the CIO. Stassen's emphasis on labor politics was a calculated effort to break apart the FLP's increasingly unstable urban coalition by highlighting the source of intraparty tension in the FLP.

Farmer-Laborism in Crisis

The rise of a liberal faction in the state GOP acutely exacerbated the growing conflict in the FLP. With the feud over the Minneapolis mayoral nomination fresh in mind, the party's left and right wings dug in for a bitter primary campaign as conservative Farmer-Laborite Hjalmar Petersen once again challenged Benson for the governorship. Petersen was encouraged to run by the party's rightwing who were appalled by Benson's Popular Front administration. He also drew considerable support from influential Republicans and business leaders convinced that a moderate Farmer-Laborite stood a better chance of being elected than a member of their own party.³³⁴ Among Benson supporters Petersen was excoriated as a closet reactionary, but the leftwing was nonetheless impatient to stifle any

³³³ Quoted in Hineraker, "Harold Stassen and Developments in the Republican Party in Minnesota," 236.

³³⁴ Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen*, 145-46.

impression that the party was tearing itself apart.³³⁵ Selma Seestrom, the Popular Front liberal co-chair of the Hennepin County Central Committee, argued that there was no division in the Farmer-Labor movement between a left and right wing, only a struggle “between the rank and file and a small clique who want control of the [Farmer-Labor] Association.”³³⁶

That clique included the Trotskyists, Latimer, and the State Federation of Labor who were tentatively rallying behind Petersen as a way to increase the trade unions’ political influence in the FLP. In a discussion with Trotsky in Mexico City in April 1938, James Cannon laid out the political situation facing the trade unions:

The Stalinists who have been driven out of the trade unions have penetrated deeply into the Farmer-Labor Association—this constitutes a weapon against us in the unions. The policy there now is the policy of a bloc of the Trotskyist unions with what they call the “real farmer-laborites,” that is, reformists who believe in the FLP and don’t wish the Stalinists to control it. How far can we carry such a bloc—how far can we fight for just organizational control? But if our people stand aside, the Stalinists get control. On the other hand, if we fight really energetically, as we do in the unions, we become champions of the FLP. It is not a simple question—it’s very easy for people to get lost in the reformist policy.³³⁷

Trotsky urged the Minneapolis faction not to abandon the FLP, but to continue working to transform it into an outright labor party.³³⁸ However, the Trotskyists’ attempt to translate support for Petersen into a move towards converting the FLP into a labor party only generated a backlash among the union rank-and-file.³³⁹ A

³³⁵ “Where is Hjalmar Getting His Support?,” *Minnesota Leader*, January 29, 1938, 3

³³⁶ Draft resolution of the Hennepin County Central Committee, no date (ca. 1938), box 1, folder Correspondence and Other Papers, undated 1938, Stageberg Papers.

³³⁷ Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky on the Labor Party in the United States* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969), 29.

³³⁸ Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky on the Labor Party in the United States*, 46.

³³⁹ “The ‘Minnesota Leader’ on Petersen,” *Northwest Organizer*, January 27, 1938, 4; “A.I. Harris on Peterson Again,” *Northwest Organizer*, February 3, 1938, 4.

group called the Organized Teamster Farmer-Labor Committee circulated a pamphlet throughout Local 544 condemning the Trotskyist leadership for supporting “reactionaries” like Latimer and Petersen. “We drivers are Farmer-Laborites,” the committee’s secretary Douglas Raze wrote, “We demand that [the Trotskyists], as representatives of our union... give full support to the Farmer-Labor administration.”³⁴⁰ In addition, the Trotskyist-led “unity committee” failed to secure the votes needed to dislodge the Popular Front bloc from the leadership of the Hennepin Central Committee.³⁴¹ Under pressure from the union rank-and-file and stymied in its efforts to win control over the machinery of the Minneapolis Farmer-Labor establishment, the Trotskyists and the State Federation of Labor could do little to chart an independent political path and reluctantly moved to back Benson against Petersen.³⁴²

Dispirited by the craft unions’ decision, Petersen opted not to attend the FLP state convention in March. The convention proceedings, held in the CIO stronghold of Duluth (no less), very quickly disillusioned the few AFL unions that did send delegations to the Farmer-Labor conclave. Eager to neutralize a conservative uprising, Benson presented a much more moderate platform to the assembled delegates. Gone were the party’s exhortations of “production for use” as well as planks calling for socialized medicine and public ownership of utilities and natural

³⁴⁰ Organized Teamsters Farmer-Labor Committee pamphlet, February 3, 1938, 2, 4, Mss 848, box 15, folder 12, Dobbs Papers.

³⁴¹ “Hennepin F-L ‘Unity’ Slate Abandoned,” *Northwest Organizer*, February 3, 1938, 1.

