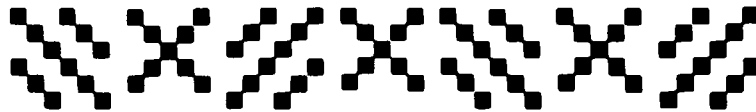


The Automobile Workers Unions and the Fight for Labor Parties in the 1930s

*Hugh T. Lovin**



Despite the New Dealers' innovative social and economic programs during the 1930s, discontented agrarians and labor unionists judged the New Deal's shortcomings so severe that they began to nurture third party movements. Scrappy automobile industry unionists in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana at first ignored the new third party efforts of impatient New Deal critics. Instead, with many other organized and unorganized workers, they expected New Dealers to provide better times after the "lean years" of the 1920s. During the post-World War I decade union rolls had declined, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had lost prestige, and unions had exercised little influence with lawmakers and other elected officials. Consequently, employers easily avoided collective bargaining with unions, strikes often were ineffective, and unionists charged that public officials consistently deployed police forces and the National Guard to tilt the balance in industry's favor during labor-management conflicts.¹

The New Dealers of the 1930s, although clearly pro-labor, failed to effect many of the changes which automobile industry workers anticipated. In response, disgruntled automobile unionists in the Great Lakes states attempted to build labor parties. That they failed to create viable labor parties calls attention to the remarkable resiliency of America's two party system even during the nation's most severe depression. More important, the unionists' failures to establish labor parties reflect the New Deal's hold on so many industrial workers and AFL craft un-

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¹ Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Boston, 1972), 84-90; Robert H. Zieger, *Republicans and Labor, 1919-1929* (Lexington, 1969), 248-77.

ionists that the Democratic party, sometimes by sheer good luck, defused the menace to it from labor party exponents and made allies of such third party crusaders as the automobile unionists in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. Hence, the abortive labor party drives in these three states deserve careful scrutiny for what they reveal about the New Deal's good political fortune and the angry unionists' decisions to become New Deal supporters.

Nationally, the drive for labor parties began in the 1920s, when self-styled "labor progressives" initiated worker education programs designed to remedy labor's escalating ills. Primarily Socialists, a few union leaders, and liberals, these labor progressives founded the Workers' Education Bureau, which the AFL Executive Council also supported until 1928, when this group finally tired of the progressives' industrial union concepts and unconventional political action ideas. Progressives also created several labor colleges, the most ambitious of them Brookwood College at Katonah, New York, which A. J. Muste and his followers established in 1921. Brookwood College, a model for the others, developed a two-year curriculum, published *Labor Age*, distributed printed materials, and conducted institutes on labor issues. Meanwhile, labor progressive orators, labor college teachers, and *Labor Age* writers challenged the AFL's insistence that organized labor strive only for wage increases, improved hours, and better working conditions. Because the most difficult labor problems had developed in industries where craft unions were less practical than industrial unions, the reformers urged the formation of industrial union organizations and "independent political action" by labor.² Most labor progressives believed AFL-organized labor parties were best suited to reaching the latter end. Such parties could tap the political clout of AFL craft unions and command votes in multi-million member industrial unions, elect legislators, and establish labor party governments that would speedily enact needed labor laws and eliminate the misuse of police and military force during labor-management disputes.

Although AFL leaders deplored these ideas, progressives bypassed federation sachems and carried their proposals to local unions, city central and trades councils, and state federations of labor. There progressives won many converts, only to lose some of them when unions such as the United Automobile,

² Bernstein, *Lean Years*, 105-106; James O. Morris, *Conflict Within the AFL: A Study of Craft Versus Industrial Unionism, 1901-1938* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1958), 86-124.

Aircraft and Vehicle Workers of America folded during the 1920s. Meanwhile, progressives and the Socialist party experimented with labor parties in half a dozen cities. By 1932 persevering progressives claimed that their unionist supporters supplied them a solid foothold in the largest mining, garment, and textile industry unions.³

The AFL, still resisting the labor progressives, voiced more convincing arguments against labor parties following the 1932 elections. AFL chiefs insisted that supporting President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal best served all laborers because labor-minded New Dealers in Congress had enacted the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. Section 7A of this law encouraged collective bargaining and speeded union growth, and opportunistic union leaders soon furnished apparent proof of the AFL's contentions about it. John L. Lewis, for instance, took advantage of the New Deal's pro-labor philosophy and laws to expand his miners' union. He dispatched swarms of organizers to the coalfields, where they proclaimed that "President Roosevelt wants you [miners] to join the union." Thousands enrolled.⁴

Unimpressed labor progressives replied with anti-New Deal rhetoric and, fortuitously for them, were able to cite enough industrial evasions of the NIRA to suggest that large numbers of laborers and unions had been deprived of those benefits which the NIRA regulatory system was designed to bestow. Noting instances where employers treated the law as a "scrap of paper," one progressive singled out unscrupulous automobile industrialists for manipulating NIRA codes "every week" to "entrench their company unions" at the expense of independent unions and, consequently, escape meaningful collective bargaining with their workers.⁵ Progressives called for stricter laws guarding against such industrial machinations but added that only labor party officeholders could provide and enforce un-

³ Morris, *Conflict Within the AFL*, 127-31; Vaughn Davis Bornet, *Labor Politics in a Democratic Republic: Moderation, Division, and Disruption in the Presidential Election of 1928* (Washington, D.C., 1964), 243-45, 247-48; Frank Marquart, *An Auto Worker's Journal: The UAW from Crusade to One-Party Union* (University Park, Pa., 1975), 27, 33; David J. Pivar, "The Hosiery Workers and the Philadelphia Third Party Impulse, 1929-1935," *Labor History*, V (Winter, 1964), 18, 19-20, 22-23.

⁴ J.B.S. Hardman, "John L. Lewis, Labor Leader and Man: An Interpretation," *Labor History*, II (Winter, 1961), 18; Saul D. Alinsky, *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York, 1970), 71-72.

⁵ Harvey O'Connor, "Labor, Awake!" *Railway Clerk*, XXXIII (April, 1934), 129, 156-57.

hesitatingly such statutes. Then, to strengthen their labor party appeals, progressives obtained a statement from AFL President William Green holding that no AFL "constitutional prohibition" restrained either the AFL or its member unions from forming "an independent party of labor." With Green's ruling in hand and over his opposition to third parties, progressives again solicited unions for support.⁶

Progressives hoped for favorable responses from automobile workers generally and particularly from members of the United Automobile Workers of America (UAWA). A union whose members were organized along industrial lines in so-called federal labor unions chartered by the AFL, the UAWA had expanded from a handful in 1934 to a claimed 375,000 members in 1937.⁷ It was, therefore, a plum worthy of labor progressives' efforts to pluck. Happily for the progressives, UAWA international union leaders, all AFL appointees who opposed third parties, argued to little avail that the New Deal had truly served labor, such representations having ever less impact on their subordinate union officials and many automobile plant workers.⁸ Some workers expressed outrage that Democrats had failed to make workable the New Deal laws intended to benefit labor; others cynically quipped that NRA really signified the "National Run Around." These workers noted that Henry Ford incurred no penalties when he refused to abide by the NIRA automobile code and that other entrepreneurs simply paid the law lip service while they manipulated it for their own ends. Consequently, company unions proliferated, employers rewarded workers who opposed the UAWA, and industrialists readily avoided collective bargaining.⁹ Then, in 1935, after the

⁶ J.B.S. Hardman, "Is a New Party Possible?" in Alfred M. Bingham and Selden Rodman, eds., *Challenge to the New Deal* (New York, 1934), 273.

