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The FARMER-LABOR ASSOCIATION

Minnesota's Party *Within* a Party

PAUL S. HOLBO

MUCH of American politics developed informally. Platforms, conventions, campaigns, patronage, spoils, pressure groups, and the parties themselves — never mentioned in the Constitution — appeared early and evolved with the nation as practical answers to the requirements of a particular time. Such a response occurred in the wheat belt of the northern Midwest during the second decade of the twentieth century, when agricultural discontent, sparked by an unstable farm economy, produced several organizations which have remained unique on the American political scene.

The first of these was the Nonpartisan League, which captured the Republican party of North Dakota and gained control of the state's government during World War I. Led by a handful of able Socialist organizers, the league directed rural resentment into demands for public ownership of grain elevators and other businesses that affected agriculture, and developed into a potent political machine.¹

¹ For a comprehensive history of the Nonpartisan League, see Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire* (Minneapolis, 1955).

² Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 207; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:546-548 (St. Paul, 1926).

Representatives of the league from North Dakota were active as early as 1916 in neighboring states, and by February, 1918, they helped to establish a similar organization among Minnesota farmers. The Minnesota Nonpartisan League, however, faced different conditions from those of North Dakota. In Minnesota no radical movement could hope to succeed without the support of organized labor. This was obtained with the formation of a separate but co-ordinate Working People's Nonpartisan Political League. The candidates of the two leagues failed to capture the Republican nomination in the primary election of that year but ran again as independents in the general election. To comply with a ruling of the state attorney general requiring a party label for candidates, they selected the title of "Farmer-Labor Party" to appear on the ballots.²

In 1920, when members of the two leagues repeated this stratagem, they appointed a joint committee which was recognized by Minnesota authorities as the legally constituted state central committee of the new Farmer-Labor party.

Such committees have widely varying powers over conventions, primaries, and

nominations. In Minnesota an election law passed in 1912 rigidly regulated the new committee's control over such party activities. As William Mahoney, the editor of a union newspaper, later commented, "A political party in Minnesota is a mere formal shell. Special interests, supported by well-meaning reformers, have emasculated party organizations."³ Several labor leaders warned that the Farmer-Labor party was "doomed to go the way of other third parties unless fortified by a more compact and powerful structure than the mere shell provided by the law."⁴

In short, the founders of the Farmer-Labor movement understood that third parties often had disappeared from the American political scene because of poor organization. They recognized that party politics called for a structure that would be far more cohesive than the ineffectual system provided by a central committee. Accordingly, in 1924 they established the Farmer-Labor Federation (soon renamed the Farmer-Labor Association), an enterprise that has no exact parallel in American political history.

THE FIRST article of the association's constitution stated that its object was "to unite the members of all farmer, labor and other kindred organizations, and unorganized elements which support independent political action by economic groups, into a political association; and to carry on an intensive program of education and organization incidental to participation in the political campaigns of the Farmer-Labor movement."⁵

Like its parent, the Nonpartisan League, the association required its members to pay dues. Unlike the league, which supported candidates sympathetic to it regardless of their political affiliation, the association was committed to the party that had created it. The auxiliary supported only Farmer-Labor candidates, and on occasion it even backed party nominees who had not obtained its own endorsement. One such candidate was Ernest Lundeen, who successfully chal-

lenged the association's selection in the gubernatorial primary of 1928 and again in the Senatorial primary of 1930.⁶ For the most part, however, the association determined the party's course by drawing up a platform and endorsing slates of candidates for the primary election. It was not in the strict sense a pressure group, but was rather a powerful political organization within the Farmer-Labor party.

Since the association was legally and officially independent of the party, trade unions and railroad brotherhoods found it possible to affiliate as members. In fact, from 1926 to 1933, unions which joined as units probably provided the majority of the organization's paying members. (Records do not exist for 1924 and 1925, but there is no reason to suspect that the pattern was any different in those years.) The exact number of union members represented in the association by affiliates is difficult to determine. There are financial records for the years 1926 through mid-1936, however. Unions were assessed dues on a per capita basis; therefore the amount of money paid in should serve as a yardstick to their membership, though they did not always pay regularly or in full. A rough estimate places the number at between 6,000 and 8,500 union members from 1930 to 1933; the total was approximately the same, or slightly less, in 1934 and 1935 and appears to have fallen in 1936.⁷ The expenses of strikes and other union activity may account for the decline, which took place at a time when Farmer-Labor candidates were running more strongly in urban

³ *Minnesota Union Advocate* (St. Paul), March 6, 1924; Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1912, p. 4, 20.