³⁴² “Vote for Governor Benson—Defeat the Reactionaries!,” *Northwest Organizer*, June 16, 1938, 4.

resources.³⁴³ In response to a year of debilitating infighting Benson attempted to placate both factions by paring back the FLP's social democratic aspirations until the party's reform agenda looked almost identical to that of the New Deal. The FLP pledged to protect the right of labor to organize and bargain collectively, to adopt a state-fund workmen's compensation law, a state wage and hour bill, and a state labor relations act patterned on the NLRA. Nonetheless, a banner prominently displayed at the front of the convention hall reading "BUILD A FARMER-LABOR BULWARK AGAINST FASCISM" was a pointed reminder of Benson's Popular Front orientation.³⁴⁴

For the Trotskyists and other trade unionists, the state convention proved a dismal reminder of the FLP's slack commitment to labor and working-class politics. Frank Tighe of the Hennepin County delegation noted, "Look on the platform and I don't think you will find it is over-crowded with trade unionists." "Don't forget," Tighe admonished the convention, "that the foundation of the F-L Party rests nevertheless upon the economic organization of the trade unions as well as the farm organizations."³⁴⁵ Organized labor felt itself ignored and marginalized as nearly all of its demands were struck down while a raft of Communist front groups and paper organizations seized control of the convention to advance Benson's moderate new program. Led by delegates from the Minneapolis Building Trades Council, the State Federation of Labor even threatened to withdraw from the convention. "Militant

³⁴³ Giekse, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 260.

³⁴⁴ Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen*, 151-52.

³⁴⁵ *Proceedings of the Farmer-Labor Convention, Duluth, MN March 25-27, 1938*, 48, box 3, folder Proceedings of the Farmer-Labor Convention, Farmer-Labor Association Papers.

Minnesota labor,” the leaders of Local 544 sighed, seemed only to hold any sway with the FLP when it threatened to walk away from the convention with its members in tow.³⁴⁶

As an attempt to restore party unity the convention proved a dismal failure. In the summer of 1938 both the left and right wings prepared for a fierce gubernatorial primary. Petersen focused his campaign on rooting out the “Reds” who had seized control of the Benson administration.³⁴⁷ Otherwise sympathetic party officials and affiliated organizations were embarrassed by his incessant emphasis on Communist infiltration. They reluctantly sided with Benson in hopes of putting an end to party infighting that was focusing unwanted public attention on the very real presence of Communists in the FLP. An infuriated Petersen took these defections as proof of Communist domination and his attacks on Benson and his inner circle, dubbed the “Mexican Generals,” increasingly combined red-baiting with anti-Semitic attacks on the governor’s supporters.³⁴⁸ As Petersen lost support among the FLP establishment, he appealed to Republicans by calling for a return to the FLP’s “liberal roots” and away from the “pale-pink liberalism” of the Popular Front.³⁴⁹ Unsure of Stassen’s electability, Republicans inundated the Farmer-Labor primary to nominate Petersen and ensure that the general election would be a

³⁴⁶ “F-L State Convention Marked By Conservatism,” *Northwest Organizer*, March 31, 1938, 2.

³⁴⁷ Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 146.

³⁴⁸ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 253, 263.

³⁴⁹ Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen*, 148; Southworth, “Harold Stassen and the Rebirth of the Republican Party,” 13, Stassen Papers.

contest between moderate conservatives.³⁵⁰ Benson only narrowly defeated Petersen in a highly competitive primary election, but the governor's paltry 16,000-vote plurality fell far short of an expected margin of 50,000.³⁵¹ Benson's win was purely a pyrrhic victory. His strongest showing was on the Iron Range where SWOC was organizing iron ore miners, but the outspoken support of the CIO undermined the FLP's conscious effort to downplay its image as the party of militant industrial workers. In contrast, Petersen's dissident campaign galvanized a growing conservative coalition against Benson that now shifted its support Stassen.

Benson's campaign for reelection clamored to reignite the same sense of urgency that animated the 1936 election by repeatedly connecting the FLP to the New Deal. As one piece of campaign literature loudly exclaimed: "MINNESOTA UNDER GOVERNOR BENSON IS TODAY THE NO. 1 NEW DEAL STATE OF THE UNION."³⁵² By 1938, the New Deal had lost much of its luster and its coalition was unraveling, but the FLP continued to identify itself with the Democrats. The Benson campaign focused on repairing the FLP's crumbling relationship with organized labor while articulating the broad social benefits of a strong labor movement. The campaign deliberately underscored how much had changed for organized labor since the trucking strikes of 1934 by sharply reminding workers of the vital role played by the state in mediating industrial disputes. "*Do you control the absolute right to and power to organize and bargain collectively?*" asked one campaign

³⁵⁰ Hineraker, "Harold Stassen and Developments in the Republican Party in Minnesota," 151.

³⁵¹ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 265.

³⁵² "Campaign Issue is the New Deal," campaign pamphlet, 1938, box 4, folder Farmer-Labor literature, Stassen Papers.

pamphlet. "The Labor Movement of our state and nation has a keen interest in government... [b]ecause government plays such an important part in our lives we must of necessity be interested in those who administer governmental functions."³⁵³

The Benson campaign was careful to describe the New Deal labor relations regime as beneficial for all segments of society, not strictly organized workers. In Minnesota, the Farmer-Labor platform declared, there were "thousands of organized and unorganized workers, whose buying power must be protected if the rest of our citizens are to thrive." Increasing the purchasing power of workers by supporting unionization was a boon for everyone- producers and consumers, workers and capitalists- in the "stores, shops, and factories."³⁵⁴ Protecting labor's right to organize and collectively bargain was essential to reviving the economy and restoring social stability in a state that had become synonymous with labor strife.