⁷ Sidney Fine, "The Origins of the United Automobile Workers, 1933-1935," *Journal of Economic History*, XVIII (September, 1958), 250-53; 275-77; Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 32. The AFL authorized federal labor unions in 1934 for the automobile, cement, and aluminum industries. Organized for assembly line workers, these were industrial-type unions from which traditional AFL craft organizations remained apart. National AFL heads maintained tight reins on the new federal locals by appointing the federal local union leaders.

⁸ For example, see: "President [of Automobile Workers Industrial Association] Appeals for Unity Giving Reasons and Facts," n.d., Richard T. Frankenstein Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit).

⁹ "Ford vs. Blue Eagle: A Nation Uniting for Recovery Waited to Hear From One 'Rugged Individualist,'" *News-Week*, II (September 9, 1933), 3-4; Sidney Fine, *The Automobile under the Blue Eagle: Labor, Management, and the Automobile Manufacturing Code* (Ann Arbor, 1963), 303-304, 306, 345-76.

Supreme Court struck down the NIRA, Congress passed the Wagner Act, which momentarily raised automobile workers' spirits. But the new law, resisted by industry, effected little immediate betterment of workers' lot. Unionists charged that automobile industry executives still sidestepped genuine negotiations with their employees with stratagems running the gamut from bellicose refusal to negotiate to forcing unions to bargain under company-imposed rules which were "incongruous to [real] collective bargaining." In the automobile factories, a union journal complained, the bosses ignored both worker and union protests against the "speed-up" on assembly lines which extracted excessive labor for a day's pay. According to a report prepared in 1936 for Committee for Industrial Organization chiefs, industry not only compelled automobile workers to endure the drudgery wrought by the speed-up and the stretch-out but parlayed its advantages through labor spies who supplied the information necessary to crush all dissent against the prevailing factory practices. A union journal asked: "Spies, company unions, intimidation, discrimination—can the worker say he is free as long as these things are permitted to exist?"¹⁰

At the same time, unionists ascribed pervasive hostility and widespread antilabor acts to state and local governments in the Great Lakes states, where Democrats had held most public offices since 1933. According to these critics Governor William Comstock in Michigan, Ohio's governors George White and (after 1935) Martin Davey, and their Democratic lieutenants not only denied unions a fair hearing during industrial disputes but permitted misuse of the National Guard during such conflicts. The unionists cited incidents such as those at Toledo, where two persons were killed during strife accompanying the Auto-lite strike of 1934. Similarly, unionists charged, many county and municipal officials vented their antagonism toward industrial labor groups. In the eyes of many, Detroit Police Chief Heinrich Pickert best symbolized those local officials—a solid phalanx of them stretching from Flint, Michigan, to Anderson, Indiana, to Toledo and Cleveland—who repeatedly helped industry resist independent unionism in the automobile

¹⁰ J.M. Campbell and Richard T. Frankenstein to Walter Chrysler, March 23, 1935, Frankenstein Papers; Flint (Mich.) *Auto Worker*, November, 1936; William Munger to John Brophy, October 26, 1936, Congress of Industrial Organizations Papers (Catholic University of America Library, Washington, D.C.), hereafter cited as CIO Papers; Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor, 1969), 37-43; the quotation will be found in *United Automobile Worker*, October, 1936.

factories. Backing up the unionists' charges, liberal sympathizers pictured Pickert as "the man who broke the copper strike in northern Michigan" before becoming a Detroit official, and they attributed Pickert's authoritarian and antilabor mentality to his military background and current position of "ranking officer in the National Guard and Reserve Army Corps."¹¹

Frustrated by adversity within the automobile plants, thwarted on picket lines, and critical of New Dealers who had not rigidly enforced the federal labor laws to improve the industrial worker's lot, automobile unionists discussed several proposals for radical political action. Matthew Smith, secretary of the Mechanics Educational Society at Cleveland, urged that unions "establish a free society of the workers' commonwealth."¹² That plan, endorsed by A. J. Muste and his American Workers' party organizers as well as many labor progressives, received a hearing in various labor quarters. In leaflets and industrial shop papers Communists added to the third party clamor by advocating a "Workers and Farmers Labor Party" committed to "political liberation" for both groups.¹³ In turn, several Ohio automobile union leaders publicly boosted for a predominantly labor party. Richard E. Reisinger, an officer in Local Union #32 and president of the Cleveland District Auto Council, argued that labor needed its own political party because Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike practiced duplicity toward labor by enacting only "stop gap" laws that "camouflage[d]" their designs to "pacify and fool the wage earner."¹⁴

When these discussions generated interest, several unions conducted labor party experiments in Ohio. Unionists ran a

¹¹ *Automobile Workers Daily News* (Anderson, Ind.), February 11, 1937; Wyndham Mortimer, *Organize! My Life As a Union Man* (Boston, 1971), 150; *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, May 5, 1934. In Michigan unionists also accused city and county authorities of winking when antilabor organizations such as the Black Legion attacked unionists and destroyed union properties. "Stamp Out the Black Legion," n.d., copy in Adolph Germer Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison); also see Michael S. Clinansmith, "The Black Legion: Hooded Americanism in Michigan," *Michigan History*, LV (Fall, 1971), 256.

¹² *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, January 12, 1935.

¹³ Roy Rosenzweig, "Radicals and the Jobless: The Musteites and the Unemployed Leagues, 1932-1936," *Labor History*, XVI (Winter, 1975), 68; "Vote Communist," n.d., copy in Harvey O'Connor Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); *Spark Plug* (Cleveland), June, 1936, copy in Henry Kraus Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); Bill Gebert, "Organize Rallies for an Anti-Capitalist Labor Party!" *Party Organizer*, VIII (June, 1935), 1-3.

¹⁴ Richard E. Reisinger, "Do We Need a Labor Party?" *United Auto Worker* (Cleveland), October, 1935, p. 2.

candidate for mayor of Columbus in 1935 and created a Lucas County Congress for Political Action that received backing from teacher unionists, railroad brotherhoods, and even the AFL's Toledo Central Labor Union Council. The Lucas County Congress wrote a pro-labor, anti-private utility, soak-the-rich platform and, later in the same year, ran seven candidates for seats on the Toledo City Council and the Board of Education. In the October, 1935, municipal elections, labor's Columbus mayoral candidate polled substantially fewer votes than his two opponents; conversely, the electoral results at Toledo encouraged labor party promoters because four labor nominees won seats, two each on the City Council and the Board of Education.¹⁵

Counting on the political momentum generated at Toledo, union leaders made plans to build a statewide labor party. Several Toledo unions promised their support, and during the next few months the Cleveland District Auto Council and its nine affiliated local unions announced their backing for a labor party. Labor organizations at Girard, Barberton, Akron, and Youngstown also expressed interest in the labor party movement. But insufficient support materialized to warrant additional organizing work. The Ohio State Federation of Labor publicly deprecated these labor party efforts, causing most of its affiliates to cooperate in blocking the third party movement.¹⁶ More crippling to the new movement was the fact that the federation doubtless would obstruct an Ohio labor party as long as the AFL opposed such bodies.

The automobile unionists and their allies, now thwarted in Ohio, promoted their cause in national AFL councils. There they joined a faction—comprised of painters, garmentmakers, teachers, and textile unionists—that had nagged the AFL for a labor party since 1930. Expecting continued resistance from President William Green and the AFL Executive Council, these groups denounced AFL conservatives and devised plans for bypassing Green and the council when the 1935 annual AFL

¹⁵ *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, October 12, 1935, and January 11, 1936. At Columbus, Ohio, the labor candidate ran against the incumbent mayor and a candidate of the Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation, a group that since 1934 had tried to organize an Ohio farmer-labor party. Ohio State Federation of Labor officials backed the incumbent mayor. Herbert Hard to Thomas R. Amlie, September 28, 1935, Thomas R. Amlie Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

¹⁶ *Farmer-Labor Challenge* (Detroit), April, 1936; *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, August 31, 1935; Minutes of Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation Conference (Columbus, Ohio), August 21, 1935, Amlie Papers.

