
The Farmers and the American Revolution.

by John Pepper

Published in *The Daily Worker* [Chicago], v. 1, whole no. 317, (Jan. 19, 1924) section 2, pp. 5-6.

It was a characteristic and interesting scene in our Party Convention [3rd: Dec. 30, 1923-Jan. 2, 1924]. The chairman announced that Joseph Manley would make the report on the agricultural question. Comrade Manley walked up from his place to the front of the hall. He was received by giggles from many delegates. Many comrades — and good comrades and good trade unionists at that — found it funny that Manley, the typical city worker, for 20 years a member of the Structural Iron Workers' Union, should appear before the Convention of the Workers Party to picture the bankruptcy and misery of the farmers, to describe the political revolt of the modern American "peasants."

The giggling comrades could not understand the fundamentally revolutionary significance of the fact of a city worker, a typical trade unionist, appearing as an ardent advocate of the idea of the solidarity of workers and farmers and of the revolutionary resolution of the Central Executive Committee on agriculture, as a fervent exponent of the idea that the Communists shall attempt to assume leadership of the rebellious farmers.

Not a Temporary Bankruptcy.

Our Party must understand that the most important revolutionary fact of our last Party Convention was our stand on the agricultural crisis in the United States and our bold attempt to place ourselves at the head of the farmers' revolt.

I know there is a big opposition in our Party

to that idea. Many comrades think that we over-emphasized the importance of the farmers, that through our agricultural work we divert precious forces from the work in the labor movement, in the trade unions, or from direct Communist propaganda. Many comrades maintain the opinion that the farmers are a born counterrevolutionary class, inseparably bound to private property, and that therefore, an alliance between Communists and farmers will only soil our revolutionary virginity. Many comrades think that the bankruptcy of the farmers is something temporary. They say that one or two good crops, and the farmers who are discontented today will be again conservative citizens.

We must state emphatically that these comrades do not understand how to analyze the most elemental facts of American social and political life. The bankruptcy of the farmers is not something temporary. The last crop was one of the best in the history of the United States. The deepest cause of the bankruptcy of the farmers is the unbridgeable internal conflicts of capitalism itself. The final, the imperialist, phase of capitalism has created, through the trusts, an absolute monopoly on industrial products. The farmers must pay for industrial products the prices dictated to them by the trusts, and they are forced to sell their products at less than the cost of production. And ruling capitalism has no remedy for the farmers. President Coolidge declared that the farmers must help themselves. At the same time, the government power, which is in the hands of the trusts, con-

centrates its gigantic and ever growing force for the deliberate ruination of millions of farmers.

The Chinese Wall of the Fordney-McCumber tariff excludes the cheap industrial products of foreign countries and renders the monopoly of the trusts impenetrable.

The Department of Agriculture reported that no less than 30 percent of the farmers' income goes for taxes.

Secretary of Agriculture [Henry] Wallace reported that "Investigation has disclosed that, of the owner-farmers in 15 corn and wheat-producing states, on an average over 5 percent had lost their farms through foreclosure or bankruptcy, while nearly 4 percent had turned over their farms to creditors without legal process, making a total of about 8-1/2 percent., In addition, more than 15 percent were in fact bankrupt, but were holding on through the leniency of their creditors."

The government itself has to admit that not less than 23-1/2 percent of the owner-farmers are bankrupt.

In 1922 no less than 2 million farmers and their families left the farms. In 1923 it is estimated that not less than 3 million farmers and their families were forced to abandon their land. And millions more are only tolerated by the mortgage-holding bankers because the bankers can do nothing with the land, because the cultivation of the land by farm-laborers would cost more than the products which can be produced.

At the same time that the owner-farmers are being ruined by the millions, the trend to tenancy is dangerously and rapidly growing.

A Part of the World Crisis.

We see before us the madness of capitalism grown to imperialism in its final development. Great Britain and Germany are faced with the problem of reducing their industrial working class by many millions. Unemployment as a mass phenomenon is menacing them ever more. There is

no hope for selling industrial products to an impoverished world, and there is no hope, therefore, of feeding the British and German industrial population. And at the same time there is the enormous agricultural crisis in the United States. Millions of farmers are unemployed, the acreage of cultivated land is shrinking more and more, simply because the farmers cannot sell their products at such prices as will make it possible for them at least to receive wages for their labor. We must understand that the reduction of the farming class in the United States is one side of that same process, the other side of which is the reduction of the industrial working class in Great Britain and Germany.

Many comrades do not realize the tremendous revolutionary significance of the agricultural crisis in the United States. Many comrades see only the proud industrial structure of the trusts, the lofty financial edifice of the banks, and they think that American capitalism is basically sound and does not feel a particle of the convulsion caused by the World War.