⁴ *Union Advocate*, September 6, 1923.

⁵ *Farmer-Labor Leader* (St. Paul), March 20, 1930.

⁶ Arthur Naftalin, "A History of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota," 151-153, an unpublished dissertation in the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷ These figures were obtained from an analysis of the cash book of the association, in the Farmer-Labor Association Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. Volumes 1 and 2 cover the period from May, 1926, through December, 1933; volumes 3 and 4 include the years 1934 and 1935.

working class areas. Most union members of the association lived in the Twin Cities and Duluth.

Farmers and others who joined the association affiliated on an individual basis. When at least ten persons in a township or ward had purchased memberships, a local club could be formed, and in the Twin Cities—especially St. Paul—these units served the party effectively. Although Farmer-Labor organizations were established in many counties after 1924, the chairman was often inactive, and in a few cases there was no contact in nonelection years between the headquarters in St. Paul and the rural county groups. The association's secretary appealed to another party worker in November, 1931: "Please check up to see whether there are County Chairmen in the counties indicated."⁸

Determined to end this situation, the association took steps in late 1932 to establish effective clubs throughout the state at the township and ward level. Professional organizers distributed information on how to proceed in forming clubs, and the Farmer-Labor administration of Governor Floyd B. Olson urged those persons who wanted state jobs to set up local groups. Early in 1934 the association announced that it had a functioning branch in each of the state's eighty-seven counties. Most rural counties contained several township clubs; some small cities were organized at the precinct level. There were eighteen clubs in the Twin Cities.⁹

⁸ Minutes of the Executive Committee, September 5, 1929, in Association Papers; Henry G. Teigan to Irene Welby, November 5, 1931, Teigan Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹ *Farmer-Labor Leader*, November 15, 1932; October 15, 1933; February 18, 1934; interview with Mr. Howard Y. Williams, Minneapolis, August 12, 1954.

¹⁰ Cash Book, vol. 1, 2, 3, 4; Membership Report, April 1, July 1, 1936; Summary of Membership by Districts, 1936, in Association Papers.

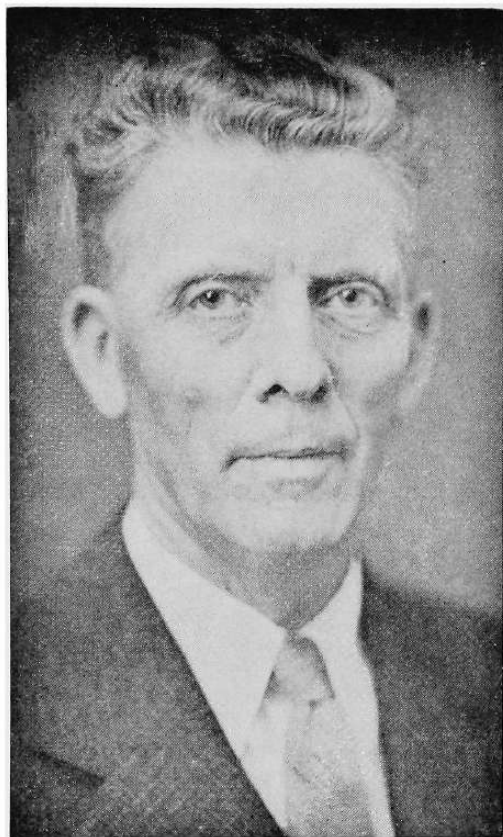
¹¹ *Farmer-Labor Leader*, August 30, 1933.

¹² *Farmer-Labor Leader*, September 15, December 30, 1933; copies of "Educational Secretary's Bulletin," "Speakers' Notes," and "The Party Line," all mimeographed publications of the educational bureau, in Association Papers.

