

## **Rural Radicals: Illinois and the Farmer-Labor Party**

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For workers of the world, the year 1919 has been called epoch-making, and electric. The Bolsheviks in Russia remained in power, the British Labor Party was rising in influence, and Eugene Debs told workers emphatically that the day of the people had arrived.<sup>1</sup> In America 1919 was the year of the steel strike, the coal strike, the Boston police strike, and the Seattle general strike. There were more workers involved in labor disputes in 1919 than in the next six years combined.<sup>2</sup> This tide of hope for workers expressed itself in several rural counties in Illinois. At the polls, Republican Warren Harding won the presidential election of 1920, easily carrying Illinois with nearly 68% of the state's vote.<sup>3</sup> Also in 1920, Socialist party candidate Eugene V. Debs made his historic run for president earning a million votes nationwide from inside the Atlanta prison system as convict #9653. Yet it was in this year that another party emerged to gain 49,630 votes in the presidential election in Illinois, 2.4% of the total votes cast. This party was called the Farmer-Labor Party, and most of the party's support, to the tune of 44, 644 votes, came from rural counties in downstate Illinois.<sup>4</sup> Senatorial and gubernatorial candidates from the Farmer-Labor Party enjoyed even higher rates of success among the rural ranks in Illinois. The ideological foundation for the Farmer-Labor Party has been called progressive unionism. As summed up by historian Nathan Fine, the platform embodied only one fundamental idea of the leaders of the new movement: all power to the workers and farmers.<sup>5</sup> This paper will illuminate the manifold reasons why it was rural Illinois coal miners who constituted the major support for the Farmer-Labor Party. Further, I will argue that for coal miners, more than for urban

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in Illinois, 1828-1928* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 377.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Illinois Blue Book 1921-22*. 768-770

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 378.

industrial workers, the Farmer-Labor party represented their hopes in the dynamic years following World War I.<sup>6</sup>

Coal mining was the most hazardous occupation in Illinois. In the first three decades of the twentieth century 5,337 men lost their lives in the mines.<sup>7</sup> More than half of mining fatalities were caused by collapsing roofs.<sup>8</sup> Miners had to trust wooden planks, installed themselves, for protection from roofs that easily caved in. Other causes of death for miners were collision with mine cars or locomotives, death from explosives, electrocution, and drowning.<sup>9</sup> In 1910, at Coal Company No.2 in Cherry, Bureau County, two hundred and fifty-six miners were killed in a fire caused by taking hay for mules into the mine.<sup>10</sup> Frank Stroff had been at work for only twenty minutes in a Madison County coal mine when a gigantic piece of slate fell on top of him and instantly crushed the life out of him. The year before, Nicholas Lacquet went to work in a St. Clair county mine and was crushed by a falling top; living just one more day, he died leaving a wife and son to forge without him.<sup>11</sup>

The dangers in the pits were only part of the miners' unfortunate lot; meager and uncertain wages were also tribulations. A miner's life included the double dangers of hunger above ground and death below. Many mining companies set up company towns around the mines which often magnified the miners' plight. Glen Carbon, Illinois was such a town. John Keiser describes the situation as such; miners were compelled to live in company houses, all alike, and were charged \$2.00 a month for each room, even a summer kitchen built at the miner's expense was withheld from the monthly wages. Men were paid to scrip equal to their debt at the

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<sup>6</sup> The rural counties that were most supportive of the new Farmer-Labor Party were Macoupin, Williamson, St. Clair, Saline, Sangamon, and Franklin counties. During the period 1903-1912 Williamson, Sangamon, St. Clair, Macoupin, and Madison counties were respectively the heaviest producers of coal in the state. From 1913 to 1922 Franklin County ranked first in coal production, followed by Williamson, Sangamon, Macoupin, and St. Clair. See *Illinois Blue Book*, 768-776.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Tingley, *The Structuring of a State: The History of Illinois, 1899 to 1928* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *Donk Brothers Coal Co. v. Stroff*, 200 Illinois 485; *O'Fallon Coal Co. v. Lacquet*, 198 Illinois 126.