Stassen's campaign also emphasized labor policy, even as his platform expounded the virtues of an "enlightened capitalism" that relied on the state to restrain working-class power. In speech to the Young Republican League of Minnesota, a party activist remarked: "While labor has made great strides during the past decade, it now faces a serious situation in Minnesota, because of the manner in which the present administration has become inoculated with ultra-radicalism and communistic tendencies."³⁵⁵ Throughout the campaign Stassen

³⁵³ "Governor Elmer A. Benson: Labor's Proven Friend" campaign pamphlet, no date (ca. 1938), box 4, folder Farmer-Labor literature, Stassen Papers.

³⁵⁴ "Farmer-Labor Platform for 1938" campaign pamphlet, box 4, folder Farmer-Labor literature, Stassen Papers.

³⁵⁵ Kenneth L. Dawson speech to the Young Republican League of Minnesota, no date (ca. 1938), box 4, folder Gubernatorial Campaign- Misc. Correspondence and Related Papers, Stassen Papers.

developed a labor policy that advocated increased state intervention to control militant labor and unscrupulous capital. In a typical campaign speech, Stassen excitedly described the threat of unchecked class conflict:

The flames of industrial warfare constitute one of the most serious threats to future progress, to social security, to the maintenance of our democratic government. The grasping reactionaries and the vicious radicals are the twin stokers who feed these destructive flames. The one, the reactionary, refuses to recognize the rights of workers to organize as he chooses.... They destroy much of the efforts of the great majority of employers who do recognize their duty to society and to their employees and who do promote the industrial peace. The other, the radical, fosters and promotes premature strikes, encourages unnecessary violence and law violations, develops a disrespect for public authority, uses the labor movement as a screen for communistic activities, ruthlessly splits asunder the great labor movement of the nation and undermines and destroys much that has been accomplished by the sincere, constructive leaders of the labor movement.³⁵⁶

The fatal flaw of the Wagner Act, Stassen complained, was that it “made no provisions for the settlement of disputes when collective bargaining failed.”³⁵⁷ He called for a “progressive labor relations act” to “[do] away with the caveman tactics of premature strikes, lock-outs, and violence” by legislating strict guidelines for labor organizing and protest.³⁵⁸ His proposed labor policy hinged on the assumption that labor, not capital, was at fault for creating social discord. If the state could restrain worker militancy, then employers would be persuaded to bargain in good faith with organizations of their workers’ choosing. This policy was grounded in a fundamental hostility to the process of politicized collective bargaining ushered in by the Wagner Act. Stassen conceded that workers had a right to form unions, but

³⁵⁶ Stassen speech notes, no date (ca. 1938), box 5, folder 1938 Gubernatorial Campaign- Speech Material, Stassen Papers.

³⁵⁷ Hinderaker, “Harold Stassen and Developments in the Republican Party in Minnesota,” 90.

³⁵⁸ Stassen speech notes, Stassen Papers.

he radically reinterpreted the spirit of the New Deal labor relations regime to reassert the state as a check on working-class power.

Stassen ridiculed the political empowerment of organized labor engendered by the New Deal. He eagerly played up the split in the labor movement, and like Republicans across the country he attacked the CIO's militancy and political aspirations; he even went so far as to instruct campaign volunteers to publicize an alleged remark by Benson that "Minnesota is a CIO state."³⁵⁹ But in Minnesota the CIO remained weak. It was unions like Local 544 in Minneapolis that were the real targets of Stassen's labor policy.³⁶⁰ In his keynote address to the Republican state convention he stated, "Our administration will respect the trade union movement as an economic movement and will not seek to make of it a political vehicle."³⁶¹ Stassen conjured up the non-partisanship of the AFL by arguing that the only acceptable place for organized labor in a democratic society was as a bargaining agent for job-conscious workers. He shrewdly quoted a member of an IAM local gutted by the raiding of the UE in a campaign letter to underscore the failure of New Deal labor policy to revive the economy. "He's for a labor relations law that will prevent most of the lockouts and walkouts which are costing us more and more in

³⁵⁹ Stassen campaign memo, no date (ca. 1938), box 4, folder Gubernatorial Campaign- Misc. Correspondence and Related Papers, Stassen Papers.

³⁶⁰ Curiously, Stassen refrained from explicitly singling out the Trotskyists in campaign speeches and literature. Perhaps he did not understand their sectarian rift with the Stalinists, but more likely he did not want to offend the State Federation of Labor by reminding them of their inability to purge the radical leaders of Minneapolis' most powerful union.

³⁶¹ Harold Stassen, Keynote Speech at the Republican State Convention, September 2, 1938, box 4, folder 1938 Gubernatorial Campaign- Misc. Correspondence and Related Papers, Stassen Papers.

lost time and putting more and more of us on the relief and WPA rolls.”³⁶² The insurgent Republicanism portrayed strikes as an impediment to economic recovery for employers, employees, and the state, rather than a legitimate instrument for working people to redress their grievances. Stassen contended that what workers wanted from their unions was industrial peace, not political activism propagated by “communistic” elements. He also pointedly dredged up the memory of a nasty jurisdictional fight to remind workers affiliated with the State Federation of Labor where Benson’s real sympathies lay.

