CHAPTER 6

The La Follette Fiasco, 1923–4

By the 1920s, Progressivism in American politics had peaked. Large corporations dominated politics, as capitalists seemed to have attained the nirvana of never-ending prosperity and an ever-weakening labour movement. Ferdinand Lundberg observed that in the 1924 presidential election between Calvin Coolidge and John W. Davis, ‘J.P. Morgan and Company had the unprecedented distinction of controlling both candidates’.1 Resentment towards traditional capitalist politics arose from anger from the trade-union bureaucracy (especially the railroad brotherhoods) over anti-labour laws and court rulings, and from disgust with the corruption epitomised by the Teapot Dome scandal. In a last gasp of Progressivism, liberal and radicals—including Farmer-Laborites, trade unionists, and other restive reformers—looked towards discontented politicians to oppose mainstream Democrats and Republicans. They accepted the framework of bourgeois politics, and many wanted to reform the Democrats or Republicans. Others saw La Follette, a maverick Republican Senator from Wisconsin, and investigator of the scandal, as a leader of a third-party—a role he opposed.2

By this time, the Farmer-Labor Party (those who did not go with the Workers’ Party) liquidated into the wider bourgeois Progressive movement, losing what specifically working-class character it had in favour of dissident capitalist politics. The FFLP’s few non-Communist supporters soon deserted it, many to the third-party movement developing in anticipation of the 1924 presidential election. Given the political mood of the time, it is unlikely that anything the Communists could have done would have resulted in mass influence, despite Pepper’s grandiose visions.

The FFLP episode demonstrates how far down the opportunist road the Communists had gone under Pepper’s tutelage. It meant disregarding the guiding Marxist principle that support for capitalist politicians (who, by definition, seek to maintain the capitalist system) was a betrayal. It also meant discarding a long left-wing socialist tradition in the US of denouncing Progressivism for merely trying to make capitalism better. (In 1906, even Victor Berger denounced La Follette, his fellow Wisconsinite, for ‘steal[ing] our thunder’ and fighting to ‘preserve the system’). The desertion of right-wing Socialists

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1 Lundberg 1946, p. 171.
2 La Follette and La Follette 1953, II, p. 111.
during the war, and the electoralism of sewer socialists like Berger, had consolidated left-wing disdain for reform-minded capitalist politicians.³

For Pepper, this did not matter. Having already supported the FFLP, with its reformist programme and two-class nature, he predicted opportunities in the La Follette movement. Pepper hailed what he called the ‘La Follette revolution’, comprising ‘elements of the great French Revolution, and the Russian Kerensky Revolution’. He expanded: ‘In its ideology it will have elements of Jeffersonianism, Danish cooperatives, Ku Klux Klan and Bolshevism’ although ‘the proletariat as a class will not play an independent role in this revolution’. He advocated that Communists ‘support the La Follette revolution at the same time criticizing and fighting for a Communist mass party’. Here his creativity in wrapping any policy, no matter how opportunist, in Marxist garb came in handy: he concocted a ‘theory of two splits’: first, the nascent third-party movement would split the petty-bourgeoisie from the big capitalists, and then the Communists would split the proletariat from the petty-bourgeoisie.⁴

La Follette and the ‘Third-Party Alliance’

In December 1923, Pepper put forward a motion at a CEC meeting that committed the FFLP to ‘initiate a campaign to bring about a split of the La Follette forces from the Republican Party’, implying that it would be principled for Marxists to support this capitalist politician if he were not a Republican. A pamphlet by Ruthenberg, The Farmer-Labor United Front, described the farmer-labour movement as an opportunity to build ‘for the first time...a class party on a mass scale fighting against the parties of the capitalist class’. The pamphlet, written in the lead-up to the Minnesota convention in June, asserted that Communists should be politically open. It denounced the third-party movement as representing ‘the class interests of the petty bourgeoisie’. Still, the bottom line was support to the La Follette movement, however couched in Marxist rhetoric.⁵

³ Berger 1913, p. 3. Lovestone’s anti-La Follette pamphlet of 1924 also contains a section on Berger’s attacks on La Follette to attack the SP’s support of his campaign that year.

⁴ Draper 1986, p. 83; Political and Organizational Committee Minutes, 19 September 1923, in Comintern archives, 515:3:397.

⁵ Ruthenberg 1924, pp. 2, 18. The pamphlet is undated, but refers to the July 1923 formation of the FFLP as ‘last year’ (p. 19) and was clearly written before the June 1924 Minnesota FFLP convention.