company store; the remainder of the pay was in cash. There was little of that.<sup>12</sup>

The quality of goods at the company store was nearly always sub par and over priced. To add insult to injury, miners were also forced to buy their own powder, oil, squibs, and other supplies from the company at inflated prices.<sup>13</sup>

In 1890 the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) formed to combat the problems facing this most unfortunate group of workers, with the belief that

Those whose lot is to toil within the earth's recesses, surrounded by peculiar dangers and deprived of sunlight and pure air, producing the commodity which makes possible the world's progress, are entitled to protection and the full social value of their product.<sup>14</sup>

Yet by 1892, the treasury of District 12 (Illinois) of the UMWA contained a grand total of \$5.40.<sup>15</sup> Due to a devastating economic depression employment was extremely uncertain during the mid-1890s, causing union membership to be very low. Companies often forced miners to sign "yellow dog" contracts, pledging that they would not join a labor organization. However, weak coal unions in Illinois were not to last forever. The infamous Battle of Virden, in Macoupin County Illinois, turned the tide for the coal miners' union, and eventually made District 12 the most powerful district in the international UMWA.

On July 15, 1897 in Mt. Olive, Illinois a group of miners led by "General" Alexander Bradley began a grand march through one coal town after another, calling miners out of the pits to protest the abominable conditions in the mines. One reporter said they "gathered strength like a rolling snowball."<sup>16</sup> The miners won broad moral support and were encouraged by a variety of people in the towns they passed. The miners enjoyed free food and drinks from miners' wives and many town officials offered city facilities to meet

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<sup>12</sup> John H. Keiser, *A Spirit-Thread of Labor History, The Union Miners Cemetery at Mt Olive, Illinois*. In *Mother Jones and the Union Miners Cemetery Mount Olive, Illinois*, ed. Leslie F. Oreor (Chicago: Illinois Labor History Society, 2002), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Luis Bloch, *Labor Agreements in Coal Mines* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1931), 55.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

in. A woman in Glen Carbon was said to have given the strikers all the food in her house! The bitter, but peaceful strike lasted six months. By the end of the year the miners' efforts were rewarded and the operators were ready to negotiate. A conference was held in Chicago in January 1898. At the conference, the miners won a major victory with a higher wage scale of 40 cents per ton of coal (a one-third increase for most), an eight-hour work day, a six-day work week, pay increases for those workers not actually engaged in mining, and screening rights were regularized.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the agreement had to be upheld.

By August 1898, the mine operators had made plans to operate the mines at Virden (Macoupin County) using non-union African-American miners from the South. All spring and summer the operators recruited black miners in Alabama promising high wages and good conditions. This was a ploy to capitalize on the "incipient racism" in the area.<sup>18</sup> Although the word "Negro" became synonymous with "strikebreaker" in rural Illinois, black miners in Springfield tried to prevent the importation of the Alabama miners, and it seems clear that few if any of the workers from Alabama knew anything about the union controversy in Illinois. Undoubtedly expecting violence, the crafty mine operators built an oak stockade around the mine, hired ex-police from the Thiel Detective Agency in St. Louis, and equipped their men with new rifles.

As early as late September, Virden was filled with angry miners. A contingent of sixty miners came from Mt. Olive led by the formerly peaceful Bradley. This time the miners were carrying guns, although Bradley maintained that his mission was "peaceable."<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, violent incidents became frequent as rumors of the presence of black workers imported from the South grew. On October 10th, the president of the Chicago-Virden Coal Company wrote to Governor Tanner to inform him the mine operators were "going to operate our mines and we absolutely decline to assume any of the responsibility that the laws of Illinois place upon the executive." The Governor responded with, "If you bring in this imported labor you do so according to your own message, with the full knowledge that you will provoke riot and bloodshed. Therefore

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<sup>17</sup> Screening a lump of coal means to pass the largest marketable size of coal over a screen to separate it from smaller pieces.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

you will be morally responsible, if not criminally liable, for what may happen.”<sup>20</sup>