OFFICIAL CONVENTION CALL

Labor Omnia Vincit

*International Union United Automobile
Workers of America*

Convened by Direction
The Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor

in the

JEFFERSON PLAZA GRAND BALL ROOM
320 West Jefferson Boulevard, South Bend, Indiana

April 27th - May 2nd, 1936



Issued by

International Union, United Automobile Workers of America

GENERAL OFFICES:

803-4 Hofmann Building
Detroit, Michigan

**OFFICIAL CALL FOR THE 1936 UAWA CONVENTION, HELD IN
SOUTH BEND**

Courtesy The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs,
Wayne State University.

convention met at Atlantic City. They hoped to persuade the AFL delegates to vote in defiance of their leaders for a labor party. Meanwhile, the Ohio unionists worked feverishly toward securing UAWA endorsement of national- and state-level labor parties. In that way they might enhance significantly the labor progressives' contentions to AFL delegates at Atlantic City that, despite the federation leadership's opposition, each year thousands more workers desired a labor party. But the Ohioans labored in vain, because AFL appointees occupied the principal UAWA international union offices and, their sway momentarily unassailable, blocked the progressives' labor party resolutions when the UAWA national convention met at Detroit in August, 1935.¹⁷

At the AFL's Atlantic City assembly in October, automobile unionists introduced several labor party measures. One championed labor parties on the grounds that the Republican and Democratic parties "function[ed] in the interest of finance capital" and forced unions to "fight not only the employer, but the police, national guard, courts, and all other agencies of a supposed impartial government." The resolution demanded AFL "endorsement" of a labor party composed of "trade unions and working class and farming organizations." A second resolution required the AFL Executive Council to initiate a labor party referendum no later than January 1, 1936.¹⁸ Ultimately the AFL Atlantic City assembly received a total of sixteen third party resolutions. All were rejected, but labor party advocates believed it significant that their proposals received a "strong minority vote." None would accept the views of observers who believed the AFL was still bound inextricably to its "hoary policy of backing whichever [major] party promises the juiciest favors."¹⁹

Meanwhile, labor party activity had spread from Ohio to other Great Lakes states. Labor journals like the Racine (Wisconsin) *Day*, which a UAWA official edited, publicized arguments for labor parties.²⁰ In Michigan automobile union-

¹⁷ *Detroit News*, August 31, 1935; *Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of the International Union, United Automobile Workers of America* (Detroit, 1935), 67, 81. The convention passed a resolution supportive of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

¹⁸ *Report of Proceedings of the Fifty-fifth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor* (Washington, D.C., 1935), 239-40, 290.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 758-59, 776; "Civil War in the A.F. of L.," *New Republic*, LXXXIV (October 30, 1935), 328; "A.F. of L. Meeting Ends in Words, Blows, and Finally Peace," *News-Week*, VII (October 26, 1935), 11.

²⁰ "Biographical Sketch of F.J. Michel," Detroit, UAWA Publicity Department, n.d. (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs).

ists debated the issue more seriously than ever since the Republican administration of Frank Fitzgerald, after replacing the conservative Democratic regime of Governor William Comstock early in 1935, had opposed union-inspired legislation for bettering working conditions in automobile plants. Continued hostility from local governments, too, spurred automobile unionists to think about political unorthodoxy. As a first step in that direction Michigan unionists ran labor tickets for municipal offices at Port Huron, Dearborn, and Hamtramck, and they backed a controversial "United Labor Ticket" for Detroit Common Council seats. Maurice Sugar, a Detroit lawyer whose labor and civil rights cases had insured him notoriety, headed the latter slate.²¹ Similarly, Indiana automobile unionists speculated that a third party might better serve them since Indiana Democrats had treated them so shabbily. By threatening those Democrats who had urban constituencies, the unionists in 1934 had negotiated concessions in return for the unions' "yeoman service" to Democratic candidates running for election that year. But, according to unionists, Governor Paul V. McNutt and most state legislators had since accorded the unions less than "cordial treatment." Furthermore, one unionist accused, politicians of both major parties constantly greeted the UAWA's militancy toward employers with "a cold, hostile attitude of disapproval."²²

When automobile unions became nuclei for labor parties in Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana, labor progressives beamed. Even more encouraging, not only were many individual unionists supportive, but backing was also widely dispersed through local unions and larger automobile district councils such as the Cleveland council. Nevertheless, third party promoters still had to overcome formidable hurdles. The state federations of labor in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana could be expected to obstruct labor parties, for they remained as loyal as ever to the AFL leaders who opposed all third party endeavors. But the worst roadblocks immediately ahead were UAWA international union officers, who stood in the way of shaping the automobile unions

²¹ I.W. Rushkin to Nathan Fine, September 28 and November 8, 1935, Larry Davidow to Fine, November 22, 1935, Amlie Papers; *Farmer-Labor Challenge*, April, 1936; Arthur E. Suffern, "Brewing a Labor Party," *Current History*, XLIV (September, 1936), 37; Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939: A Study of Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh, 1975), 14.

²² "Studebaker Union Notes," March [1936], Kraus Papers; James R. Poland to Adolph J. Fritz, September 17, 1934, UAWA Local #9 Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); James D. Hill, *U.A.W.'s Frontier* (n.p., 1971), 40-41, 68.

into effective third party forces. Already UAWA president Francis Dillon and his handpicked subordinates had threatened to array the prestige, power, and finances of the international union against all progressive proposals for change, including new labor parties.²³

Fortuitously for labor party proponents, the tenure of Dillon and his appointees proved unexpectedly brief. A rebel faction of self-labeled "progressives" (for sake of clarity, called UAWA progressives in this essay) organized late in 1935 to eliminate AFL controls over the UAWA, inaugurate more genuine industrial unionism in the UAWA, and depose Dillon and his staunchly pro-AFL allies. UAWA progressives staged their revolt and, successful by April, 1936, soon transferred the UAWA and its member unions from the AFL to the Committee for Industrial Organization. Typed "radically different" from "the old line labor leader" by a financial journal, many UAWA progressives had university, seminary, or labor college training. Some boasted radical political pasts, and most criticized the AFL's "pork chop" union traditions for unduly restricting the goals and scope of union activity.²⁴ Consequently, they were receptive to labor party proposals. While still reaching for power, the UAWA progressives promised five fundamental reforms, including support for an AFL-organized labor party and, until the AFL acted, UAWA participation in the midwestern farmer-labor parties that anti-New Deal agrarians had earlier organized. UAWA progressives based their political action program on a recent proposal from textile industry unions to the AFL.²⁵ That proposal had first attacked past Republican and Democratic failures "to preserve the constitutional and civil rights of the workers, farmers and small business men" and then urged formation of labor parties to protect "the masses of our people" from "oppressive, autocratic control of big business and powerful financial and industrial interests." Until the AFL created a national labor party, unionists were counseled to create state-level parties to which they admitted sympathizers

²³ *United Automobile Worker*, March, April, 1936.

²⁴ Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston, 1970), 372-79, 501-509; *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 1937; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 18, 1937; Charles A. Madison, *American Labor Leaders: Personalities and Forces in the Labor Movement* (New York, 1950), 390-91.

