
The FLP Convention

[events of July 3-6, 1923]

by Robert M. Buck

Editorial in *The New Majority* [Chicago], v. 10, no. 3 (July 21, 1923), pp. 4-5.

Certain questions were asked during the recent national convention and conference of the Farmer-Labor Party [July 3-5; 6, 1923] and they are heard yet on the lips of folks who were not there and who did not, therefore, hear the speeches in reply thereto. These questions may be summarized as follows:

Why was the conference called? Why did not the Farmer-Labor Party present a program, instead of letting the Workers Party be the only one to place a proposal before the conference? What is the status and condition of the Farmer-Labor Party now, since the creation of another party by the Workers Party delegates to the conference and the attempt in connection therewith to steal the name of the Farmer-Labor Party?

The recent conference was not the first stormy session through which the Farmer-Labor Party has passed with contending groups and in which it has steadfastly refused to be stampeded, standing fast by its principles and emerging unbowed of head and unbroken of ranks or spirit. The Farmer-Labor Party today stands in a more favorable position to perform its mission as a vehicle for the development of independent political action by the workers through a party of their own, than it did before the conference.

Ever since it started, 4 years ago, under the name Labor Party, the Farmer-Labor Party has encountered an insistent demand on the part of men and women of labor and of the farms, for unity of working class political action. Without reference to the practical possibilities of the situation, speakers and organizers on the road have been met with the repeated questions: Why do you not get together with the other parties representing labor? There are too many workers' tickets in the field at each election; how can we

win? Letters on this theme pour constantly into the National Office of the Farmer-Labor Party.

From the very start the leaders of the Farmer-Labor Party have expressed sympathy with this desire for unity. Indeed, at the very first national convention of the party [Chicago: Nov. 22-25, 1919], the constitution was so worded as to permit, when the time should arrive, of affiliation of other political groups with the Farmer-Labor Party on a basis of autonomy, somewhat after the fashion of the British Labour Party, and the door of the Farmer-Labor Party has always been open to such political groups as can subscribe to its policies and program.

But many of the men and women active in the affairs of the party felt that the time for uniting with other groups had not arrived. Of all the working class parties, the Farmer-Labor Party is the only one that accepts affiliations from labor unions and farmer groups on a per capita basis, that being the backbone of the party rather than a dues-paying membership, although the Farmer-Labor Party has individual dues-paying members also. This fact emphasizes the necessity for the party accepting as its central tactic the laying of its foundations deep in the unions and the organized farmer groups. Hence it became early apparent and increasingly apparent from time to time that the prime necessity was to build up substantial support from these sources and to make nothing to alienate that support or make it too difficult to obtain.

This led to the conclusion that the Farmer-Labor Party should not amalgamate, or federate, or unite with other groups having a definite and different philosophy than its own, until such time as it, the central organization, the Farmer-Labor Party, should have worked up substantial strength of its own; until it

should be standing staunchly on its own two legs (the unions and the farm organizations) too obviously solid to be shoved over and off its feet by contending groups coming in to affiliate. When it should have achieved such a state of growth that it could command the confidence of labor and farmers in its ability to stand its own ground and accept affiliations of other groups without permitting them to divert it from its purposes, then, and only then, would the time be ripe for affiliation with other parties.

But notwithstanding this opinion of many of its active workers, in 1920 there arose such a clamor for amalgamation with certain liberal groups, centered around the Committee of 48, that the party managers had to give in and, at a National Convention [Chicago: July 11-14, 1920], try to find a common ground with the Committee of 48 and effect union with them.

At that time, as in the case of the conference just ended, there were some who objected to the experiment being made. There were some with so little faith in the destiny of the party and its stability and stamina that they started a small-sized panic lest the party should be gobbled up by the liberals grouped around the Committee of 48. Nevertheless the convention proceeded and our party maintained its integrity and came out untouched and unscathed, having proven by the only possible process in dealing with group opinions of men and organizations accustomed to stand by their opinions, namely, by physical demonstration, that the amalgamation of the labor-farmer folks and the liberals was not possible.