On the morning of October 12<sup>th</sup>, all miner “troops” were ordered to be on duty. It had been raining in Virden for days. The Mt. Olive contingent patrolled the railroad in shifts of forty while the other twenty, freezing and exhausted, sought refuge in a friendly farmer’s barn. At 12:40 a.m. a Chicago-Alton train with the imported Alabamans on board (as they neared Virden all shades were pulled down) flew past the miners at the depot going forty miles per hour. Few casualties resulted from an exchange of shots, but a bloody encounter occurred as the engineer slowed to the stockade. The shooting lasted for ten minutes. The engineer was wounded, but refused to unload the strikebreakers and continued to St. Louis. Forty miners were wounded, and seven killed. The youngest miner killed was Edward Long of Mt. Olive, age 19. The guards had the advantage of new rifles and the oak stockade. Of the guards, five were killed and four wounded. After the battle, the miners descended upon the company store, their symbol of feudalism, and nearly trampled the proprietor to death. A mine guard called the clash, “hotter than San Juan Hill.”<sup>21</sup>

For the miners, the victory was worth the cost. A month later the company granted the wage increase, and Illinois became a bastion of union power in the coalfields for decades. While John Walker was president of District 12 of the UMWA, the Illinois miners became the most powerful in the international union. To this day October 12<sup>th</sup> is Miners Day in Mt. Olive Illinois. The Union Miners Cemetery, the only union owned cemetery in the country is a national landmark, and the world renowned Mother Jones is buried next to her “boys” who died at Virden. Mother Jones wrote November 12, 1923:

When the last call comes for me to take my final rest; will the miners see that I get a resting place in the same clay that shelters the miners who gave up their lives on the hills of Virden, Illinois, on the morning of October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1897 [*sic*], for their heroic sacrifice of [*sic*] their fellow men. They are responsible for Illinois being the best organized labor state in America. I hope it will be my consolation when I pass away to feel I sleep under the clay with those brave boys.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 49.

The United Mine Workers provided an enormous benefit for miners after they were established as a force in Illinois, yet the union was still met with vigorous opposition.

Mine owners had a reputation for irresponsibility and greed. They assiduously avoided every effort to unionize. A shining example was Joseph Leiter who opened a mine in Zeigler, Franklin County in 1904. Leiter incorporated the town and the mine in Delaware, and owned nearly all the stock. The union miners struck the day the mine opened. After the strike, Leiter was to blame for several deadly incidences. The first, April 3, 1905, occurred when fifty men were killed in Leiter’s mine due to a gas explosion. Further, a state mine inspector was killed while investigating that very explosion. On November 8, 1908 the mine caught on fire again. Fire inspectors obtained an agreement from the company to seal the mine for ninety days. On January 10, 1909 the inspectors were called back as there had been another explosion which killed twenty-six men. Leiter had failed to seal the mine. This time inspectors demanded Leiter seal the mine permanently. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, less than a month later, they were called back yet again as another explosion had killed three more men.<sup>23</sup> An additional example of a mine owner with a brutal attitude towards his employees was George Baer. In 1900, George Baer, president of the mine-owning Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company made an infamous statement in which he scoffed at the ideas that miners were suffering. “They don’t suffer; why, they can’t even speak English,” said Baer.<sup>24</sup>

By 1919 the climate in the coal mining counties of Illinois was one of fierce unionism. World War I had greatly disrupted life in Illinois.<sup>25</sup> During the war Illinois enjoyed nearly full employment. Although most workers had not joined unions at the start of WWI, the industries for which unions did exist took full advantage of war problems to improve their situation. There were more strikes during WWI than before or after.<sup>26</sup> The number of labor disputes reported in the monthly bulletin of the Illinois Coal Operators Association was highest in 1917 with 1,006 reported disputes. In 1914 there

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<sup>23</sup> Tingley, *Structuring of a State*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> McAlister Coleman, *Men and Coal* (New York: Arno and The New York Times, 1969), 72.

