CHAPTER 5

The Farmer-Labor Party

The combination of an anti-Communist labour bureaucracy, and the decline in union strength, limited the Communists’ opportunities in the labour movement, whatever strategy they chose. Still, after the promise of the early TUEL years, the party’s manoeuvres increased their isolation in the labour movement for much of the decade. Central to this failure were the disastrous efforts at forming a ‘farmer-labour’ party, which left the party with few allies in the broader labour movement and damaged its internal health. In the end, the Comintern leadership, particularly Trotsky, helped the party navigate these dangers. However, by 1923–5, the Comintern itself was changing, reflecting the bureaucratic degeneration of Soviet Russia. As a result, the party’s labour work in this period cut to the core of the US and international Communist movement.

This chapter analyses the role that the Communist Party played in the labour movement in the mid-1920s, as well as the Comintern’s intervention in the party’s labour activity. By this time, the party was becoming increasingly isolated, with TUEL militants being driven out of the trade unions. The leadership of the party sought to escape this isolation. ‘Progressive’ radicalism—first the farmer-labour movement and then the ‘third-party alliance’ around Republican Senator Robert La Follette—appeared to be answers. However, instead of polarising these movements on class lines, the Communists’ actual work in these milieus threatened to jettison the Marxist principle of proletarian independence. This would have meant retreating from the left wing’s fight for revolutionary politics in favour of trying to pressure the capitalist parties, namely, returning to social-democratic reformism. In 1924, the Comintern intervened forcefully, if clumsily and belatedly, to prevent the party from liquidiating itself politically. The *deus ex machina* nature of this intervention compounded the party’s isolation.

Campaign for a Labour Party

After the World War, amid an upsurge in working-class militancy, the creation of a labour party seemed possible, just as the British Labour Party had recently

emerged from the Liberal movement. Important sectors of the labour leadership sought a larger role in politics, while many Progressives, disillusioned with the two established parties, saw the working class as a progressive social force for post-war ‘reconstruction’. Had even a reformist mass labour party—like the British one—been formed, it would have been a defeat for the AFL’s long-standing ‘non-partisan’ hostility towards a workers’ party and a political reflection of the social division between workers and capitalists, albeit in a distorted way.²

According to Andrew Strouthous’s study of the labour party movement, in the early 1920s ‘the AFL was riven by civil war to determine its political policy’. John Fitzpatrick’s Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) was a major advocate for a labour party. Fitzpatrick, an Irish American blacksmith who had been head of the CFL for some two decades, had worked with radicals including William Z. Foster. In November 1919, the CFL’s New Majority published the entire Soviet Constitution; that month Fitzpatrick helped organise the Cook County Labor Party (CCLP). This advocated ‘democratic control of industry and commerce for the general good by those who work with hand or brain, and the elimination of autocratic domination of the forces of production and distribution either by selfish private interests or bureaucratic agents of government’.³

Fitzpatrick, the CCLP’s candidate for mayor of Chicago, received about 60,000 votes in 1919 (8 percent). Seeking allies, the next year the Labor Party added ‘Farmer’ to its name, forming the Farmer Labor Party (FLP). This search for rural support reflected the fact that, as German Socialist Karl Kautsky had observed two decades earlier, ‘the United States, in spite of their highly developed industrial capitalism, are a strongly agrarian country’. At this time, more Americans still lived in rural areas than in urban ones, and there was a history of rural radicalism. Although the farmer-labour movement attracted more support among farmers than the trade-union movement, the new Farmer Labor Party diluted the proletarian focus of the labour party movement by trying to create a two-class party. When they attempted to unite forces with progressive Republican Senator Robert La Follette from Wisconsin, they ignored the class line altogether. La Follette refused, claiming he was searching for a party with an ‘advanced but not socialist’ programme. In 1920, farmer-labour presidential candidate Parley P. Parker received only 265,000 votes (compared to more than 900,000 for Debs and 16 million for Harding). However, farmer-labour

³ Strouthous 2000, p. 2; Shapiro 1967, pp. 29–31; Bekken 1997; Fine 1928, pp. 382–6; Shideler 1945, pp. 20–41.