Stassen’s studied effort to cultivate a liberal image was supplemented by an archconservative shadow campaign to demonize the FLP through extensive red-baiting intertwined with vitriolic outbursts of anti-Semitism. As a result there were two Republican campaigns for governor: one was filled with admiration for the New Deal, and the other was shot through with fascistic and xenophobic language and imagery.³⁶³ Republicans picked up the thread of anti-Semitism left over from Petersen’s primary campaign to assail Benson. Despite Stassen’s liberal pretensions and claims that he did not endorse such tactics, the tenor of the Republican attacks on the FLP can best be summed up in one Stassen campaign song:

Hi ho, hi ho
We join the CIO
We pay our dues
To the goddamn Jews
Hi ho, ho.³⁶⁴

³⁶² Stassen campaign letter, no date (ca. 1938), box 4, folder Gubernatorial Campaign- Misc. Correspondence and Related Papers, Stassen Papers.

³⁶³ Hyman Berman, “Political Anti-Semitism in Minnesota during the Great Depression,” *Jewish Social Studies* 38 (3) 1976. 260-61.

³⁶⁴ John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 301.

Republican politician and fascist sympathizer Ray P. Chase popularized these sentiments in his widely distributed anti-FLP screed *Are They Communists or Catspaws?* Subtitled a “Red Baiting Article,” the scurrilous pamphlet reached some 13,000 homes and was disseminated to leading Lutheran and Catholic figures across the state.³⁶⁵ In it the FLP was painted as a facade for the insidious forces of international Communism and Jewry.³⁶⁶ Chase’s pamphlet featured crude, Nazi-inspired anti-Semitic caricatures of four of Benson’s advisors as commissars of Bolshevik tyranny. Referred to as the Mexican generals by Petersen during the primary battle, the epithet stuck and conjured up an image of a clique of foreign revolutionaries conspiring against the supposedly “forgotten men” of Minnesota (i.e., gentile Scandinavians and Germans).³⁶⁷ While Stassen never stooped to anti-Semitism, neither did he bridle supporters like Chase whose conflation of red-baiting and anti-Semitism proved highly effective.³⁶⁸ The net result made the 1938 Minnesota gubernatorial election, in historian Jeffrey Gurock’s estimation, “the most successful use of political anti-Semitism in the United States.”³⁶⁹

Although the FLP again attempted to rally voters against a fascistic assault on progressive reform, this year the momentum was on the side of the Republicans.

A.I. Harris, one of the governor’s advisors singled out in Chase’s hate literature,

³⁶⁵ Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 150.

³⁶⁶ Ray P. Chase, *Are They Communists or Catspaws? A Red-baiting Article* (Anoka, MN: n.p., 1938).

³⁶⁷ “F.-L. Party Betrayed by ‘Mexican Generals.’” *Minnesota Liberal Counselor*, no date (ca.1938) box 4, folder 1938 Gubernatorial Campaign- Misc. Correspondence and Related Papers, Stassen Papers.

³⁶⁸ Berman, “Political Anti-Semitism in Minnesota,” 262.

³⁶⁹ Jeffrey S. Gurock, *American Jewish History, Volume 6, Part 1* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 262.

compared the “fake liberalism” of the GOP to National Socialism’s subversive appropriation of working-class politics.³⁷⁰ Red-baiting and “phony liberalism” were symptomatic of the ideological bankruptcy of the Republican campaign, but also the danger of reaction masking its true intentions with progressive platitudes.³⁷¹ Homegrown fascism and the GOP were conspiring together, the FLP reported, because the leader of the Minnesota branch of the Silver Shirts announced he was backing Stassen.³⁷² In response to unceasing red-baiting Benson distanced himself from the Popular Front and urged his Communist allies to keep quiet during the election. He declared himself and the FLP the only true liberals in the race. “The aim of liberal government,” he stated in a campaign speech, “[is to] aid people in today’s efforts to liberate themselves from want and insecurity. Today, any political leader who fails to recognize the danger of this new industrial and commercial feudalism cannot qualify for liberal leadership.”³⁷³ Benson defended his pro-labor record and compared himself to Michigan Governor Frank Murphy who refused to use troops against the sit-down strikers at GM’s Flint plants.³⁷⁴ Yet his labor platform was limited to pleas for increased wages and shorter hours, and aside from a CIO-backed proposal for a state-level Wagner Act, the governor offered no specific policies for addressing the economic crisis. Despite adopting a carbon copy of the New Deal, Benson enjoyed little support from Democratic leaders. Still reeling from

³⁷⁰ “Fake Liberalism Forerunner of Fascism,” *Minnesota Leader*, April 23, 1938, 4.

³⁷¹ “Republican Smoke Screen Fails,” *Minnesota Leader*, October 22, 1938, 1, 7.

³⁷² “Backing Stassen, Silver Shirt Chief Tells Leader Reporter,” October 22, 1938, 8

³⁷³ Youngdale, ed., *Third Party Footprints*, 328-29.