<sup>25</sup> Tingley, *Structuring of a State*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 103.

were only 426, and in 1919, 796 disputes were reported.<sup>27</sup> Between 1915 and 1920, union membership jumped from two million to more than four million people.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the aftermath of the war created a financial crisis for working people in America. Massive wartime inflation created a heavy burden for the working class. The overall cost of living was an average of 99% higher in 1919 than just four years earlier.<sup>29</sup> Wartime concessions to labor were viewed as mere expedients the capitalists planned to “take back” once the war ended.<sup>30</sup> The government policy of the time was in support of corporate interests in order to provide “economic stabilization.” Their idea was to cut the cost of production by slashing wages and eliminating union work rules.<sup>31</sup> This prompted a national strike wave in which coal miners were major participants.

After the war, the miners were operating under the Washington Wage Agreement which was to last during the continuation of the war but not longer than March 31, 1920. Since the Armistice with Germany had been signed November 11, 1918, the miners were faced with rising costs of living and widespread unemployment, and took the position that a new contract must be negotiated. The operators maintained that the signing of the Armistice did not constitute formal proclamation of peace, and that the miners’ strike beginning November 1, 1919 was in violation of the contract. John L. Lewis, president of the UMWA, decreed that he would not “fight my government, the greatest government on earth.”<sup>32</sup> Despite this proclamation, the miners refused to work, and many miners attributed the official “surrender” to the decline of the organization’s militancy.<sup>33</sup> It was not a complete surrender, however, and under a new agreement the workers were to return to the pits with an immediate raise of 14 per cent. The final decision was a 34 per cent

<sup>27</sup> Bloch, *Labor Disputes in Coal Mines*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> Tingley, *Structuring of a State*, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 7.

<sup>30</sup> David Montgomery, “The Farmer-Labor Party.” In *American Workers from the Revolution to the Present* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Coleman, *Men and Coal*, 98

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

increase to tonnage men,<sup>34</sup> and 20 per cent to day men to take effect in 1920.<sup>35</sup>

The southern-most coal counties in Illinois of Williamson, Saline, and Franklin—proudly called “Egypt” by natives—were exclusively mining territory. Williamson County to this day is referred to as “Bloody Williamson” as a result of the Herrin Massacre of 1922. As Paul Angle noted in his study of Williamson, “The loyalty of members of the United Mine Workers of America to their organization had a deep and durable quality impossible to overestimate”<sup>36</sup> The locals in Williamson and Franklin counties were the union’s citadel.<sup>37</sup> Half of the state’s sixty thousand miners lived there, and every miner down to the man held a union card. Investigators probing the causes of the Herrin Massacre in 1923 summed up the contrast in conditions before and after unionization in Southern Illinois. Their report explained that citizens of Williamson County believed that the union had brought them “out of the land of bondage into the Promised Land.” Miners went from having no safety, power, or dignity, to owning their own homes and automobiles. What they had of daily comfort they thought came from the union and not from the government.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> A tonnage man is a man who is actually in the pits mining (he is technically the “miner”), a day man is a man who works supplying the tonnage men or any other laborer who is not actually mining. Tonnage men were the most respected in the coalfields.

<sup>35</sup> Coleman, *Men and Coal*, 98.

<sup>36</sup> Paul M. Angle, *Bloody Williamson* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Quote from investigative report—“When mining began in that country it was upon a ruinously competitive basis. Profit was the sole object; the life and health of the employees were of no moment. Men worked in water half-way up to their knees, in gas-filled rooms, in unventilated mines where the air was so foul that no man could work long without seriously impairing his health. There was no workmen’s compensation law; accidents were frequent, and there was no common ground upon which employer and employee could meet. They had no interest in common as they regarded each other with hostility and distrust. Then came the union... Peace and goodwill and mutual respect have been the general rule since that time. [Wages increased], improvements in the working conditions was reflected in the appearance of the workmen, their families, their manner of life and their growing cities and public improvements. There are 13,000 miners in Williamson County, 62 per cent of whom own their own homes and most of them own automobiles. All occupations are unionized. They believe in the union, for they think it brought them out of the land of bondage into the promised land when their government had been careless of or