The number of paying individual memberships probably did not exceed a thousand before 1930. Records of dues indicate that a maximum of 1,500 individuals belonged to the organization between 1930 and 1933. Throughout the first nine years of the association's history, many persons who worked in campaigns and even attended party conventions never officially joined the auxiliary. It is impossible to estimate the number of such quasi-members. But the great drive to establish clubs stimulated the enrollment of over fourteen thousand members by 1934, a figure that was maintained until 1936. In the latter year each of the state's nine Congressional districts boasted more than a thousand members. The largest numbers were in the old Nonpartisan League strongholds, such as Swift, Chippewa, Isanti, and Itasca counties, and in the major metropolitan areas. There were some 3,500 members in Minneapolis and St. Paul and 1,600 in Duluth.¹⁰

Thus, although total affiliation, union and individual, was probably not over 7,500 in 1930, the number gradually increased to about 10,000 members by 1933. After that year it climbed to well over 20,000.

In August, 1933, the organization added an educational bureau with a full-time staff to aid in the establishment of clubs and "to assist directly in making each club an interesting educational and social center for its community."¹¹ The bureau supplied clubs and unions with pamphlets and books, provided agendas for meetings in homes, and scheduled speakers for picnics, which often drew audiences of several hundred and occasionally attracted as many as three thousand persons. In September, 1933, the Junior Farmer-Labor Association was formed. Membership was open to those between fifteen and thirty years of age. A number of junior clubs were established in the Twin Cities and in northern and western Minnesota. In December, 1933, the central Farmer-Labor Association initiated a night school to train public speakers for the party. More than 150 persons enrolled.¹²



HENRY George Teigan

ALL MEMBERS of the association received copies of the official newspaper, the *Farmer-Labor Leader*, which first appeared on January 15, 1930. In publishing its own newspaper, the Farmer-Labor party followed a pattern set by the Nonpartisan League. An outstanding feature of the older organization had been its press, notably the *Minnesota Leader*, which had announced the establishment of the league in the North Star State with the blaring headline "Mob Rule at Lakefield; Big Conspiracy to Bar Justice," and had maintained the flavor and furor of this first barrage for several years.¹³ The first constitution of the Farmer-Labor Association had provided for a weekly newspaper to advertise the party's activities and disseminate its ideas. This journal, aptly named the *Farmer-Labor Advocate*, passed out of existence in 1927, during a high point in Republican economics and a

low point in Farmer-Labor politics. In 1929, as their prospects improved, Olson and other leaders of the association laid plans for the *Farmer-Labor Leader*. Throughout the decade of the 1930s—the time of the party's greatest success—this newspaper appeared biweekly, with frequent special editions to publicize candidates and important events.¹⁴

The state executive committee of the association set editorial policy and periodically discussed ways of improving the paper's effectiveness. Henry G. Teigan, a onetime Socialist and former organizer for the Nonpartisan League, was the first editor. In 1932, when Teigan's duties as secretary of the association demanded all his attention, the executive committee hired a professional newspaperman, Herrlee G. Creel, to replace him. Creel's unusually high starting salary of seventy-five dollars a week indicated that the association, which was normally impoverished, considered the post important.¹⁵

The paper was capably edited, well-written, and attractive in format. The editors avoided lurid or "yellow" journalism, but they featured eye-catching political cartoons on the front page. A frequent contributor was John Baer, a former Nonpartisan League Congressman from North Dakota, who was also the political cartoonist for *Labor*, the newspaper issued in Washington, D.C., by the national railway brotherhoods. He typically portrayed the intrigues of fat, wheezy "Big Biz," his hat and pockets bulging with dollar bills, against hard-working, clean-cut "Farmer" and "Labor."

Varying in size from four to twelve pages, the *Leader* carried full accounts of Farmer-Labor conventions, farm and union meetings, and speeches by party leaders. It served as a vehicle of communication between headquarters in St. Paul and local

¹³ *Minnesota Leader*, February 16, 1918.

¹⁴ The Minnesota Historical Society has nearly complete files of all three newspapers.

