

The Farmer-Labor-Communist Party

AT first sight the Farmer-Labor-Communist Convention at St. Paul looked like a revival of a well-known melodrama with the original cast. There was the Farmer-Labor hero, long politically childless, who is convinced by all the omens that he is at last to become the father of a little political party of his own; and there was the Communist villain ready to steal the child at birth, leaving the heart-broken father to rush out into the dark. The lines were familiar, and there were many of them, for the lack of action during the first acts threw the pay black upon rhetoric. The tirade was much employed. The supporting cast included the old favorites, but there was a new figure in the stellar rôle, William Mahoney of the Executive Committee of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party which had called the convention.

Perhaps one reason why the play had a new and unfamiliar ending was that the critics of the press so confidently predicted the old catastrophe that the cast was ashamed to go through with it. Certainly the appearance of the St. Paul Daily News at noon on the second day, with its scare headlines predicting a split, was the cue for speeches of reconciliation. Mr. Mahoney promptly repudiated the threat to bolt with which he was credited, and Mr. Foster disclaimed for the Communists any threat of control. "We understand that to appeal to the country with any chance of success this cannot be a Communist movement," he said. "We do not expect a Communist party or a Communist platform to come out of this convention." The chief factors in imposing a new ending on the drama, however, were Mr. Mahoney's refusal to repeat the lines of excommunication of the Communists written by Mr. Gompers for John Fitzpatrick last year at Chicago, and Mr. Foster's sweet reasonableness in sacrificing form for substance. The convention ended with Communist and Farmer-Labor bending with equal pride and solicitude over the cradle of the infant. The melodrama has become a pastoral—if only the child lives.

The St. Paul convention was projected by the Farmer-Labor party of Minnesota which, with two United States senators to its credit, fairly takes priority among state third parties. It was called last autumn for May 30; but at a conference in March the date was shifted to June 17 to avoid embarrassing Senator La Follette's position at the Republican Convention. It had, like all third party movements, the initial object of uniting the various political fragments, bearing different names in different states, which represent the protest against the old parties. It was originally successful in obtaining a wide degree of coöperation, extending from the Committee of Forty-Eight to the Communists.

It had a rival in the Conference for Progressive Political Action, which under the leadership of President W. H. Johnston of the machinists and the heads of the railroad brotherhoods was scheduled to meet at Cleveland on July 4. The inclusion of the Communists became a ground of opposition to the St. Paul meeting, and under the attacks of the leaders of organized labor and later of Senator La Follette many groups withdrew from participation. Nevertheless, over five hundred delegates assembled on June 17, representing the Farmer-Labor parties of Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana and Washington, the Non-Partisan League of North Dakota, the Progressive party of Nebraska, the new Labor party of Illinois, the Federated Farmer-Labor party, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the United Mine Workers, and many scattered groups among which one caught the names of the Red Eye Farmers' Club, the Ladies' Shelley Society and the Negro Tenants' Protective Association.

There were two rival programs before the gathering. That of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor representatives called for the postponement of the formation of a national party until after the present Presidential campaign, and meanwhile the encouragement of action by state parties. Other groups favored the formation of a national party out of hand. It was this question which was bitterly fought out in committee between Mahoney and Foster. Mahoney had to conserve the interests of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party in the coming campaign, and avoid, so far as possible, offering any embarrassment to the prospective candidacy of Senator La Follette. He was for postponement of complete organization. On the other hand, Foster had to consolidate the position of the Communists within the party. He was naturally fearful that after the campaign was over Farmer-Labor would follow the advice of Gompers and La Follette and cast him and his followers out. He was for immediate and complete organization. Mahoney was in a strong position with regard to the Communists, whose chief aim was to remain in contact with the progressive movement and who would have been discredited by a bolt of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party; he was in an exceedingly weak position with regard to his own supporters, owing to the repudiation of the convention by Senator La Follette. In the end, the committee on organization reported what was in form a compromise, providing for the appointment of a national committee to serve through the present campaign with power to replace or withdraw candidates, and to negotiate for combination with other progressive groups. Both in this committee and at the convention to be held

after election, affiliated national political bodies are to be represented, which means the Workers' party. Duncan McDonald of Illinois was nominated for President, and William Bouck of Washington for Vice-President.