Other industries in Illinois were engaged in union battles during the post WWI period as well. Led by William Z. Foster and John Fitzpatrick, organization of the union stockyards was initiated on June 15, 1917. With Fitzpatrick as president, the Stockyards Labor Council was able to organize 40,000 workers, about half of the labor force in the yards.<sup>39</sup> The union demanded recognition, and to avoid prolonged disruption the president's Mediation Commission came to Chicago to hold a meeting. The packers were on one side of the room, and the union on the other. J. Ogden Armour's lawyers started the meeting by speaking out against any discussion with the union representatives.<sup>40</sup> In a famous story, John Fitzpatrick decided this could not go on. In his own words, he describes how he handled the situation.

So I just stood up and said, "Gentlemen, it all seems to turn on whether or not Mr. Armour is going to meet anybody, and I want to say right here that I am now going to shake hands with Mr. Armour." So I just walked across that circle, had to walk about 20 feet over to where Mr. Armour was sitting, and I stuck out my hand. He got very red and looked up at me very funny and then he stood up very courteously and shook hands and said, "Of course I'll shake hands with Mr. Fitzpatrick."...[A]fter that...we sat down and quickly arranged a conference with packers and union labor.<sup>41</sup>

The commission was able to settle some issues while the others were sent to arbitration. The arbitrator, Judge Alschuler, provided for an eight hour day, a forty-hour week with overtime pay, twenty minute lunches, a wage increase, and the same rates for women and men. This was a huge success and union membership surged after this victory.<sup>42</sup>

Also in 1919, labor made a massive attempt to organize the steel industry. Again, it was Foster and Fitzpatrick initiating organization.<sup>43</sup> A strike ensued as more than 300,000 steel workers

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indifferent to their needs. They hold themselves to be good Americans and proved it during the Great War, but what they have of daily comfort they think comes from the union and not from the government." See Paul Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Tingley, *Structuring of a State*, 103.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> John Keiser, *John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism* (Ph.D. Diss. Northwestern University, 1965), 40.

<sup>42</sup> Tingley, *Structuring of a State*, 104.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 105.

left their jobs. The workers were winning, but the tide turned when the police and army violently attacked the picket lines. Steel operators also used the press, courts, and public officers to break the strike. Workers were hungry despite commissaries set up to feed them, and eventually the strike disintegrated.<sup>44</sup> Fitzpatrick said, "When I think of those steel trust magnates and the conditions their workers live and work in and die in- why their hearts must be as black as the ace of spades."<sup>45</sup>

Although the stockyard workers had gained some ground by unionizing, eventually the agreements with the packers failed to hold up. This, along with the disappointments of the steel strike and the coal strike, buoyed a sense of class consciousness among workers in Illinois. American laborers began to think in group and class terms more than ever before.<sup>46</sup> Keiser notes that labor was increasingly self-conscious due to its economic victories and its political recognition, however superficial.<sup>47</sup> This was the climate in which union members and organizers who had formerly voted for traditional political parties began to embrace the concept of a Labor Party based on the unions.<sup>48</sup>

The growing sentiments from the rank and file for a Labor Party were staunchly resisted by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and especially by president Samuel Gompers. Gompers thought that the politicization of the labor movement was a mistake. He argued that, "Political movements are ephemeral. The trade union movement is not for today. Its continued existence is too valuable to be gambled in the political arena."<sup>49</sup> The nonpartisan slogan was to "stand faithfully by our friends, oppose and defeat our enemies."<sup>50</sup> Critics of the policy quickly emerged, arguing that hostile interests had far more money to spend lobbying, and that even if a unionist were elected, he would have to owe allegiance to his party's bosses or be back "on the workbench," thus tying his hands.<sup>51</sup> John Fitzpatrick saw the reelection of Woodrow Wilson in 1916 as "the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Keiser, *John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism*, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States*, 377.

<sup>47</sup> Keiser, *John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 378.