The world crisis of capitalism does not follow a fixed pattern. It started on the industrial side in Germany and Great Britain, but it attacks the agricultural side in the United States. The capitalists themselves, although they try to hide the crisis, see much more clearly than do many Communists. Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, in a speech recently made before a meeting of the Farm Economic Association, said:

"Now the need is not for greater production, but for a better adjusted production, and to some extent, for a reduced production. That is a very difficult matter. The plowing up of meadows and pastures and seeding grain fields back into grass is not so easy."

Capitalism has only one remedy for the agricultural crisis: reduction of the acreage of cultivated land, return to more primitive modes of production, and driving the farmers by the millions off the land. And the capitalists see — what cer-

tain Communists fail to see — that under the rule of capitalism and capitalist government the bankruptcy and misery of the farmers as a mass phenomenon is inevitable. Secretary of Agriculture Wallace said:

“It will be conceded that the unrestricted operation of economic laws in course of time will bring about better material conditions for those who farm. These laws are at work. They are driving people from the farms and will continue to do so until farm production is reduced to a point where the demand for food will compel a fair price. They are transferring the land from those who farm it to those who do not, increasing the number of non-resident landowners and the attending evils. They are compelling those farmers who manage to hold on to follow methods of farming which deplete the fertility of the soil and permit their buildings, fences, and the productive plant to deteriorate at a rapid rate, thus using up capital investment. They are reducing the standard of living in the farm home, compelling hard labor by the farm mother, depriving the farm children of their rightful opportunities and creating in them a hatred for farm life, which will lead them to leave the farm at the first opportunity. The free operation of economic laws is working all these evils, and more.”

The representative of the capitalist government of the United States admits the complete bankruptcy of the government and of the present economic system in solving the present agricultural crisis. The spokesmen of the government admits that the economic laws of capitalism drive the farmers inevitably into bankruptcy, that they lower the standard of living of the farmers to that of the Russian peasants of the Tsarist times, and lead to inevitable and complete expropriation of the farming masses. A process of the greatest historical import is taking place before our eyes. A process which finds its counterpart only in the “Bauernlegen” in Germany after the Thirty Years’ War and the mass expropriation of farmers in Great Britain through the then new and ruthless capitalism.

Many comrades have accused me of exag-

gerating, not only the revolutionary importance of the farmers, but the significance and tempo of the agricultural crisis. But the picture which Secretary Wallace gives of the effect of the economic laws of capitalism bears out the analysis of the Central Executive [Committee of the WPA] and political situation of the United States, and the analysis of the agricultural resolution adopted by our last Convention.

On the contrary, if we make a mistake, it is in not emphasizing enough our agricultural work, and the revolutionary import of the farming crisis. We must understand that the economic bankruptcy of the farmers goes so rapidly forward that our work among the farmers cannot keep pace with it. And we must understand further that the political revolt of the farmers into the various Third Party and Labor Party movements represents nothing else than the political expression of this terrible bankruptcy and misery. When, under these circumstances, comrades persist in declaring that we must sit comfortably with our dogmas, which prescribe (as they imagine) that the crisis of the industrial side of imperialism must come first, without seeing the existing agricultural crisis, it shows that these comrades do not understand the most elementary duty of revolutionary Marxism, namely, to analyze, and reckon with, facts as they are.

The Farmers and the Proletarian Revolution.

We can arrive at the correct estimation of the importance of the farmers for the communist movement only if we connect it with the question of the seizure of power by the working class. We must understand that as long as the capitalist class can maintain political leadership over the farmers, the working class has no possibility or even hope of coming into power.

†- These 17 language groups of the WPA were: Czechoslovak, English, Estonian, Finnish, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Jewish, Latvian (“Lettish”), Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Scandinavian, South Slavic (Slovenian and Croatian), Ukrainian.

This is true for every country, but especially for the United States. We should not forget that the United States is not as thoroughly industrialized as Germany or Great Britain. Industry in the United States is the most highly centralized and concentrated in the world, but it covers only certain parts of our country. The United States is at the same time the greatest agricultural country of the world. The United States has a tremendous agricultural population. In this respect our country resembles Russia more than it does Great Britain, which has no agricultural population to speak of. And we ought to bear in mind that the overwhelming majority of industrial workers in our country are foreign-born, who, just because they are foreign-born are greatly handicapped in their role of a political factor. The Workers Party, as a faithful mirror of the composition of the American working class, with its 25,000 members would play a 17-fold greater political role if it had not contained by necessity 17 foreign language federations.† The bulk of the native-born workers are skilled workers and foremen, and belong to the labor aristocracy. It is of vital interest to our party to win over and influence as great a mass as possible of native-born English-speaking workers. But it is highly improbable that we can win over in the near future the majority of this labor aristocracy corrupted by imperialism. The farmers as a class present a different picture than the working class. We have many foreign-born farmers, especially Germans and Scandinavians, but the bulk of the farmers are native-born Americans.