²⁵ Homer Martin to William E. Dowell, March 18, 1936, "Problems of the Auto Union Convention," n.d., Homer Martin Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); *Kenosha* (Wisc.) *Labor*, undated clipping, Kraus Papers; Jack Skeels, "The Background of UAW Factionalism," *Labor History*, II (Spring, 1961), 170-71; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 88-89.

from "industrial, agricultural, fraternal, benevolent, unemployed, [and] consumers" groups.²⁶

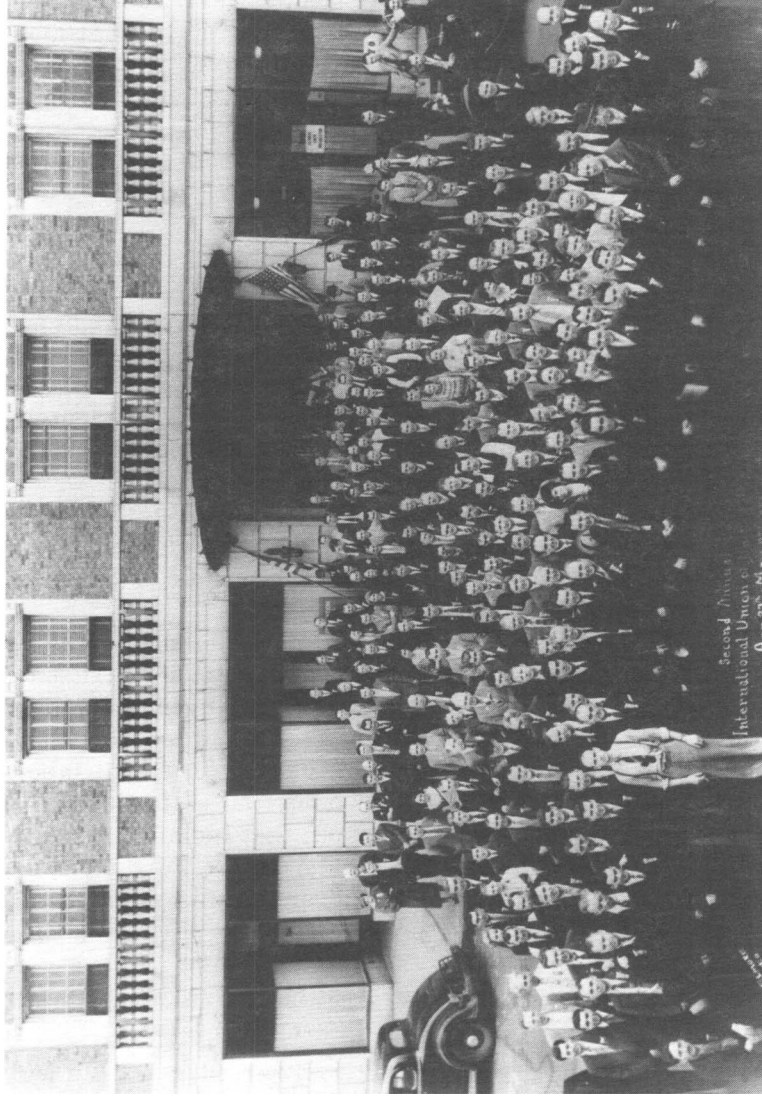
UAWA progressives unveiled their labor party plans two months before formal ratification could be secured from the UAWA national convention at South Bend, Indiana, on April 27, 1936. During that interim many groups pressured the progressives to modify their political plans. As advocates of a popular front, Communists demanded broad farmer-labor parties which welcomed non-farm and non-union elements. Socialists denounced this popular frontism because they correctly perceived the Communist party's real intention of working for the reelection of Roosevelt in 1936 and, moreover, because many Socialists preferred pristinely pure workingmen's parties.²⁷ Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) automobile industry workers, mainly Michigan residents, scoffed at labor and farmer-labor parties because, in their view, unionists should distrust all politics in a capitalist order. Meanwhile, Congressman Thomas Amlie of Wisconsin invited UAWA progressives to hitch their wagon to his American Commonwealth Political Federation. Amlie had initiated his so-called "Farmer-Labor" movement in 1933 and spoke principally for agrarian left groups and sympathetic townsmen. In Amlie's opinion the depression had discredited capitalism, but New Dealers had failed to banish the Great Depression or reorganize the American economy. He promised eternal prosperity when victorious farmer-labor legislators took office, dispensed with capitalism's "production for profit" penchants, and established an "economy of abundance" based on uninhibited "production for use" of goods and services.²⁸

UAWA progressives wavered, with many leaning toward an exclusive labor party, although outside labor progressives lectured them that automobile unionists need not fear farmer-labor parties for, as was happening in the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party led by Governor Floyd Olson, farmers and laborers worked together harmoniously. But Amlie finally lured the UAWA progressives to his camp. Happily for him, his forces

²⁶ *Report of Proceedings of the Fifty-fifth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor*, 252-53.

²⁷ "The Farmer-Labor Party and the Struggle against Reaction," *The Communist*, XIV (December, 1935), 1186-96; *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, March 14, 1936; Norman Thomas, "The Thirties As a Socialist Recalls Them," in Rita James Simon, ed., *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana, Ill., 1967), 116.

²⁸ Donald R. McCoy, *Angry Voices: Left-of-Center Politics in the New Deal Era* (Lawrence, 1958), 38-87.



DELEGATES TO THE 1936 UAWA CONVENTION POSE IN FRONT
OF THE JEFFERSON PLAZA HOTEL

Courtesy The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs,
Wayne State University.

had formed the Michigan Farmer-Labor party in 1934 and offered UAWA progressives ties to well-established political organizations in many rural counties where unionists alone might be unable to overcome the farmers' aversions to the UAWA's union militance. Moreover, important Farmers' Union groups made evident their cordiality to the UAWA by praising a Wayne County Farmer-Labor organization which automobile unionists helped to organize early in 1936.²⁹

Amlie's forces were weaker in Ohio and Indiana. There his supporters had established the Ohio Farmer Labor Progressive Federation, a lackluster organization beset by destructive internal friction. However, UAWA progressives judged the Ohio federation's political spadework valuable and believed that unionists could make the organization a satisfactory and vigorous political tool.³⁰ In Indiana Amlie luckily had persuaded South Bend unionists to lead a local Farmer-Labor movement. Many of these unionists were also small farmers who alternately manned industrial assembly lines and tilled their acreages near South Bend during the lengthy periods of unemployment which plagued virtually all automobile industry workers. These unionists greatly admired Amlie and his "economy of abundance" panacea since he promised to resolve the economic problems of both agriculturalists and urban labor.³¹

When UAWA progressives veered toward Farmer-Labor, alarmed AFL, CIO, and Democratic party leaders tried to change the progressives' minds. Denigrating third party arguments, they said that unionists misjudged the New Dealers, who had decided to deny conservative, antilabor Democrats any important places on industrial state tickets in 1936. For proof, these groups pointed out that Indiana's McNutt probably could never again become governor. Further, they argued, Roosevelt had handpicked Frank Murphy, a liberal Democrat, to head the Democratic ticket in Michigan. CIO

²⁹ Simeon P. Martin to Fine, May 14, 1936, and G.C. Leibrand to Fine and Amlie, May 28, 1936, Amlie Papers.

³⁰ Hard to Alfred Bingham, n.d., Amlie Papers; Thomas Moore to Howard Y. Williams, April 22, 1936, Howard Y. Williams Papers (Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul); Richard E. Reisinger to Henry [Kraus], n.d., Kraus Papers; *Farmer-Labor Challenge*, April, 1936; *United Automobile Worker*, July 7, 1936; "The Coming Labor Party," *The Nation*, CXLII (April 15, 1936), 468; *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, April 18, 25, May 2, 1936.