<sup>49</sup> Molly Ray Carroll, *Labor and Politics* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1923), 171.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

realization of hope for the future of the common people.”<sup>52</sup> But his enthusiasm was quickly curbed given the administration’s record of suppressing civil liberties and by its favorable response to industrial interests. Neither party could be trusted to be a support to working people.<sup>53</sup>

John Fitzpatrick, president of the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), became an ardent believer that unions should work politically to achieve their ends. Fitzpatrick organized many workers in Illinois; being of the rank and file himself, he understood the necessity of a strong labor movement. In October, 1918, the CFL asked John Walker, president of the Illinois Federation of Labor (IFL) and former UMWA president, to push for a labor party. The December, 1918 convention of the IFL endorsed a party and a platform, and the Cook County Labor Party was born. This was followed by the Illinois State Labor Party (April, 1919) and a National Labor Party on November 22, 1919.<sup>54</sup> In 1919, the Cook County Labor Party nominated Fitzpatrick for mayor. The party’s platform modeled itself after Wilson’s fourteen points, fashioning “Labor’s fourteen points.” Labor wanted to increase its balance in a society dominated by private interests and government bureaucracies. Some of the fourteen points included rights to organize and bargain collectively, the right to an eight- hour day and a minimum wage, equal treatment for men and women in industry and government, representation at the peace conference, a voice in public education, and a League of Workers to supplement the League of Nations to guarantee disarmament. The state-oriented points included the abolishment of unemployment through public works projects during economic depression, lowering the cost of living by controlling “profiteering,” accident and health insurance, payment of the war debt by taxing inheritance, incomes, and land values. The restoration of free speech, assembly, and press, repressed during the war, were included. Finally, the government should nationalize, develop its natural resources, and adopt policies of public ownership of public utilities.<sup>55</sup> Fitzpatrick received 55, 990 votes, roughly eight percent. The CCLP complained after the election of bad treatment by the press; however, the CCLP did replace the Socialists as the number

<sup>52</sup> Keiser, *John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism*, 117.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 120-121.

three party in Chicago.<sup>56</sup> Fitzpatrick concluded post election that the party had “established itself on the map.”<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that neither the party nor Fitzpatrick ever considered overthrowing the established system of government. It was stressed that the party was non- revolutionary. Its goal was for the exploited to recapture their government from the exploiters by peaceful political action, and begin to run it for the ninety percent who were being denied self government.<sup>58</sup> The Labor Party stood for “a pragmatic eclecticism of program, free from commitments to any integrated social philosophy.”<sup>59</sup>

The National Labor Party (NLP or LP) held its first convention November 22, 1919, and the Farmer-Labor Party succeeded it in 1920. Here it adopted a set of principles and a presidential platform which included thirty-two principles and nine planks.<sup>60</sup> The opening paragraphs of the declaration of principles read as follows:

The Labor Party was organized to assemble into a new majority the men and women who work, but who have been scattered as helpless minorities in the old parties under the leadership of the confidence men of big business.

These confidence men, by exploitation, rob the workers of the product of their activities and use the huge profits thus gained to finance the old political parties, by which they gain and keep control of the government. They withhold money from the worker and use it to make him pay for his own defeat...workers have reached the determination to reverse this condition and take control of their own lives and their own government.

In this country this can and must be achieved peacefully by the workers uniting and marching in unbroken phalanx to the ballot boxes. It is the mission of the Labor Party to bring this to pass.<sup>61</sup>

The declaration also included the nationalization of railroads, mines, forests, water, power, telegraphs, telephones, stock yards, grain elevators, natural gas and oil well, cold storage and terminal warehouses, elevators, packing plants, flour mills, and of all basic industries “which require large-scale production and are in reality on

<sup>56</sup> Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago [online] [http://66.107.4.19/mayors\\_of\\_chicago.htm](http://66.107.4.19/mayors_of_chicago.htm).