That experiment concluded, there still arose the clamor for amalgamation. If the Farmer-Labor Party couldn't unite with liberals, it ought to find somebody else to unite with. Then along came the Conference for Progressive Political Action. Many of our people were skeptical about that, but it was necessary to go through with that effort also, and give it every opportunity to develop and succeed. And when it not only proved to be a non-partisan affair, dual to the AF of L non-partisan political program, but actually defeated

a resolution merely approving of the principle of independent political action and then adopted a constitution which bound affiliated organizations to try old party methods in their local political situations before undertaking independent political efforts; then the Farmer-Labor Party bowed itself out of there, having demonstrated by ocular proof again, that it could not amalgamate with an unlike body — a body unlike in principle, program, and method.

Still came the clamor for united action. Heretofore the clamor had been for union with groups to the right of the Farmer-Labor Party. But with them disposed of, the new clamor was for union with groups to the left. The opinion of many of those active in the party's affairs was still the same; that the time was not ripe. But again, a demonstration was necessary. Groups from the left were clamoring for cooperation. There were no more arguments that were potent to explain to the bystanders in both groups and elsewhere that the desired cooperation was impracticable. Again there had to be a laboratory experiment to demonstrate whether or not it could be done.

That was why the conference was called. The men who believed that the time will not have come for amalgamation until the Farmer-Labor Party shall have built its own strength up so that it can meet all comers, gave way and submerged their own opinions and undertook to make a sincere and earnest effort to find a common meeting ground with Socialist Party and Workers Party groups.

Even before the conference was convened it was demonstrated that there is no present chance for unity between the Socialist Party and the Farmer-Labor Party, for the Socialist Party would not even send a fraternal delegate to sit and discuss with us the problem with which we were coping. Manifestly they were not ready for unity except with themselves.†

Hence the conference came to be a test of the good faith and the behavior of the remaining major group of those invited — the Workers Party.‡ And be it known that the Farmer-Labor Party is the only group

†- This misstates the Socialist perspective slightly. The Socialists were not willing to risk further marginalization of the SPA organization by subsuming itself in a skeleton Farmer-Labor Party without first gaining the active participation of the American trade union movement on a broad scale. Seeing no trend in that direction from the AF of L unions in 1923, the SPA opted out of the Farmer-Labor Party's July conclave, instead choosing to remain within the Conference for Progressive Political Action to work for this end.

‡- The Socialist Labor Party was also invited and declined. The Proletarian Party of America was invited and attended.

in the country that has shown the courage to invite the communists of the Workers Party to sit in conference.

The Farmer-Labor Party was so earnest in its desire that the conference should be an attempted meeting of the minds of the groups therein that it deliberately refrained, and so announced, from trying to program it in the slightest particular in advance.† It deliberately refrained from trying to organize the conference in any particular way. The Farmer-Labor Party behaved itself as a hospitable and courteous host and went in with no stacked decks in its pockets, no dirks up its sleeves, no guns on its hips. The National Committee of the Farmer-Labor Party did write down a proposal it hoped the conference would adopt. It was the purpose to submit that with the proposals from other groups to the committees of the conference at the proper time, for round-table discussion. And repeatedly, over and over again, while the work of sending out credentials and other preliminary tasks were proceeding, the officers of the Farmer-Labor Party said to the invited groups: “No delegation is bound to anything. We will talk and find, if we can, a plan for the delegates to take back to submit to their respective constituencies.”

Reports came into the party headquarters that the Workers Party was packing the conference with delegates from trade unions in which they had enough members to have their own people named as delegates. We said: “It doesn’t make any difference. If they want to pack it, if they want to behave that way, let them. We don’t have to do what they propose unless we want to.”

They were distinctly and definitely on a test of their behavior. The conference was their opportunity to see if they were folks other folks could work with.

They were not such folks. They did pack the conference. They were unruly guests. They started right off the bat to tell their hosts what they should do and how to do it. They came in, not only with a program,

there was no harm in that, but with a program in conflict with the invitation, and with the spirit of the meeting.‡

Instead of a program for a plan to be carried back by the delegates to their several constituents, it was a plan for immediate organization, including the election of a new National Executive Committee, not in the future, but by that conference, then and there, which they had packed and which they controlled.

Instead of a plan to be submitted to the committees of the conference, it was a plan adopted with a rush and imposed upon the committees as instructions what kind of reports they should make back to the conference.