A revolutionary movement in the United States, which embraces only the foreign-born proletarian workers of the basic industries and only a narrow stratum of the native-born workers, has no real hope of gaining power without the support of the millions of native-born, working farmers. Nor should we forget this fact, that in no country (with the exception of Russia) have the farmers such an old political tradition, or have made so many attempts at political upheaval against

capitalist leadership (Greenback Party, Populist Party, Non-Partisan League) as in the United States. It is an uncontested fact that (with the exception of Russia) in no other country is there such an old and deep-rooted tradition of political cooperation between farmers and city workers as in the United States. It would be political blindness not to see the gigantic importance of the fact that all these numerous Farmer-Labor Parties, spontaneously sprung up, are everywhere the expression of a political alliance between city workers and farmers.

Guild Interests or Revolution?

It is not revolutionary Marxism, but on the contrary, a caricature of Marxism for Communists to reject the alliance with the farmers in the name of proletarian purity. Marxism does not mean the representation of the interests of the working class narrowed to a guild basis. It means the representation of the general interests of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. We Communists must conduct all our campaigns and actions in such a way as not to lose sight of the proletarian revolution for a moment, whether the revolution be near or far off. In America we are not at the threshold of a proletarian revolution. But we stand at the threshold of one of the deepest social and political crises of our country. In this crisis our greatest tasks are to develop a communist mass party of industrial workers and to win the confidence of the masses of working farmers. In other words, during the present crisis and through the present crisis we must forthwith lay down the foundation for the proletarian revolution which sooner or later will come and must come.

In the correct estimation of the work among the farmers, the Workers Party has played the role of pioneer in the whole Communist International. We can be proud that our young, and in many respects imperfect, party was the first in the whole Communist International which grasped the great

lessons of the Russian Revolution and the deepest sense of Marxian Leninism (expressed in the writings of Lenin, Zinoviev, Radek, and Bukharin).

Many comrades say that the alliance with the farmers is well enough for Russia and that it is perhaps correct as a policy for certain European countries, but it is not right and timely for the United States.

The Communist International has a different opinion. We wish to quote here Zinoviev's article which was written for our *Daily Worker*, and in which the chairman of the Communist International approves fully the pioneer work of the Workers Party of America on the agricultural field:

"It is quite natural that the American Communists have concentrated their activities above all in the working class, in its trade unions. From here only was it possible to begin the work of the revolutionary enlightenment of the American proletariat, and the rallying of it under the standard of Communism. Those successes which the American Communist have had hitherto in the American labor movement (the uniting of the left wing) in no way can be called little. But it is yet more important that the American Communists are able alone among the first to raise and bring forward the question of work among the small farmers. This fact best of all testifies to the great vitality of American Communism.

Whoever desires to aid the Communist Party to become, not a guild organization, defending only the narrow class interests of the proletariat, but a party of proletarian revolution, of socialist upheaval, of the hegemony of the proletariat, such a person must, after having established a workers' party, direct its attention also to the conquest of the peasantry.

In this respect the American Communists first felt out the new path. The American Communists have

helped to found the Federated Farmer-Labor Party (preserving, to be sure, their communist, proletarian party as an independent organization). Not everywhere and not always will precisely this form prove the most suitable. But in any case the experiment initiated in this respect in America deserves serious study by an assiduous attention from the whole international communist movement.

The failure to appreciate properly the role of the peasantry is the fundamental original sin of International Menshevism. The essence of Bolshevism consists just in this, that it has clothed in flesh and blood the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, that it has begun to transform into actuality the hegemony of the proletariat in the revolution; and precisely for that reason it seeks an ally in the person of the indigent peasantry (in America, small farmers), which with correct tactics on our part will aid the proletariat to fulfill its historical mission." †

Zinoviev says that the Workers Party of America was the first which felt out the new path leading to the alliance with the farmers. Zinoviev says that the rejection of the alliance of communists with farmers is the original sin of international Menshevism. The alliance with the farmers is not opportunism, but on the contrary is the real revolutionary Leninism. The position against alliance with the farmer means that we conceive our role to be as a steady opposition within the capitalist order, and it means that we do not consider seriously our role in overthrowing the capitalist order. The rejection of the alliance with the farmer means (unconsciously and unwillingly) the maintenance of the dogmatic revolutionary phrase, but the practical abandonment of revolutionary realism.

†- Zinoviev's letter to the American Party was not published in *The Daily Worker* until the subsequent issue, dated Jan. 21, 1924, pp. 1, 6. It was previously placed into the Congressional Record "in garbled form" by Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, head of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, according to a *Daily Worker* editorialist.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Free reproduction permitted.