<sup>57</sup> Keiser, *John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism*, 127.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 123-124.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States*, 378.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

a non-competitive basis.”<sup>62</sup> These entities were to be democratically managed. The private bank was to be abolished and laid exclusively in the hands of the federal government. Also the nationalization of unused lands appeared in the Labor Party’s declaration.<sup>63</sup> Although the platform had a socialist ring to it, the LP did not use the “phraseology of the Marxians or socialists. They spoke of industrial, political, and social democracy.”<sup>64</sup>

The post-war labor parties were neither organized nor encouraged by international union leaders. They were truly of the rank and file. The convention that launched the National Labor Party was one of the largest gatherings of rank and file workers in the history of the labor movement in America.<sup>65</sup> Most of the delegates came from local unions. Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Missouri, Michigan, Kentucky, Kansas, and Iowa contributed the bulk of support from about forty states.<sup>66</sup> Fine acknowledges, “The first two states [Illinois and Indiana] accounted for hundreds, among whom those from the coal fields were conspicuous.”<sup>67</sup> The men and women at this convention were the most militant trade unionists in the country in 1919. At their own 1919 convention, the United Mine Workers, representing 400,000 members, voted unanimously in favor of a resolution supporting the organization of the National Labor Party. However, the coal miners’ union executive board simply ignored the resolution.<sup>68</sup>

It is significant to bear in mind that the Labor Party was being seriously undermined from both sides of the political spectrum. Sam Gompers dispatched AFL officials to dismiss pro-Labor Party presidents of central federations, and “reorganize” local bodies that favored this type of political action. He was actively engaged in deflating their prospects for success.<sup>69</sup> Fitzpatrick declared that “the AFL is trying to scare everyone to death who dares rise up and oppose its political ideas.”<sup>70</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, the Socialist Party leadership refused to cooperate with the Labor Party. The Socialists felt that they were already well established and that the

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 387.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 383.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 387.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 389.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 387.

Labor Party would simply split the vote. They justified their stance on the grounds that the Labor Party was not specifically endorsing socialism as the alternative to capitalism.<sup>71</sup> Communists also denounced the Labor Party on the grounds that a party based on unions would impede the overthrow of capitalism. Their political strategy in the 1920 election was to boycott the ballots because voting showed a willingness to participate in the capitalist state. Interestingly the Communists, led by William Z. Foster, took over the Farmer-Labor Party in the mid 1920s, eventually leading to its demise.

Although the Labor Party convention of 1920 was dominated by local unions as in 1919, Gompers had clearly had an effect. There was a sharp decrease in the number of central bodies. These organizations were vulnerable to the AFL because their charters could easily be revoked through the AFL hierarchy.<sup>72</sup> Still, there were 171 unions present from Illinois alone.<sup>73</sup> The delegates to the 1920 convention represented a merger between the Labor Party and the Committee of Forty-Eight,<sup>74</sup> but it was the labor-progressives who dominated the convention. The first order of business was to change the name of the organization from the National Labor Party to the Farmer-Labor Party. This was done in the hope of attracting farmers who were also seeking new political alliances. By 1920 the American farmer’s Great Depression was already underway. Their wartime boom quickly turned bust. Large- scale farming also led small farmers towards defensive politics.<sup>75</sup> To illustrate, in 1919 a ton of coal could be had for the market price of six bushels of corn. One year later a ton of coal cost a farmer the equivalent of forty bushels of corn.<sup>76</sup> Economically speaking, workers and farmers had a similar struggle.

In 1920, the delegates to the convention nominated Parley P. Christensen for president. John Fitzpatrick was nominated for

<sup>71</sup> Farrell Dobbs, *Marxist Leadership in the U.S.: Revolutionary Continuity-Birth of Communist Movement, 1918-1922* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 109.

<sup>72</sup> Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States*, 390.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> The Committee of Forty-Eight included professionals, business men, and intellectuals from every state in the union. They were the inheritors of the Progressive Party of 1912. The Forty-Eighters spoke of old fashioned American civil liberties, and were deeply sympathetic to labors’ struggle.

<sup>75</sup> Keiser, *John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism*, 131.