³⁷⁴ F.P. Ryan, “In Michigan It’s Murphy, In Minnesota It’s Benson” campaign leaflet, no date (ca. November 1938), box 14, folder Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, Nov. 7-8, Benson Papers.

the failure of his so-called purge of anti-New Deal Democrats, Roosevelt did not actively campaign for Benson and kept silent through almost the entire campaign. The president did not even endorse Benson until a week before the election, offering only generic praise for the governor's "efforts to develop liberal governmental policies."³⁷⁵ Unlike in 1936, the Democratic Party was in disarray and its popularity was flagging. Yet Benson and the FLP continued to identify their campaign with that of the Democrats.

As the election drew nearer, the FLP nervously tried to mitigate the impact of continued labor factionalism. A handful of local elections across the country foreshadowed political fallout of a split in labor's ranks. In Seattle the Washington Commonwealth Federation, a non-partisan farmer-labor group working within the state Democratic Party, was torn apart by the dueling AFL and CIO unions. The CIO unions backed the Commonwealth Federation's liberal mayoral candidate, while the craft unions opted to back a conservative Democrat.³⁷⁶ Closer to home, St. Paul fell to the Republicans despite the FLP's decision to support the city's Democratic machine and not run any candidates in the municipal elections.³⁷⁷ In a letter to Benson, Vincent Dunne explained: "The present program of the FLP is one which can scarcely inspire the workers and farmers to close ranks and conduct the stubborn fight which is necessary for victory." The defeats in St. Paul, Dunne warned, presaged trouble for the general election because there was little "difference in the

³⁷⁵ "Benson Named Liberal Choice by Roosevelt," *Minnesota Leader*, November 5, 1938, 1, 3.

³⁷⁶ "AFL-CIO Warfare Defeats Labor in Seattle Mayoralty Campaign," *Minnesota Leader*, April 9, 1938, 4.

³⁷⁷ Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 262.

class character” of either candidates or their programs.³⁷⁸ The Trotskyists remained ambivalent about the FLP and hostile to Benson’s New Deal-oriented Popular Front administration because, they argued, Farmer-Laborism was forfeiting workers’ interests in order to win over the urban middle-classes. In a plea for labor unity, the *Minnesota Leader* ran an editorial outlining the steep costs of factionalism. “There is the threat that the [labor] movement may be broken up into dis-unified fragments, with some of those fragments even listening to labor’s enemies from the ranks of private monopoly. There is also the siren voice of the new Republicanism, which hopes to win back the good will of the workingmen whom it betrayed, by covering the claws of reaction with the soft phrases of Republican ‘yes, but’ liberalism.”³⁷⁹ US Congressman John Bernard laid out the political repercussions of the rupture in labor’s ranks in blunt terms. In elections where the AFL and the CIO divide their support among competing candidates, “thousands of middle class and professional people, the logical supporters of progress, become distrustful of both labor candidates and throw their votes to the reactionary whom everybody has forgotten to expose. The A.F. of L. man is defeated, the C.I.O. man is defeated, and a company stooge wins hands down.”³⁸⁰

Class politics, not labor unity, was the real problem. Even though the labor movement was officially united behind Benson and the FLP, rank-and-file workers did not “turn out in full force” during either the St. Paul or gubernatorial primary

³⁷⁸ Letter from Vincent Dunne to Elmer Benson, no date (ca. October 1938), Mss 848, box 15, folder 12, Dobbs Papers.

³⁷⁹ “Labor Day—1938,” *Minnesota Leader*, September 3, 1938, 4.

³⁸⁰ “Bernard Upholds New Deal Laws,” *Minnesota Leader*, April 2, 1938, 6.

elections.³⁸¹ Local 544 announced its support of the entire FLP slate, but advocated an alternative, yet vague, “militant program” to the official party program.³⁸² As partisans in the internal struggles dividing the FLP, the Trotskyists failed to take seriously the political ramifications of labor factionalism. Local 544 and the other AFL unions in Minneapolis consistently refused to reintegrate the CIO into the institutions of the city labor movement. When Selma Seestrom put forward a proposal that the Minnesota Industrial Union Council jointly decide upon candidate endorsement with the CLU and the Hennepin County Central Committee, the proposal was quickly shot down for giving the much smaller CIO unions equal representation with the AFL rivals.³⁸³ Joe Van Nordstrand, organizational director of the Industrial Union Council, accused the leadership of Local 544 of staging “political strikes” at state cooperative creameries to “foment sentiment” against Benson and the CIO.³⁸⁴ Although both factions officially supported Benson, the ceaseless maneuvering and jockeying for power in the Hennepin County Central Committee and CLU proved self-defeating at the ballot box. The rank-and-file was fatigued by months of senseless infighting and factionalism. As the election neared, the trade unions, the FLP’s vital base of urban support, were in disarray and disillusioned.

³⁸¹ Letter from Dunne to Benson, Dobbs Papers.

³⁸² “Militant FLP Resolution Passed,” *Northwest Organizer*, November 3, 1938, 1.

³⁸³ “CLU, F-L Committees To Meet,” *Northwest Organizer*, August 4, 1938, 4.

³⁸⁴ Recommendation of the Minnesota State Industrial Union Council on Methods of Cooperation with the Working Farmers, no date (ca. 1939), Mss 848, box 15, folder 13, Dobbs Papers.