The guests had failed to behave themselves. They had demonstrated that they were not the kind of folks other kinds of folks could live with in peace and harmony. But more important than that, they had demonstrated that they hadn’t the slightest conception of the principle of human conduct that requires deliberation and care in bringing strange groups together and trying to make teammates of them. Confidence cannot be established with a sledgehammer, a battering ram, or a pile-driver. If they could not cooperate to make an easy approach to a sympathetic group, how could they be expected to permit any federation they were in to make the human kind rather than the bigot-zealot kind of an approach to unions and farmer groups? And the job of developing independent political action in the labor movement can only be accomplished by the human approach in this country and at this time.

The guests having made that demonstration, it was idle for the Farmer-Labor Party to present the mild, good-mannered program its National Committee had prepared. It would have lasted about 3 seconds in the roughhouse. It would have been used by the dominant group in the conference only for their own tactical advantage and, since it was obvious from their conduct that they could not be treated with, it was useless

†- Rather, the Farmer-Labor Party seems to have automatically assumed that its program and its constitution would be continued forward in the “new” federated organization and to have been oblivious to the possibility that an organized caucus would exert its own hegemony in opposition to the hegemony of the FLP.

‡- The “spirit of the meeting” being, from the FLP’s position, to see whether the FLP’s constitution and program might be mildly tweaked to allow other political organizations federative membership in the standing FLP organization. Instead the Workers Party caucus — tightly organized, but no big majority of those gathered — pushed for the establishment of a wholly new organization, effectively marginalizing the FLP leadership and overemphasizing the WPA’s position in the new organizational apparatus.

and even dangerous to offer a basis of treating.†

In this way, a third time, the judgment of those who have continually held that the party must build itself into a position of self-reliant strength before the time will have come for amalgamation was confirmed and again physical demonstration proved that policy to be sound. Nothing plus nothing plus nothing equals nothing. For the Socialist Party, the Workers Party, and the Farmer-Labor Party to combine would yield nothing stronger than any one of the three alone. And it seems obvious that, if the unions will not interest themselves in the propaganda of the parties to the left of the Farmer-Labor Party, it would endanger the chances of their listening to the Farmer-Labor Party, if that party had associated with it the parties in question. This is the case and will continue to be the case until the Farmer-Labor Party is sufficiently organized to inspire confidence that from its very size alone it cannot be dominated by either Left groups or Right groups. When that time comes it can take any political group into affiliation without losing its opportunity to do its appointed work.

Therefore the Farmer-Labor Party, in its own convention, repudiated the runaway actions of its rowdy guests and went on its way as before. Of course the Workers Party has created a temporary confusion in stealing the name of the Farmer-Labor Party for its latest camouflage, calling itself the Federated Farmer-Labor Party, but that is a passing phase. The big thing is that the air is cleared. It has been actually demonstrated that the Farmer-Labor Party can withstand assaults from the Right and from the Left and maintain itself and not be stampeded into doing what it doesn't want to do. It now faces its greatest opportunity. It now stands forth with more potential strength than

ever, having leaped all hurdles and with a clear track before it. It remains now only to go on and take advantage of the renewed confidence that now may be reported in it and organize labor and farmer support. Its position is now clearly defined and its integrity is established.

It only remains to review the defections from our party's ranks to the new aspect of the Workers Party, namely, the Federated Farmer-Labor Party, and two certain policies of the Farmer-Labor Party and their usefulness in this situation.

The Farmer-Labor Party has lost only one branch, if it lost that. That is the Washington state branch. Delegates [John] Kennedy and [William] Bouck, representing that state, went over to the new party. They were confident that their group would follow them, and perhaps it will. But the other dozen or so of delegates who left the Farmer-Labor Party convention for the new party represented only themselves.

Two policies have marked the Farmer-Labor Party tactics from the very start. The first of these is that the party scrupulously refrains from trying to dictate to the unions as to how they should run themselves. The Farmer-Labor Party has no theories for the conduct of the labor movement, nor any criticisms to make of the conduct of unions or union personnel. It is concerned only with the politics of labor.

The other is that the party has always stubbornly refused to fight with other working class parties or groups. It fights only one enemy — the common enemy of the workers. It has no time nor inclination for red-baiting. It has no abuse to heap on revolutionaries. It has a constructive job to do. It has leaped another hurdle that was in the way of that job. It is in the clear. It is on its way. Let's go.

†- So much for organizational "courage" of the FLP, which Buck boasted of earlier. Its vision for the result of the gathering short-circuited, facing hegemony of another organization in place of its own, it counted votes and bolted without even presenting its program as an alternative.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.