³¹ John Bartee to Amlie, March 22 and April 20, 1936, Amlie Papers; Bartee to Williams, April 5, 1936, Williams Papers; "To All Federal and Local Unions Affiliated to the St. Joseph County [Ind.]," April 25, 1936, Joseph Brown Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); Alton A. Greer to All Farm and Labor Organizations, January 28, 1936, UAWA Local #9 Papers.

chieftain John L. Lewis, for his part, expressed his view that labor must work to reelect Roosevelt. In April, 1936, Lewis organized Labor's Non-Partisan League, designated it the CIO's political arm, and commanded the league to gather AFL and CIO union support for Roosevelt.³²

Progressives shrugged off AFL and Democratic pleas, with one of their publications denouncing AFL and Democratic opportunists for trying to "unite labor behind a movement [for Frank Murphy] to bedeck with roses the mountain of manure in the Democratic Party."³³ Less readily dismissed were the CIO's importunings, because Lewis had promised the UAWA \$100,000 to finance the body's organizational work; to ignore his wishes invited sacrifice of those funds. But progressives finally chose to stand their ground and easily secured approval of their third party program at the UAWA national convention in April, 1936. As earlier instructed by their local unions, convention delegates from Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana supplied the votes to pass a third party resolution and also to withhold UAWA backing of Roosevelt. Then left-wingers, led by Wyndham Mortimer and George Addes, controlled the UAWA convention machinery so that opponents of third parties could not thwart the progressives by resort to parliamentary maneuvers.³⁴ Nevertheless, CIO representatives fought back at the convention, attempting to win votes for at least a reconsideration of the progressives' third party course. They failed, and John L. Lewis, forced to intervene personally, threatened to withdraw the \$100,000 earlier promised the UAWA. With only minutes remaining until the assembly adjourned, the delegates relented to the extent of endorsing Roosevelt.³⁵

Except for principle, UAWA endorsement of Roosevelt under duress cost UAWA progressives little, because Farmer-Labor soon dropped its plans to run a nominee against Roosevelt. Amlie and his agrarian aides believed this step essential since Lewis probably would persuade most unions to support Roosevelt. To no avail, UAWA progressives tried to

³² Galenson, *CIO Challenge to the AFL*, 131.

³³ *Farmer-Labor Challenge*, April, 1936.

³⁴ Bartee to Amlie, April 20, 1936, Amlie Papers; Fine, *Automobile under the Blue Eagle*, 425-26.

³⁵ Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York, 1949), 52-53; "Automobile Labor Hits Its Stride," *The Nation*, CXLII (May 13, 1936), 602; *United Automobile Worker*, May, 1936.

lead Amlie to the opposite conclusion.³⁶ Meanwhile, the progressives' main third party measure stood as adopted at the South Bend convention. That document characterized the Republican and Democratic parties as "parties of big business" equally ready to "break strikes and otherwise continually encroach upon the rights of labor, the farmer and small businessmen." UAWA unions were instructed to form state and local farmer-labor parties and keep these organizations "exclusive of no worker."³⁷

During the next few months Lewis permitted the UAWA unions to continue state-level third party work, but he publicly advised the unions that such activity would be more appropriate following the 1936 elections. UAWA progressives ignored his counsel, and several automobile district councils and local unions even criticized the UAWA's endorsement of Roosevelt. But, as UAWA officials defended the latter action under pressure from Lewis, eventually most UAWA local unions placated the CIO chief by also endorsing Roosevelt.³⁸ These disputations aside, UAWA progressives busily organized Farmer-Labor parties. Aiming at AFL unions, they contributed to the labor party propaganda coming from groups such as the United Textile Workers of America and, since the UAWA had deserted the AFL, they found sympathetic AFL unionists to expound progressive views at the 1936 AFL national convention at Tampa.

To expedite their political work in the Great Lakes states, progressives secured UAWA funds for purchase and distribution of Farmer-Labor political materials.³⁹ Then they bargained with the CIO in order to minimize its opposition to Farmer-Labor candidates in Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. In Michigan the progressives succeeded. There UAWA leaders, positioned in the leadership of the Michigan Labor's Non-Partisan League organization, proposed that the league, although the CIO's political arm in the state, confine its work to electing Roosevelt and Democratic nominees for gubernatorial and congressional posts. In the ensuing bargaining the Democrats' partisans in the league grudgingly accepted the UAWA's proposition. The

³⁶ McCoy, *Angry Voices*, 108-12; "Report—National Farmer-Labor Party Conference—Called by the Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota," May 30-31, 1936, pp. 2, 5, 10, Williams Papers.

³⁷ *South Bend Tribune*, May 1, 1936; *United Automobile Worker*, May, 1936.

³⁸ *News-Week*, VIII (August 15, 1936), 9; Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York, 1977), 249, 250; *United Automobile Worker*, September, 1936.

³⁹ Minutes of Detroit District Council, May 11, 1936, Minutes of General Executive Board of UAWA, August 3-8, 1936, George Addes Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs).

Michigan league supported Frank Murphy's Democratic candidacy for governor; otherwise, it publicly opposed none of Michigan Farmer-Labor's nominees for state and local offices.⁴⁰ Rolling their sleeves higher during the summer of 1936, UAWA progressives drew many more unionists to the Michigan Farmer-Labor party. They attracted primarily automobile workers and AFL painters, claiming to have gained the interest of automobile unions with membership exceeding 70,000.⁴¹

Equally encouraging was Farmer-Labor progress in Ohio. There UAWA progressives established Farmer-Labor clubs and county organizations in six major industrial counties, conducted political work in Mahoning Valley manufacturing centers, and appointed a "State Committee for the Promotion of a Farmer-Labor Party." However, that committee scaled down Ohio progressive plans after lengthy deliberations, deciding to restrict Farmer-Labor work to electing United States congressmen from four districts and candidates for local public offices in the principal industrial counties.⁴²

Progressives made similar headway in Indiana. After founding a state-level party on May 16, 1936, they established permanent organizations in three counties and appointed provisional committees for work in several others. Then more good fortune came the progressives' way. Unexpectedly, central labor union councils at Indianapolis and South Bend defied the AFL and supported Farmer-Labor, and, unlike state federations of labor in Michigan and Ohio, the Indiana State Federation of Labor also endorsed the Farmer-Labor party.⁴³ A full Indiana Farmer-Labor ticket was named for state offices; John Bartee, an automobile union leader in South Bend, headed the slate.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Frank Martel to George L. Berry, August 27, 1936, Wayne County (Mich.) AFL-CIO Papers, Open Series 1 (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs).

⁴¹ Leibrand to Fine, October 24, 1936, Amlie Papers.

⁴² *United Automobile Worker*, July 7, 1936; *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, June 13 and July 25, 1936; "Report on Akron Convention," June 8, 1936, Amlie Papers; Wilmer Tate to Williams, July 13, 1936, Williams Papers; Reisinger to Henry [Kraus], n.d., *Cleveland Citizen*, undated clippings, Kraus Papers.

⁴³ Bartee to Williams, July 8, 23, and November 5, 1936, Williams Papers; *United Automobile Worker*, July 7, 1936; "Proceedings: Organizing Convention of the St. Joseph County Farmer-Labor Party," July 11-12, 1936, Germer Papers; CIO *Union News Service*, September 28, 1936.

⁴⁴ Born in Michigan in 1904, Bartee was a metal finisher in the Studebaker plant at South Bend. President of UAWA Local #5 at South Bend until 1936, he joined the international union staff, returned to South Bend in 1938, became secretary of the Indiana state CIO organization, and held that office until 1941. See "Oral History Interview of John Bartee" (1961), 1-3, 8 (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs).