Backlash

The FLP was defeated as spectacularly as it was brought into office two years earlier. Benson was buried in a landslide by nearly 300,000 votes. In out-state rural counties the governor was handily beaten, but the biggest reversal was in Hennepin County where Stassen won by close to 50,000 votes.³⁸⁵ In Minneapolis the polarization of the city's voters demonstrated in the 1937 was repeated in the generational race. Benson won a mere 6,500 votes out of almost 40,000 total votes cast in the bourgeois Eighth and Thirteenth Wards. Most distressing for the FLP, though, was the continued decline of Farmer-Labor support in working-class wards. In 1936 Benson trounced his Republican challenger in the laboring Third, Sixth, and Ninth Wards. Two years later, he barely won these solid working-class districts as overall voter turnout in fell by fully 15 percent.³⁸⁶ The governor's race was the centerpiece of the statewide collapse of the FLP. In the Twin Cities, on the Iron Range, and in the small towns and farms, a resurgent Republican Party drove almost the entire Farmer-Labor ticket from office.

In an editorial forum for *The Nation* entitled "Why We Lost" featuring Philip La Follette and Frank Murphy, Benson concluded that the defeat stemmed from a number of factors including red-baiting, anti-Semitism, and divisions in the organized labor movement. The cumulative effect was to produce "confusion in the minds of farmers and 'white-collar' sections of our city population as to what the sharpening labor issues were all about" after two years worth of conservative

³⁸⁵ White, et al., *Minnesota Votes*, 196-97.

³⁸⁶ County general election recapitulation, November 10, 1938, Hennepin County Elections Office.

propaganda upbraiding Farmer-Laborites and New Dealers for waging a “class war” in Congress and state legislatures.³⁸⁷ The Republican victory led many to ask, “Did the people vote against the New Deal?” No, Benson surmised, because the victorious Republicans in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin all vowed to continue to protect the basic reforms of the New Deal (i.e., legal protection for collective bargaining, social security legislation, unemployment insurance, and farm subsidies). The people did not vote down the New Deal, they voted in a party that promised to fulfill the New Deal *better*, but this promise was at odds with the Republican Party’s core interests. “Today’s streamlined conservatives and ‘New Dealized’ Republicans have promised two things: (1) To rebuild our crumbling economic foundations; (2) to do so without dislodging the financial and industrial oligarchy which now stands between the people and their full use of the economic, social, and political institutions of their country. The two promises contradict each other.” Benson took solace in this contradiction and predicted that the people would return to progressive politics “earlier than many of us expect.”³⁸⁸

The Republican victory, though, was much broader than Benson realized. GOP rode to victory across the industrial North and Midwest, unseating New Deal and third-party politicians by embracing a liberalized platform. In Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, “the workshop of America,” Republicans were elected over staunchly pro-labor New Deal candidates. The GOP elected 17 new governors, 12 previously held by Democrats and 2 by third parties. In the US Senate and House of

³⁸⁷ Philip F. La Follette, Elmer A. Benson, and Frank Murphy, “Why We Lost,” *The Nation*, December 3, 1938, 587.

³⁸⁸ La Follette, Benson, and Murphy, “Why We Lost,” 588-89.

Representatives, the Republicans picked up 23 and 81 seats respectively. According to Clyde Weed, the Republicans elected in 1938 “accepted the broad outlines of New Deal,” but remained staunchly conservative and committed to blocking any further leftward drift in social and economic policy.³⁸⁹ This explanation, as Benson’s editorial argues, obscures the significant ideological concessions made by Republicans to accommodate even the broad outlines of the New Deal. The defeat of progressive New Dealers sympathetic to some kind of social democratic reform steered the Democrats in a more conservative direction. This move, though, was heavily influenced by liberal Republicans’ embrace of the basic thrust of the New Deal. New Dealized Republicans helped to pioneer the fiscal Keynesianism that shaped the political economy of the New Deal order from the 1940s onward. This “peculiarly American brand of Keynesian economics,” as political scientists Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek describe, “represented a distillation of the terms under which liberalism’s new social priorities could accommodate southern, corporate, and labor power.”³⁹⁰ The elections of 1938 did not signify the end of liberalism. On the contrary, the elections established the enduring terms and boundaries of the New Deal order. The Republican resurgence in 1938 convinced the Democratic Party perhaps once and for all to delimit its commitment to class politics and retrench its social policy initiatives.

The split in the labor movement that fully emerged in 1938 fatally undermined the very social movement most capable of mustering a campaign for

³⁸⁹ Weed, *The Nemesis of Reform*, 201.

³⁹⁰ Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “Regime Building in American Government: A Review of Literature on the 1940s,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 113 (4) 1998-99, 701.

more extensive social and economic reform. The case of the Minneapolis labor movement underscored how political divisions begat organizational divisions that prevented organized labor from consolidating the impressive gains won in the 1936 elections. The political differences between the CIO and AFL were not unique to the mid-to-late 1930s. The ongoing debate over the worth of voluntarism and non-partisanship were deep-seated, reinforcing a parochial and narrow-minded approach to politics that became all the more self-defeating as the labor movement emerged as a national social movement. Yet the crisis of the Depression and the experimental nature of the New Deal opened the space for organized labor to mobilize not only its greatly expanded constituency, but also other social classes behind a political agenda that addressed the structural deficiencies of capitalism. Even during the tenuous period of unity in 1935 and 1936, the labor movement was able to push the Democratic Party to identify itself and the New Deal with working-class politics. Something resembling social democratic reform was within organized labor's grasp before 1938, but not after, because both Democrats and Republicans reached a tacit compromise to rein in a movement that the latter considered too radical and the former too divisive.

