

THE NON-PARTISAN LEAGUE¹

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THE organization of the Non-partisan League of North Dakota was the logical result of the failure of the old political parties to respond to the expressed will of the voters of the state. The chief industry of North Dakota is agriculture. It is one of the greatest wheat producing states of the union. At two state-wide elections the voters by overwhelming majorities had adopted a constitutional amendment preliminary to the enactment of certain measures relating to the marketing of grain. The legislature refused to put it into effect. A large delegation of responsible farmers from all parts of the state went to Bismarck to petition the legislature. It was treated with contempt by Republican and Democratic politicians alike. Then it was that, abandoning hope of relief through the usual party channels, the farmers set about to organize the league.

Knowing the tremendous odds against them, the work was carried on quietly and over 25,000 members had been secured before the strength of the new movement became generally known. A bitter opposition at once developed, but the momentum was too strong and by the time the regular November election of 1916 arrived, the paid membership had mounted to over 40,000 and the league candidates swept the state.

It was a political revolution. Approximately eighty per cent of the electorate voted the league ticket. The league's candidate for governor, Lynn J. Frazier, received 87,665 votes as against a total of 22,966 cast for his two opponents. All other state officers were elected save the state treasurer. Out of 113 members of the lower house of the legislature the league elected 81. North Dakota chooses one-half of the senate at each election, and out of 25 to be selected the league won 18; also the three judges of the supreme court to be chosen in this election.

¹ One of our members who has recently been traveling in the northwest and to whom for that reason we referred Mr. Gilbert's article writes that it is a very interesting article which interprets the league very well from the point of view of a supporter. "Of course," our correspondent says, "the league has its bitter opponents, who would not accept such an interpretation. Possibly you may think it necessary to let one of the more thorough-going and intelligent of these critics have his "say" also in the pages of the NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW. Certainly you could hardly expect to get a better article than the present one from one of the active supporters of the League. Though I think it barely possible that there may be something in some of the criticisms of the League made by its opponents, I am strongly inclined on the whole to be thoroughly sympathetic with the movement. In other words, my present opinion, based on an incomplete acquaintance with the movement, is that it is a genuine and honest socialist farmers' movement, which promises to be beneficial to the country. This does not mean, however, that I approve of all that the League or its leaders have done."

The remarkable independence of the North Dakota voter is shown by the fact that although Mr. Frazier was running on the Republican ticket, having easily captured the primary nomination of that party in June of 1916, President Wilson carried the state.

THE METHOD OF ORGANIZATION

The unusual thing about the Non-partisan League is the method of organization. Three years ago the plan which A. C. Townley and his associates worked out, would have been considered impossible by most students of politics, especially the high dues asked of each farmer who joins. But, favored by the circumstances in North Dakota and pushed with remarkable daring and leadership, this plan proved not only entirely workable, but the only one which could have achieved the primary hope of the North Dakota farmers, the securing of immediate political power in the state. From the first the league has been built on the following principles, each one of which overcomes a difficulty that has hampered if not killed one or more important farmer movements in the past:

1. Only farmers should be admitted to membership.
2. There must be co-operation with labor organizations in politics.
3. There must be efficient, centralized control of the work of organizing.
4. The machinery is to be used only to capture the government, allowing democracy in the government itself.
5. To be successful, the farmers themselves must pay the costs of campaigns and organization.
6. They must have a means of communication among themselves and controlled by themselves, their own press.
7. The league should co-operate with and protect all other co-operative organizations of farmers and city workers.

When a state is organized, the members are brought together in township, county, and state meetings for the purpose of nominating candidates and to consider the detailed program on which these candidates are to go before the people for election. The league dues are now \$8 a year, or \$16 for the two state campaign years. This is the league estimate of the lowest amount on which a successful and rapid campaign can be waged; it includes an allowance for the campaign expenses of the men nominated. No man, therefore, will be kept from running for office on a league nomination on account of expense, and, more important still, no nominee will have to go to interests hostile to the program for financial support. Each member now gets a weekly thirty-two page magazine, *The Non-partisan Leader*, and as the election time approaches a special weekly newspaper covering his state. This press service takes about \$5 of the \$16. The organizers are paid 27½ per cent or \$4.40 per member, the very least for which men can be obtained to do the work properly. Out of this each organizer must pay his expenses, including

the purchase and upkeep of an automobile, usually a Ford, and the day wages of a hired man to take the place of a farmer who goes along to introduce the organizer. Deducting these two sums, we have \$6.60 left to cover expenses of central and state offices, a large staff of lecturers, special publicity, delegations and conventions, and the candidates for election.

THE LEAGUE PROGRAM

The league program differs somewhat in the several states because the problems to be remedied by political action differ; but with the exception of the tonnage tax on iron ore, the following program for Minnesota is typical:

1. Exemption of farm improvements from taxation.
2. Tonnage tax on ore production.
3. Rural credit banks operated at cost.
4. State-owned terminal elevators, warehouses, flour mills, stockyards, packing houses, and cold-storage plants.
5. State hail insurance.
6. A more equitable system of state inspection and grading of grain.
7. Equal taxation of the property of railroads, mines, telegraph, and telephone companies, electric light and power companies, and all other public utility corporations, as compared with that of other property owners.