Their campaigns launched, UAWA progressives encountered their first serious troubles in the summer of 1936 with the establishment of the Union party and its nomination of William Lemke for president. Running on a radical agrarian platform and wishing to qualify readily for a place on the Michigan ballot, Lemke asked for the Michigan Farmer-Labor party's presidential nomination. His supporters deemed that request reasonable since Farmer-Labor had neither its own presidential nominee nor liking for Roosevelt or Republican candidate Alfred M. Landon.⁴⁵ But Lemke's request triggered destructive warfare within the Michigan Farmer-Labor organizations. Agrarian party members rallied to Lemke while labor elements declared such support unthinkable because his main backers included Father Charles Coughlin. Although Coughlin earlier had defended automobile industry unionism, urban radicals and many unionists had come to consider Coughlin's views "fascist." They accused him of admiring the dictators in power in Germany and Italy, and they deplored Coughlin's recent vacillations on labor questions.⁴⁶

UAWA progressives grasped at straws to rescue their Michigan party as it became so divided that the loss of many farmers was possible. They bargained with AFL officials, proposing that the federation sufficiently strengthen the Michigan Farmer-Labor party so it could afford to lose those agrarians who admired Lemke; in return, progressives promised to help the AFL keep Lemke off the Michigan ballot. AFL leaders seriously reviewed the proposition, consulted with Labor's Non-Partisan League officials, and prepared to accept the progressives' offer if New Deal Democratic interests were served by so doing. Finally AFL leaders concluded to the contrary because both Lemke and Farmer-Labor seemed safely ignored, as neither could exercise much impact on the upcoming presidential election.⁴⁷ That decision left the Michigan Farmer-

⁴⁵ Edward C. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (Lincoln, 1963), 220-24; David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party, 1932-1936* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1969), 189-95, 212, 249.

⁴⁶ Neil Betten, *Catholic Activism and the Industrial Worker* (Gainesville, Fla., 1976), 96-98; Wayne County Farmer-Labor Party to Wayne County Council of NUSJ, September 9, 1936, Kraus Papers; *United Automobile Worker*, September, 1936; "Oral History Interview of Mort Furay" (1960), 13-14 (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs).

⁴⁷ Martel to Berry, August 18, 21, 27, and December 14, 1936, Wayne County AFL-CIO Papers.

Labor factions to battle destructively. The factions, never able to compromise, each ran their own tickets with predictably dismal results in the general elections; candidates of each group polled at most about 50,000 votes.⁴⁸

Next, Socialist leaders compounded Farmer-Labor's electoral headaches. Walter Reuther and a few others excepted, Socialist leaders urged their unionist followers to resist the Farmer-Labor parties and wielded a countervailing influence against Farmer-Labor in several larger UAWA local unions. Less obtrusively, Socialist leaders argued to unionists that labor party advocates should momentarily heed the CIO, join Labor's Non-Partisan League, and build credit with Lewis and his lieutenants by helping to reelect Roosevelt. Then, having earlier entrenched themselves in the Non-Partisan League, labor party promoters could orchestrate the building of genuine labor parties in 1937 and 1938.⁴⁹

Despite these setbacks UAWA progressives predicted success in November, at least in Ohio and Indiana, where Farmer-Labor groups had repulsed intrusions from Lemke's Union party followers and where the Socialists were less disruptive to the movement. However, progressives badly miscalculated, for the greatest perils for them lurked in quarters that most had overlooked. During the autumn of 1936 New Dealers and CIO leaders unleashed a juggernaut which overwhelmed all opponents. Roosevelt built an "urban coalition," attracting ethnic minorities and workingmen's groups on whom progressives had counted for votes.⁵⁰ Hammering at unionists, in the meantime, Lewis described Roosevelt to them as a "good and faithful servant," and for the president Lewis gathered endorsements from uncounted CIO and AFL local unions, thirty-five state federations of labor, and officers of eighty-five international unions.⁵¹ Consequently, progressives watched

⁴⁸ Milton Scherer, "Lemke Chooses to Run on Third Party Ticket. . .," n.d., Williams Papers; New York Times, November 5, 1936.

⁴⁹ Minutes of National Executive Committee of Socialist Party, July 12-13, 1936, Norman Thomas Papers (New York City Public Library); Davidow to Martel, August 20, 1936, Henry Glicman to John Reid, April 22, 1937, Wayne County AFL-CIO Papers; Berry to Brophy, June 18, 1936, Labor's Non-Partisan League Papers (Catholic University of American Library); James Oneal to Germer, July 25, 1936, Germer to Oneal, July 26, 1936, Germer Papers.

⁵⁰ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), 184-88; also see Friedlander, *Emergence of a UAW Local*, 9.

⁵¹ John L. Lewis and the International Union, *United Mine Workers of America: The Story from 1917 to 1952* (Silver Springs, Md., 1952); "Address of John L. Lewis," September 19, 1936; "Industrial Democracy in Steel," n.d., all in John L. Lewis Papers, microfilm edition (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1970); New York Times, November 8, 1936.

helplessly while the CIO took its toll in the Great Lakes states where Farmer-Labor parties were the progressives' political vehicle. By resorting to "Skull Cracking," a Michigan Non-Partisan League officer gloated, the CIO kept labor's "friends" behind the Democrats. Influenced by the CIO, United Rubber Workers of America delegates voted 61 to 39 not to back the Ohio Farmer-Labor movement, although UAWA progressives once claimed these rubber industry unionists for their side. In Indiana, even with AFL aid, the Farmer-Labor ticket met humiliating defeat at the polls. Meanwhile, the Ohio Labor's Non-Partisan League organization, judged by CIO leaders to be one of their most effective state-level political arms, rallied industrial workers to the Democrats with slogans such as "Down with the Company Union" and "Vote Roosevelt." When the CIO demonstrated its overwhelming power in Ohio, UAWA progressives threw in the towel in that state several weeks before the general election.⁵²

Organized and unaffiliated industrial workers contributed heavily to Democratic victories in November, 1936, but labor progressives were unimpressed and believed that the Democratic landslides in no way rendered labor parties less practical. Francis Gorman, a United Textile Workers officer, declared that Roosevelt and his fellow Democrats could not sate labor's "hopes and aspirations," leaving the rationale for labor parties as compelling as ever. Alex Rose of the Cap, Hat and Millinery Workers generally agreed, though he was friendly to Roosevelt, whom he characterized as "a truly representative spokesman of the people." Rose called the president's recent reelection "a great historic accident" that "may not repeat itself for another hundred years"; moreover, he reminded unionists, "Political friends of organized labor are usually also friends of many others, and in crucial moments they are not dependable, they desert the labor cause when they are most needed."⁵³

Labor progressives renewed their fight nationally, sometimes before all of the 1936 ballots were tabulated. Asking first for CIO aid, they were rebuffed on the grounds that a bright future awaited labor since Roosevelt and other Democratic politicians dared not renege on their recent campaign promises.

⁵² Martel to Berry, December 14, 1936, Wayne County AFL-CIO Papers; Galenson, *CIO Challenge to the AFL*, 273; *Steel Labor*, October 20, 1936; *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, October 10, 1936.

⁵³ *Textile Worker*, September 19, October 3, and November 7, 1936; *Report of Proceedings of the Fifty-sixth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor* (Washington, D.C., [1936]), 649-50.