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Campbell Mackay, *The Progressive Movement of 1924* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966) 41.

senator from Illinois. John Walker ran for governor. When the ballots were tallied, Fitzpatrick polled only 50,749 votes. Most of Fitzpatrick's votes, 45,989, came from the progressive miners downstate. Walker polled 52,814 total votes, 49,148 from downstate. The disappointing results were blamed on the campaign being run by political novices. Trade unionists were much more adept in the field of economics than that of politics. Nationally speaking, Christensen was not an outstanding personality or a well known public figure; he was a lawyer from Utah. Also, the party had little experience in raising money. The entire campaign was funded with \$24,000.00. The most powerful problem facing the Labor Party was the opposition on either side. The AFL and other more conservative groups thought the party was far too radical; limited farmer support was thought to be caused by fear of "red" influences. Socialists, communists, and other radicals saw the party as too conservative.

However, for downstate miners, the Farmer-Labor party was a perfect fit. In Macoupin County, Fitzpatrick polled 18% of the vote. In Franklin County 11% of the vote was for Farmer-Labor. In Williamson County, Walker polled 13% and Fitzpatrick polled 14%. In Saline County Fitzpatrick polled 19%, while Walker polled 18% of the vote.<sup>77</sup> Anthony Barrett, in his master's thesis on John Walker, characterized the trade unionists who advocated progressive union policies as "men with a deep sense of humanitarianism, a feeling of urgency for legislative reform, and a dedicated commitment to the improvement of the trade union movement."<sup>78</sup>

Clearly such men would appeal to rural coal miners. Rural Illinois miners gained everything from their participation in the union. They believed it was the union that had improved their lot when the government had proven unconcerned. The union brought them higher wages to feed their families, safer working conditions, and a sense of dignity. What they knew of the comforts of daily life, as the investigator of the Herrin Massacre pointed out, they thought came from the union. Undoubtedly, with this attitude, a party based on trade unionism would be appealing. Downstate miners also worked in the most treacherous conditions imaginable. For them, collective bargaining and bargaining power meant life or death. If

<sup>77</sup> *Illinois Blue Book, 1921-1922*, 768-772.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Barrette, "John Walker-Labor Leader of Illinois 1905-1933" (M.A. Thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 1967), 150.

they had no strength at the bargaining table it could mean any number of atrocities to bear.

The miners were also the most united group of workers in Illinois. District 12 of the UMWA was exceptional in that it often had the highest paid workers, and acted in solidarity even without the consent of the international executive board. Miners from other states would often come to Illinois to work. The nature of their unity promoted voting based on group and class consciousness. They also shared a mutual disinclination towards radical ideology. Rural miners were not socialists, and they were often violently against the idea of communism.

Further encouraging the miners to vote for the FLP was the fact that FLP leaders were labor heroes. John Fitzpatrick, described as sober and industrious, was not only of the rank and file, but he was famous for organizing the biggest labor strikes in Illinois. He was so committed to labor and progressive unionism that when he got married he searched the whole country for a union-made wedding band.<sup>79</sup> John Walker, also of the rank and file, was the former president of the UMWA, as well as the long-time president of the Illinois Federation of Labor. Walker and Fitzpatrick were both good friends of Mother Jones, the "coal miners' angel." Even Parley Christensen was known for his support of labor through his law practice in Utah. Fitzpatrick was admired for his commitment to his own beliefs and his courage in standing up to Gompers and the AFL executives.

Although largely disappointed in the practice of their government, southern Illinois coal miners were fiercely American and proud of the contributions they made during WWI. It is not surprising then that a party committed to social democracy, as opposed to a party advocating the overthrow of the government, would appeal to miners. The Farmer-Labor Party and its leaders wanted labor and working people to be fairly treated, to have a piece of what they produced, and to balance the interests of Big Business. They wanted working people to be able to take control of their own lives and their own government. The rural Illinois coal miners believed in the same principles for themselves and for their country. It was in this spirit that they, nearly single handedly, supported the Farmer-Labor Party in Illinois, in the epoch-making years following the Great War.

<sup>79</sup> Keiser, *John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism*, 5.