The most noteworthy feature of the above program is, of course, its demand for a large measure of state ownership. It is the antithesis of Jefferson's "that government is best which governs least"; yet the league claims at least to express the aspirations of the common people for more fundamental democracy. That it can reconcile the motives of Jefferson, the fundamental democrat, however, with integration of state functions is due to the fact that in recent years the people's concept of government has been undergoing a pronounced change. In the early days the only government the people had known was that of the policeman which laid heavy burdens on men's shoulders and exacted a servile obedience. Blackstone, for instance, defined law as being made by superiors for the government of inferiors. The less the inferiors had of this kind of law making and government, the better they liked it, but with long experience in government by the ballot the people are turning to the conception of government as an aid in the struggle for livelihood, a great coöperative machine run by all the people which can be put to other tasks than simply that of policing the population.

STATE OWNERSHIP

Such is the theory back of the league program of state ownership. Until within the last ten years a program of this kind could have been brought to naught by simply calling it socialism. The readiness with

which it is being hailed by the farmers in the northwest, on the other hand, is convincing proof of the point that our people have rapidly changed their conception of the state. Now the dubbing of this program as "socialistic" has practically no influence or weight with the farmer. He has stood for regulation and in his opinion that has failed; he is anxious now to try state ownership. This does not mean that he is converted to communism or sweeping adoption of state socialism, but that he is anxious to have the state take over any common service when such action clearly promises lower costs to the users.

NON-PARTISANISM

The league is non-partisan in the sense that it does not form a part of either the Democratic, Republican, or Socialist party; at the same time it does not set up a separate party of its own as those who attempt to get away from two-party rule in our cities commonly do. The tactics are to get all farmers to vote one way, that this united vote may be used to capture the nominations on one of the established party tickets at the primaries and later to win the election. In North Dakota, for instance, nearly all the nominations were made on the Republican ticket because that state is normally Republican; and because of the 1916 victory, league men now constitute the Republican party there. The united vote can, of course, be used to run a separate ticket whenever it seems practical to do so. The indications are now that the league will run an independent ticket in South Dakota in the fall. Again, the united farmer vote can be used simply to endorse candidates chosen otherwise than by league nomination.

The most frequent criticism of this political method has been that it sets class against class, and the conclusion of the critics naturally follows that class organization is undesirable. The league's answer to this is that men cannot become aware of their own interests without becoming what is called "class conscious," and that the league purpose is not the arraying of the farmers as a class against every other class but the forming of alliances with several other classes into an harmonious whole that constitutes at least nine-tenths of the American people,—especially with city workers and what is known for the want of a better term "as small business." In a democracy where the majority is supposed to rule, a movement cannot be undesirable which promotes the interests of more than nine-tenths of the citizens. Those serious reformers who shy at class consciousness will probably recall many bitterly disappointing instances in which they have had to attribute the defeat of reform to the fact that those who would be benefitted did not know their own interests. Class organization only grows out of the soil of long thought, education, and experience as to what these interests are.

THE LEAGUE AND THE CITY

Being entirely a farmers' movement, the league movement has nothing directly to do with cities. It does not demand exemption of city improvements from taxation, for instance, when it demands the exemption of farm improvements, because that is a city matter. The league plan is to make alliances with any interests in the cities making demands that are corollary to its own. Nevertheless the league offers much promise to the city progressives beyond what this making of alliances might indicate. In nearly every state in the Union a large part, perhaps the most important part, of the city government is at the state capital. By lack of home rule our cities are fettered to the state constitution and the state government so tightly that they cannot secure half the reforms they are prepared for. Heretofore a city, after overcoming the local obstacles to reform, has had to fight a second battle in the state legislature where it met not only the representatives of special privilege, but the rural representative ignorant of city conditions and therefore hostile to city reform. In states where the Non-partisan League succeeds, the city reformer will miss this uniformed, out-of-date rural representative in the legislature, and—probably just as important—the crooked rural legislator, false to the interests of the farmers as well as to those of the city people. The league movement is a great rural education movement. New currents of thought are given expression and scope, and conditions are reviewed by the average voter as never before. The state government will be watched as never before by those whom this new education reaches. No man, with means as small as those of the average farmer, who has paid \$16 to get the right men in office, will fail to watch them closely.

EVERY FARMER A POLITICIAN

One of the elements of strength in the movement and at the same time one of its great contributions to the development of truly democratic government, is the fact that it makes every man who joins a politician, or in other words a citizen actively interested in the affairs of the state. The old parties are organized from the top down with a local leader in each small district to take care of its support there. The average voter is not called upon to do anything but vote. The league, however, calls on the individual voter for an important sacrifice; consequently when he has once jumped in, he becomes an active worker to make his own sacrifice successful. The members, for instance, probably do nearly as much organizing as the paid organizers and lecturers. The fact that there are 40,000 in Minnesota means that the league has 40,000 party workers there. The old parties in so far as they stand for interests opposed to or uninfluenced by this farmers' movement, have nothing to match it. The one has a militant, spirited army; the other has lieutenants, captains and generals with only a small, disinterested following.