According to Lewis, federal agencies now must protect workers from ever again being "clubbed, gassed, or shot down with impunity." Progressives disputed such rosy forecasts, but CIO officials replied that the CIO could promise only to "adjust" if differing "political alignment[s]" developed later. That seemed unlikely, several CIO leaders added, for the election of Roosevelt in 1936 had initiated a labor party in America.⁵⁴

Repulsed by the CIO, labor progressives turned to the AFL in desperation. Realistically, however, they could expect little from the federation; at best they could hope their overtures would help them sustain the very limited AFL union support which they had generated in 1936 in such places as Indiana. Moreover, the progressives' gestures to the AFL pleased various radical groups which supported labor party movements. Still leading agrarian forces billed as Farmer-Labor, Congressman Amlie encouraged progressives to build labor parties under the AFL's aegis. He reasoned that his own groups were so weakened by their 1936 debacle that only unions could sustain viable third parties and, in that event, the organizations must closely resemble the Labour party in Great Britain.⁵⁵ Communists advocated a "broad national Farmer-Labor Party" which Earl Browder, the chief Communist party official, compared to the People's Front in France. The "progressive trade unions" were to be the "backbone of this new [American] political alignment." However, Browder cautioned that such a party also required CIO backing.⁵⁶ For their part, Socialists urged two duties on unionists: to work for third parties through the CIO and its political agency, Labor's Non-Partisan League, and to help labor progressives confront state and local AFL leaders with labor party demands. Pursuing the latter course vigorously, Socialists and their unionist allies sometimes managed to evoke encouraging responses from the AFL. In Michigan, for instance, they prodded the Detroit and Wayne County Federa-

⁵⁴ "Industrial Democracy," December 31, 1936, Lewis Papers; "Notes on CIO Meeting," November 7-8, 1936, John Brophy Papers (Catholic University of America Library); press release of Labor's Non-Partisan League, November 11, 1936, Amlie Papers.

⁵⁵ Amlie to Bingham, December 8, 1936, Amlie Papers.

⁵⁶ "Meet Earl Browder," *Current History*, XLV (October, 1936), 93; New York *Daily Worker*, July 3 and September 4, 1937; John Williamson, "The Election Results—What Next?" n.d., Amlie Papers; unsigned observer reports on Communist Party District Committee meetings at Pittsburgh, November 5, 1936, and at Chicago, March 21, 1937, American Federation of Labor Papers, Series 11, File C (State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

tion of Labor until it appointed a committee to "canvass the possibility of forming a Labor Party."⁵⁷

Labor progressives next urged UAWA progressives to lead labor parties in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. These requests seemed reasonable because UAWA progressives still were receptive to unorthodox political adventures and, despite the recent Democratic victories there, UAWA progressives might readily tap support from thousands. In those states many sit-down and conventional strikes followed the 1936 elections. Public authorities often repressed the outbreaks, and Roosevelt deeply disappointed unionists when, during one bitter struggle, he declared a "plague" on both unions and the "Little Steel" companies. Furthermore, unmistakable labor party rumblings accompanied the strikes. Automobile unionists openly flaunted their political might. Workers, an automobile union journal reported, were "openly razzing their straw bosses and their stooges for touting [Alfred] Landon" in the recent presidential canvass. Another journal noted that the automobile unions, keenly aware of their "dynamic strength and vitality," recognized the "great need of the working people to organize politically as well as in trade unions."⁵⁸ Then, on March 23, 1937, 60,000 persons openly defied Detroit city authorities and demonstrated at Cadillac Square. The demonstrators vented their rage against Mayor Frank Couzens and Heinrich Pickert, the city's police chief to whom unionists ascribed "police fascism." The crowd applauded wildly when orators advised workers to elect only public officials who "put human rights above property rights" and to ensure "a[n] automobile worker as mayor and a labor man as police commissioner after the next election." Listening politely, the group also heard out Leo Krzycki, an Amalgamated Clothing Workers union leader, who counseled, "I urge you to organize politically as a labor party, and your rights will be protected."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, UAWA progressives hesitated to launch labor parties in 1937. AFL unions doubtless would resist such parties, and progressives disliked offending the pro-Democratic CIO since that agency had contributed so mightily to their political miseries in 1936. Moreover, progressives thoughtfully

⁵⁷ Minutes of National Executive Committee of Socialist Party, November 20-22, 1936, September 1-4, 1937, Thomas Papers; Glicman to Reid, April 22, 1937, Reid to Glicman, April 20, 1937, Wayne County AFL-CIO Papers.

⁵⁸ Flint (Mich.) *Auto Worker*, November, 1936; *Pontiac Autoworker*, March 30, 1937.

⁵⁹ *Detroit Free Press*, March 24, 1937; *Detroit News*, March 24, 1937; *United Automobile Worker*, April 6, 1937.

mulled over the merits of three possible courses. Philosophically, many deemed labor parties the most practical vehicles for labor over the long haul. But a second group, citing political immediacy as the controlling consideration, argued that the UAWA should revive the farmer-labor movements of 1936 in order to preserve labor's old bonds with sympathetic agrarians. A third group of progressives advocated that unions instead simply make the Democratic party more responsive to labor's wishes.⁶⁰ Unionists, the latter group admitted, had plenty of grievances against the Democrats since the New Dealer landslides of 1936. Industrialists still defied the UAWA, and Henry Ford demonstrated such tenacity in resisting the UAWA that he became the automobile unions' toughest nut to crack. On another front, unions complained that too many federal lawmakers refused to support new legislation which would force Ford and like-minded holdouts to the collective bargaining table. Scarcely less offensive to many unionists was the 1937 "Little Wagner" Act which was passed by Michigan Democratic legislators. This act was so outrageously defective from the standpoint of organized labor that unionists successfully petitioned for its repeal. Satisfactory "Little Wagner" laws seemingly could not be secured from Ohio and Indiana lawmakers. Nevertheless, one UAWA progressive faction excused New Dealers from blame for such conditions, held conservative Democrats responsible, and argued that labor needed only purge conservatives to make the Democratic party suitably labor-minded. In so doing, unions could avoid the pitfalls which had always beset American third party movements.⁶¹

During these discussions CIO chieftains scowled and discouraged all third party talk, and finally the UAWA progressives listened to their CIO superiors. The die cast, progressives urged unionists not to participate in farmer-labor endeavors and, with greater misgivings, declared against UAWA unions marching with the labor party drummers. UAWA president

⁶⁰ For examples of this discussion, see Minutes of Greater Detroit District Council of UAWA, July 26, 1937, John Zarembo Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); Minutes of UAWA Local #248, September 30, 1937, UAWA Local #248 Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); "Oral History Interview of John W. Anderson" (1960), 32 (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs). In the judgment of national Socialist leaders, third party sentiment survived in 1937 among Socialist unionists mainly in maritime, teachers, and needle trades unions. Minutes of National Executive Committee of Socialist Party, December 10-12, 1937, Thomas Papers.

⁶¹ Richard D. Lunt, *The High Ministry of Government: The Political Career of Frank Murphy* (Detroit, 1965), 139-42; *Steel Labor*, June 21, 1937; *United Automobile Worker*, August 21, 1937.

Homer Martin explained the progressives' decision in August, 1937. Walking on eggs so that the CIO remained unoffended and labor party supporters in the UAWA were at least partly mollified, Martin remarked that labor was not ripe for its own exclusive party. Although unionists accepted the need for independent political activity, he added, too many laboring people did not agree that only their "own" deserved public office, making it impossible to organize a labor party "based on and firmly rooted within the ranks of the organized labor movement."⁶² Later in August, UAWA national convention delegates ratified the progressives' decisions. Passed after cursory review was a resolution favoring "independent political action" but reserving such initiatives for the CIO's political arm, Labor's Non-Partisan League.⁶³

Thereafter automobile unions awaited the CIO's nod or "developments of tomorrow" which might revive the labor party "question."⁶⁴ But labor party declarations never came from CIO officials, although Lewis toyed until 1938 with the possibilities of farmer-labor political action. Finally, CIO leaders spoke, projecting "politics on a basis that is going to be effective" in the 1938 state and congressional elections. Denouncing many Democrats elected two years earlier, Eli Oliver (vice president of Labor's Non-Partisan League) called them "plain, simple, old-fashioned liars" and directed CIO unions to defeat those conservatives who had winked wickedly to garner labor votes in 1936 and then ignored "the power of organized labor."⁶⁵ Late in 1938, delegates to the CIO's first national convention laid down new political action rules. They dismissed "independent political action" and confined the CIO's political activity to working in the two major political parties. For the immediate future, as Lewis then explained CIO policy, the CIO intended to ensure that the Democratic party nominated and elected liberals. When that goal was reached the CIO and its member unions planned to stand watch so that these liberals stayed in line, to which Lewis added: "Sometimes political leaders forget how enduring and deep the labor movement is, and they attri-

⁶² *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, September 18, 1937; Amlie to Bingham, October 4, 1937, Amlie Papers; *United Automobile Worker*, July 10 and August 21, 1937.