Despite the setback of a Republican victory, both the FLP and the Trotskyists interpreted the defeats of 1938 as concrete evidence of a substantive shift at the base of the national political culture. Not content to accept the limitations of the New Deal status quo, voters turned to the Republicans, now preaching a liberal sermon, because there was no real political alternative. The people wanted change, the FLP reasoned, but remained confused about what kinds of changes would be

necessary to end the economic crisis of the Depression.³⁹¹ The Trotskyists argued that the election went to the Republicans because of the New Deal's inability to articulate a new message that explicitly acknowledged the contradictions of capitalist society. "Throughout the northern strip of states the New Dealers were ruthlessly rejected and expelled from office" because voters could find no real differences in the Democrats or their third party allies like the FLP.³⁹² Nonetheless, a liberal consensus had been won by the struggles of economically and politically organized working people. These struggles imbued working people with the confidence to demand better treatment at work and a government more responsive to their needs. To win again in America's workshop, the FLP and the Trotskyists agreed, the Republican Party would need to prove its liberal credentials. Historically, though, the result was liberal retrenchment.

Conclusion

The 1938-midterm elections became a critical moment to test the durability of the New Deal order, its coalition, and its ideological limits. On a national level, the case of the Minneapolis teamsters was emblematic of a widespread backlash against the New Deal and the politicized labor movement that energized its left-leaning tendencies. The defeat of New Dealers in the industrial North was accompanied by the mortal wounding of their third party allies like the FLP. Labor won access to political power because of its militancy and militancy in turn helped to undermine

³⁹¹ "Beyond the New Deal," *Minnesota Leader*, November 12, 1938, 3.

³⁹² "Why Workers and Farmers Voted Republican," *Northwest Organizer*, November 17, 1938, 2.

its great strides by the end of the 1930s. Labor's political clout was not weakened because of militancy in and of itself. Labor militancy was not an infantile outburst, as Roosevelt suggested after the Flint sit-down strikes. Nor was it a wholly self-defeating electoral stance that isolated workers as a class from other social classes. Labor militancy provided the basis for a national movement to cohere around local and regional experiences of class conflict that linked shop floor struggles with political activism and real gains in public policy. What the Trotskyist teamsters and others in the labor movement failed to articulate was a message that consistently connected the struggle of workers with those of other social classes. The ruinous effect of factionalism only amplified organized labor's political isolation.

The elections also witnessed the rise of a new, redefined GOP. The moderate and liberal Republicans who assumed power in 1938 recognized that the political landscape of the North was markedly different from the one they confronted a decade earlier. The basic thrust of New Deal reform- the need for some degree of state intervention in the economy, some social welfare legislation, and the legitimacy of organized labor's rights- proved popular. These Republicans recognized the changing political tenor of the times and adapted by conceding an important ideological point by recognizing the legality of unions. However, these Republicans retained a marked hostility to any challenge to the supremacy of capital and continued to follow the path charted by conservative Democrats.

The New Deal's social democratic potential, embodied in the "moral preeminence" of the labor question and the organizational upheaval of militant

organized labor, was blunted decisively in 1938.³⁹³ The defeats of the 1938 elections crystallized the schisms that stymied organized labor's very ability to mobilize politically for sweeping social change. Organized labor held a vaunted position in terms of prestige and political relevance as a mass, class-conscious movement in the 1930s and effectively reshaped the political order for next several decades. Yet this movement was highly unstable and composed of powerful but combustible elements that quickly fractured the emerging national labor movement by the mid-1930s.

³⁹³ Fraser, "The 'Labor Question,'" 57.

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE

The debacle of the November elections left the Farmer-Labor Party reeling and months later still bitterly divided over who or what was responsible for such a disaster. At a March 1939 meeting of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Association, the party's left and right factions angrily conducted an electoral postmortem. The right wing, comprised mainly of trade unionists, blamed the Communists in Benson's Popular Front administration for ignoring the interests and demands of organized labor. Benson's campaign, one delegate argued, made no effort to reach out to the unions for policy input in order to "get any locals lined up" behind the governor. "The unions don't give a damn who is in control politically," another labor representative declared, "but they do want to do everything they can to better the conditions of the unions." The Popular Front left wing retorted that it was labor's narrow focus on the interests of the unions that drove away crucial middle-class and rural voters and cost the FLP the election. It was the Trotskyists, they claimed, who were fomenting division in the county organization to destroy the Farmer-Labor Party once and for all.³⁹⁴ Both factions could agree that Farmer-Laborism and liberal reform in general was at a crossroads, but neither quite understood just how sharply the future of reform had contracted.