The Farmer-Labor party has no reason to apologize for its leading candidate. Duncan McDonald has served the United Mine Workers of Illinois in various capacities, including the presidency, and has also been president of the Illinois Federation of Labor. He is able, a student of industrial and political affairs, a man of large views and of fine presence, an admirable speaker. He suggests the English and continental type of labor leader, Keir Hardie, or Jean Longuet, rather than the machine political type—the Gomperses, Faringtons and Wolls by whom he has been superseded in the American labor movement. It is well understood that Mr. McDonald stands ready to withdraw in favor of Senator La Follette, if co-operation with the Conference for Progressive Political Action can be arranged at Cleveland.

It must not be supposed that the Communists were the only group at St. Paul demanding the immediate formation of a national party. The farmers of the Northwest, in their helplessness and misery, feel their dependence on some form of organization. They have had an example of what can be accomplished socially as well as politically in the Non-Partisan League. The farmers have acquired the habit of looking on their political party as an educational and social centre, and to their party headquarters for advice and help in all sorts of trouble. An independent candidacy does not offer them the same sense of security. And let no one believe that there is any lack of trouble and misery among the farmers of the Northwest. One heard at St. Paul of a sheriff setting out from Green Bay, Wisconsin, to serve six foreclosure notices in one morning; of a farm in Minnesota worth \$40,000 sacrificed on a mortgage of \$5,000, by a family which has owned it for two generations; of a three weeks' trip through South Dakota in ramshackle cars, not one of which boasted a top or a windshield. Unemployment in the industrial centres is tragic enough, but it has alleviations which are absent in the case of a family with nine children evicted from their farm and adrift on the countryside. It is this condition which is responsible for the recruits to the Communists among the farmers. Combated by the trade union organizations, the Communists have apparently made no great progress among industrial workers. The American labor movement is not revolutionary. How long this can be asserted of the farmers of the Northwest is, it must be admitted, a question.

The chief question in the background of the St. Paul convention, and perhaps its chief significance, concerns the relation of the Communists to progressive groups, and the possibility of joint political action in the future. This is a practical matter. On

the one hand the position of the Communists is fairly obvious. It is clear that they must preserve the integrity of their organization. It is clear that they desire affiliation with other disaffected groups because they find in them their richest field of propaganda and proselyting. If the Farmer-Labor interests are united enough and clever enough to use the Communists as the Communists will certainly use them, a working agreement is possible. If the advantage is entirely on one side no combination can be of long duration. It is entirely open to Farmer-Labor groups to decide that owing to differences in political philosophy or in view of the odium attaching to the Moscow connection no association with the Communist or Workers' party is politically feasible. It is open to such groups to decide that, owing to their lack of ability, organization and leadership, any traffic between them and the Communists must redound solely to the advantage of the latter, and is therefore politically inexpedient. But the idea that the Communists can be induced to put their talent for organization at the disposal of a progressive movement without sharing its control—as one of them put it, to do the kitchen work without being allowed in the parlor—is absurd, and the alternate pursuit of it and repulsion from it makes the Farmer-Labor parties ridiculous. A year ago the Chicago Farmer-Labor party, after defending the right of the Communists in the Conference for Progressive Political Action at Cleveland, invited them to their own convention. Only a few days before the meeting did Mr. Fitzpatrick, President of the Chicago Federation of Labor and chief force in his section of the Farmer-Labor party, discover that he could not jeopardize his standing in the labor movement by association with Communists. Naturally, he cut a pitiable figure at his own convention and the bolt of the Chicago Farmer-Labor party was followed by its death. The Minnesota Farmer-Labor party projected the St. Paul convention on present lines seven months ago. Its late repudiation, vocal by Senator La Follette, tacit by Senators Magnus Johnson and Shipstead, undoubtedly diminished the attendance and the ability of the Farmer-Labor leaders on the ground to deal on anything like equal terms with the Communists. They held a weak hand. Possibly the greatest damage the Communists could have done them would have been to nominate La Follette. That they did not do so may be taken as a sign that they did not seek to sabotage the situation. At all events, the fate of the present new-born party may be expected to settle the question of the political relations of Communism and the Farmer-Labor movement in the United States. If the party dies it will die of that political malady the germs of which the Communists, in spite of their own robust immunity, seem like Typhoid Mary to carry among their associates.

ROBERT MORSS LOVETT.