⁶³ Labor's Non-Partisan League *National Bulletin*, September 2, 1937.

⁶⁴ *Wayne County Democrat* (Detroit), September 11, 1937.

⁶⁵ *Proceedings of the First Convention: Committee for Industrial Organizations in the State of Ohio* (Columbus, 1938), 77-78; Labor's Non-Partisan League *National Bulletin*, August 15, 1938.

bute to themselves the strength that organized labor has bestowed on them."⁶⁶

UAWA unions cooperated, repeatedly rejecting third party overtures to them in 1938 and 1939. Typical of such incidents, an assembly of UAWA local union presidents, principally officers in Michigan and Ohio unions, declared "political expression" of combined "labor, farm, radical and other Progressive groups" unacceptable until the CIO sanctioned such endeavors.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, CIO and UAWA leaders discouraged incipient labor party sentiment in the unions by providing their followers with plenty of outlets for conventional forms of political activity. The UAWA governing council established a permanent Political Action Committee that worked in concert with Labor's Non-Partisan League to promote the candidacies of CIO political favorites.⁶⁸ The CIO established state-level organizations in most states between 1939 and 1941, and CIO industrial union councils and permanent Non-Partisan League organizations proliferated. All supplied unionists with additional mechanisms for acceptable political activity.⁶⁹

When the CIO and UAWA leaderships confined the automobile unions' politics to conventional channels after 1937, labor progressives acknowledged defeat in the long fight for labor parties in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. Only a few cared to renew that battle during the ensuing decade. Socialists attempted but failed to organize a Michigan labor party in

⁶⁶ *Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations* (Pittsburgh, 1938), 230-31; *The Progressive: LaFollette's Magazine*, December 24, 1938; *Kansas City Star*, June 13, 1939; "Excerpts from the Opening Statement of President John L. Lewis to the Executive Board of the C.I.O.," June 13, 1939, Brophy Papers; "Excerpts from Address of John L. Lewis," January 24, 1940, Lewis Papers.

⁶⁷ "Minutes of National Conference Held in the City of Toledo," August 28, 1938, CIO Papers.

⁶⁸ Minutes of UAWA International Union Executive Board, November 21, 1937, October 4-7, 1938, Addes Papers; Minutes of UAWA International Union Executive Board, May 9-25, 1938, Frankenstein Papers; *Joint Report of the International Union Officers to the Thirty-sixth Constitutional Convention of the United Mine Workers of America* (Columbus, Ohio, 1940), 63-64.

⁶⁹ E.L. Oliver to Martel, January 25, 1938, Wayne County AFL-CIO Papers; "Report of the Secretary-Treasurer, Labor's Non-Partisan League of Ohio," January 5, 1939, Labor's Non-Partisan League Papers; "The CIO in Wisconsin Politics," undated newspaper clipping, Milwaukee Industrial Union Council Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin); Minutes of Greater Detroit and Wayne County Industrial Union Council, May 21 and July 16, 1940, Zaremba Papers; "Report of John Brophy... to [CIO] Executive Board Meeting," June 13, 1939, Brophy Papers; *Report of President John L. Lewis to the Second Constitutional Convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations* (San Francisco, 1939), 8.

1938.⁷⁰ In 1944 radicals and a handful of lower-echelon automobile union leaders formed the Michigan Commonwealth Federation, a body they envisioned as the nucleus for a third party. Citing farmer-labor activity in Canada, the *MCF News* argued: "If the Canadian workers and farmers can do it, so can we." Two years of fruitless effort followed before the federation collapsed.⁷¹ Meanwhile, for most labor party crusaders of the 1930s all that remained were major party politics and the inevitable post-mortems of their failures. A few have recently appeared in print, but unhappily these old-time reformers have preferred nostalgia in their reminiscences to full intellectual dissection of their abortive movements.⁷²

Capitalizing on industrial worker frustrations with the New Deal's shortcomings became a major pastime for radicals by the mid-1930s. That agrarian practitioners of this art—such as Congressman Thomas Amlie—and their labor counterparts, the labor progressives, built respectable followings among automobile industry unions proved to aspiring reformers that labor parties were possible in Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan. Eventually automobile unions became nuclei of the proposed political organizations. New Dealers, however, did not quake, although there were reasons for so doing. They had failed to make the National Industrial Recovery and Wagner acts effective tools in labor's service; conservative Democrats in state and local governments fired ever more indignation among industrial laborers and caused critics to rank Democrats and Republicans as equally antilabor; and rising from labor ranks were persistent wails that, instead of collective bargaining, police and military power were deployed unfairly against unions to resolve labor-industry conflicts. But New Dealers were vindicated at the polls in 1936; to win they had belatedly swayed many automobile unionists into their ranks, ruthlessly trampled midwestern labor parties, and established for the

⁷⁰ Resolution adopted by Wayne County Socialist Party, November 29, 1937, Minutes of State Executive Committee of Michigan Socialist Party, January 23, 1938, Thomas Papers; Ben Fischer to Frank Zeidler, December 11, 1937, "Local and Branch Bulletin," November 22, 1938, Social Democratic Party Papers (Milwaukee County Historical Museum, Milwaukee, Wisc.); Marquart, *An Auto Worker's Journal*, 79-80.

⁷¹ "Report: Michigan Study Committee for Building a New Political Party," n.d., "Declaration of Principles Adopted by the First Constitutional Convention of the Michigan Commonwealth Federation," January 28-30, 1944, *MCF News*, n.d., all in Michigan Commonwealth Federation file (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); Clayton W. Fountain, *Union Guy* (New York, 1949), 170-71.

⁷² For example, see Marquart, *An Auto Worker's Journal*, 123-26.

automobile unions a reputation as Democratic strongholds that has since persisted.

Yet the Democrats' conceit in the wake of their triumphs was misleading. New Dealers did not inspire automobile unionists to uncritical admiration for the New Deal. Nor did astute engineering by Democratic politicians play more than a secondary role in the outcome in the automobile industry unions. Instead, for several reasons the automobile unionists formally abandoned all third party ventures in 1937. They heeded the pro-Democratic CIO, adoptive parent of the UAWA after it severed its relationships with the AFL. Occasionally Lewis and his CIO lieutenants secured UAWA acquiescence by applying pressure against labor party activity in the UAWA unions. But more often they resorted to persuasion, appealed to UAWA unionists' sense of loyalty to the CIO, and successfully hammered in the logic of CIO arguments that the Democratic party, although encrusted with conservatives and containing liberals negligent about paying their labor debts, was the best political vehicle for the CIO and its member unions. Meanwhile, two other considerations supplied compelling reasons for UAWA progressives and their subordinate unionists to follow the pro-Democratic course desired by the CIO. First, the AFL stressed its abiding faith in the two party system and, with such minor exceptions as were seen in Indiana in 1936, consistently served notice on UAWA progressives and their allies that labor parties were exceedingly risky since they could never tap support from the powerful, well-entrenched craft union forces of the Great Lakes states. And, finally, there remained the ultimate restraint of America's historical experience and its clear lesson that third parties were doomed. Thoughtful UAWA progressive leaders could scarcely gainsay this practicality, especially after their bruising political setbacks in 1936; and, were progressives still myopic in the wake of such failures, their AFL and CIO elders reminded them forcefully of the futility that came from defying American political traditions.