On the one hand, this debate over the role of class in electoral politics

³⁹⁴ Minutes of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Association, March 22, 1939, box 2, folder Minutes of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Association, March 22, 1939, Stageberg Papers.

underscored just how much Minnesota and national politics had changed over the last decade. The crisis of the Depression certainly contributed to the rapid ascendance of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1930, but it was the organization of urban workers that ensured the party's continued electoral success. The trucking strikes of 1934 made collective bargaining a reality for workers in the city's bustling transportation and distribution economy and the following two years extended the reach of unions into other Minneapolis industries. Labor militancy revitalized the labor movement and remade it into a social movement of working people capable of reshaping city and state politics. Therefore, in Minnesota and elsewhere, the political achievements of the New Deal were not solely the product of Roosevelt and the executive branch. As David Brody writes, "The public men who carried labor's fight occupied state houses, mayors' offices and congressional seats, and what they did on behalf of labor they did independently of the New Deal administration."³⁹⁵ At the local and state level, the FLP- like New Deal Democrats- responded to the upsurge in labor militancy and the dislocations of the Depression by placing working-class demands for greater economic regulation and social welfare policies at the center of a large new reform coalition. The elections of 1936 represented the apogee of labor-centric reform politics, but this new coalition's durability was strained by the class politics at its core.

Although organized labor substantially redefined the contours of New Deal liberalism, labor's class politics also contributed to the sharp contraction of the New Deal's social democratic potential. Building a broad cross-class coalition was the

³⁹⁵ Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 126.

highest priority of New Dealers and Farmer-Laborites. Examining the 1938 election returns convinced even pro-labor New Dealers that whatever electoral edge the unions provided candidates could also induce a backlash against the specific class interests of organized workers. Labor factionalism contributed decisively to this perception as competing unions focused their political influence on securing jurisdictional authority over particular crafts and industries. In Minnesota the divisions within the labor movement were complicated by sectarian tensions between the Trotskyist teamsters and Popular Front Communists as both groups struggled to win influence in the Farmer-Labor Party. Both the Trotskyists and the Communists believed in reformist electoral politics; the point of contention was whether the FLP should advance its social democratic platform as a progressive cross-class entity or an outright labor party. As the mid-term elections neared, the various factions in the labor movement and the FLP could find little common ground on which to rally popular support, much less push for more sweeping reform.

The vaunted coalition of 1936 was in tatters, but the appeal of New Deal liberalism was not so easily diminished. The liberalism of Stassen and other New Dealized Republicans simply embraced the “essential conservatism” of the New Deal.³⁹⁶ The eclectic and experimental reforms of the New Deal were intended only to rationalize capitalism’s most glaring deficiencies and inequalities.³⁹⁷ It was the politicization of the labor movement that pressured New Deal Democrats to undertake more substantive reform, but as the movement fragmented so too did the

³⁹⁶ Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 107.

³⁹⁷ Skocpol, “Political Responses to Capitalist Crisis: Neo-Marxist Theories of the State and the Case of the New Deal” in *Politics and Society* 10 (2) 1980, 156.

Democrats. As a mass social democratic party the FLP was even more susceptible to the debilitating effects of labor factionalism. Into the breach stepped a new generation of Republicans who understood the need for reform, but could not abide by the class politics of a militant labor movement. They made common cause with liberal reform, but balked at the social democracy advanced by certain segments of the labor movement. The liberal Republican onslaught of 1938 convinced the Democrats to delimit their reform agenda. Divided, the progressive wing of the labor movement could do little to influence the Democrat's party policy. The unions of the CIO as well as those of the AFL entrenched themselves as competing interest groups in the wider constellation of Democratic politics.

The defeats of 1938 destroyed the FLP along with other third parties that presented a more radical alternative to the New Deal. In 1944, the party's remnants merged with the Democrats to create the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party (DFL).³⁹⁸ For the next decade this amalgam of Democrats and Farmer-Laborites foundered at the polls. During this time, the state Republicans under Stassen and his successors continued to embrace liberalism while consciously working to expunge the radical heritage of Farmer-Laborism and the militancy of the Trotskyists. In 1939, the state legislature passed the Minnesota Labor Relations Act that severely curtailed workers' ability to strike- it would become the model for the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. Then in June of 1941, only months before the US entered the Second World War, the Stassen administration, in conjunction with the FBI and Daniel Tobin of the IBT, helped to orchestrate the arrest of Local 544's Trotskyist leadership on charges

³⁹⁸ Cf. Jennifer Delton, *Making Minnesota Liberal: Civil Rights and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 12-19.

of sedition and the union was put into receivership. In Minnesota, the forces of liberalism outflanked and repressed radicalism.

From 1934 to 1938, the very shape of liberal reform was actively contested and workers and their interests stood at the center of this debate. It was working-class politics, ushered in by insurgent militancy and then galvanized into a robust, if fractious, coalition at the polls. What drove this nascent coalition was a dynamic impulse for social reform that substantively changed people's lives. Workers won higher wages and better conditions on the job, but they also discovered their collective power to reshape politics and to connect their struggles with those of other social classes. At the apogee of its power, organized labor squandered its newfound clout in fruitless factional battles and alienated crucial cross-class allies. Throughout the war and postwar years, organized labor remained a critical, but subordinate, component of the liberal coalition.³⁹⁹ The electoral defeats of 1938 brought to a close the moment when organized labor could rightfully claim to be the lynchpin of American reform politics. It was the local struggles in cities like Minneapolis that defined the longterm direction of the New Deal order.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

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