Laurels for Low-Brows

IT is the low-brows that America is today crowning with laurel. Yesterday the wreaths lay white with dust across the foreheads of the Western Olympians, but the foreheads were high, and it was their very height that demanded the wreath. We visited them: Henry James, MacDowell and Hunt in their chill rows about the library, we bowed before their sparse majesty on the walls of the art museums. But today visiting is out of fashion, and genuflections are reserved for fundamentalists. We admit the barrenness of this ancient homage. We are tired of being told that there are no young Olympians. We resent comparison with Europe where Conrad, Stravinsky and Picasso prove with irritating conviction that the fine arts are not dead. And as our energy will not permit us to remain disgruntled for long, we have stripped the bays from the majestic temples of the great, and crowned the low-brow without apology and without shame.

The low-brow is no novelty. For years he has thriven in happy nakedness among us. In the audience he has screwed up his merriment over the antics of his professional counterpart, Charlie Chaplin, or raised a quizzical grimace at the ironical mastication of Will Rogers. We have low-brow artists and a low-brow public, and both have passed unshadowed by so much as the cornice of an art museum or the portico of a concert hall. But now we have decked them all in green in the name of art, and in that name we are bidden to pause and evaluate. Hitherto we have clapped our abandoned hands on Saturday afternoons at burlesque and vaudeville; now we must take them seriously through the week and tap our typewriter keys to a new jazz rhythm. The necessity for these livelier arts is nothing new; but the time is suddenly ripe to make a virtue of them.

Have they anything to do with art? Are they its bastard children in a parlous age, or its healthy free-born offspring on American soil? Can the relationship be proved legitimate by analysis, or should they be allowed to carouse happily in an underworld of their own? These are questions which impetuously demand an answer. Time will tell, perhaps, but in America we do not wait for time.

Have they anything to do with art? First, for answer, we must investigate art, which takes more space than an essay. To Matthew Arnold, Tolstoy, and the wise teachers of secondary schools, art is obviously great matter, handled by a great method: high seriousness, communicated with complete elucidation. Also it is great in proportion to the greatness of its subject, requiring some such theme as a nation's birth, or the pantheism hidden in a primrose.

To another collection of thinkers, dwelling chiefly in Montparnasse, Greenwich Village and the

salons, art is any matter, however slight, if neatly handled. It may paint a pottery vase or a green pepper, or chant of corsets, covered in patterned chintz. But once admit that time is the only test of art, and it must be further conceded that while a nation never tires of its birthdays nor Spring of its primroses, still life may often seem still-born to the next generation. Peppers go out of style as alligator pears come in, and sonnets to the stays of yesteryear seem hopelessly old-fashioned in a boyshform age. It is the great subjects that last, that have led us to believe that they are great because they last.

The "lively arts," it is inevitable that we pat these lusty striplings on the back with Gilbert Seldes's phrase, are essentially of the moment. It is the very nature of their being. The colyumist is a laureate, writing occasional verse. The comic strip heroes deal in oil and radios as promptly as the progressive retail shop-keeper. Jazz, in its present state, has invoked so few original melodies that to play the jazz of five years ago is to recognize a photograph of the same face before its hopelessly old-fashioned Dutch cut was clipped into the shingle.

If then, we call these lively arts illegitimate, we do not mean that they are outlawed by some national academy. We do not mean that they dwell outside the range of dignified æsthetics, for who shall say where that range lies? We do not call them illegitimate because their subject is necessarily slight, but because, being slight it is also evanescent. They lure and woo their votaries with a new charm for each day of the calendar, but do they wed with them?

Even the slightness of subject matter of the lively arts is a moot question. Their keenest crusader, Mr. Seldes, quotes the eternal triangle featured by Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mice and Offisa Bull Pup in George Herriman's comic strip, as a theme at once lofty and deep. He reminds us of the classic confidence of Bert Savoy's invisible girl friend, "Margie," the high Bacchic humanity of Don Marquis's protagonist, "The Old Soak." But Mr. Seldes lets the cat out of the bag with one admission when he suggests that the ultimate value of one of the lively arts lies not in its subject matter but in the manner with which it is handled. It "pleases the eye, the ear, and the pulse," he writes of a good revue; when very good it "*does this so well that it pleases the mind*" he adds with conciliatory italics.

Once admit that the low-brow arts fall into that category of art which depends on method and manner rather than subject matter, and it must be conceded that their sole claim to art lies in their popular success. This also is suggested by Mr. Seldes's quotation. Popular success becomes the sole cri-