¹⁵ *Union Advocate*, September 12, 1929; Frank Starkey to Guy W. Alexander, February 9, 1931; C. R. Erickson to Starkey, April 18, 1932, Teigan Papers.

party workers by listing schedules of meetings and speeches, and by providing information on how to organize clubs, as well as broadside publicity for campaigns. The progress of the state legislature and the voting records of individual members were covered in detail. Candidates could purchase publicity with complete coverage of their districts for a flat fee of fifty dollars, and many utilized this cheap and effective service.¹⁶ The *Leader* also included pertinent national news and reports of liberal movements elsewhere in the United States and Europe—particularly in the Scandinavian countries. The whole content was permeated with progressive and socialist doctrine, often presented in the form of simple and witty parables.

The state's leading dailies, the *Minneapolis Journal*, the *Minneapolis Tribune*, and the *St. Paul Pioneer-Press*, bitterly criticized the Farmer-Labor party. Moreover, a great majority of the state's smaller daily and weekly newspapers were similarly conservative. In fact, small-town editors, such as Roe G. Chase of the *Anoka Herald* and Rudolph A. Lee of the *Long Prairie Leader*, launched some of the most violent sallies against the third party.

Having learned from the Nonpartisan League the problems involved in financing local papers, the association did not attempt to found its own country newspapers, though a few individuals made such efforts, usually short-lived. Instead, the Farmer-Labor Press Association, which was an adjunct of the *Leader*, sent press releases and news copy on state, national, and party affairs to a number of editors throughout the

state and encouraged them to use the liberal Federated Press Service.¹⁷

Only a handful of established publications actively supported the Farmer-Labor movement. These included the *Meeker County News* in central Minnesota; the *Farmers' Independent* of Clearwater County in the northwest; the *Mille Lacs County Times* and the *Askov American* in north central Minnesota; and the *Montevideo American*, the *Willmar Daily Tribune*, and the *Swift County News* in the west central area. All but the Willmar paper were weeklies of limited circulation, and all were located in counties where the Farmer-Labor party was especially strong.

Two union newspapers, the *Minnesota Union Advocate* and *Labor*, which issued many thousands of copies of special editions, greatly aided the third party among city workingmen and in those small towns that had sizeable groups of railroad employees. But the *Leader* bore the brunt of the journalistic political wars.

IT IS difficult to estimate the paper's circulation. The association attempted constantly to expand it, and by April, 1934, the paper itself claimed a circulation of 160,880. Undoubtedly the number of paid subscriptions was smaller. In 1937 Fred G. Miller, Creel's successor as editor, reported that in 1933 only 10,000 subscriptions had been paid. By 1936, however, there were 44,000 paying subscribers.¹⁸

The systematic promotion of the *Leader* began in late 1931 when two experienced organizers—Arthur C. Townley and A. E. Bowen, who had founded the Nonpartisan League—solicited over 1,200 paid subscriptions in four weeks. A number of the association's other representatives soon joined them in order to earn the fifty-cent fee for every two-dollar yearly subscription they sold. Furthermore, ward and township club members often acted as salesmen to boost the party and supplement their own scanty earnings. In 1933 a primary function of the local clubs was to distribute the paper.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Farmer-Labor Leader*, September 12, 1930; letters from district leaders in Mountain Iron, Kinney, and Buhl to Teigan, May 5, 1931, Teigan Papers.

¹⁷ Numerous examples of these press releases may be found in the Teigan Papers.

¹⁸ *Farmer-Labor Leader*, April 9, 1931; April 30, 1934; Convention Proceedings, 1937, p. 76; Minutes of Executive Committee, November 21, 1936, both in Association Papers.

¹⁹ Teigan to Starkey, November 4, 1931, Teigan Papers; Membership Report, April 1, July 1, 1936.



"now Don't Slip!"

Many subscribers were not able to pay in full, but the association considered the wide distribution of its organ more important than revenue. Clubs passed out hundreds of thousands of copies without charge, and the editors encouraged readers to give the paper to friends and neighbors in order to spread its message. Thousands of extra copies of campaign editions were printed for sale to clubs, unions, and individual party workers in bundles of ten or more at a nominal price of a cent apiece.²⁰

The *Farmer-Labor Leader* (retitled the *Minnesota Leader* in 1936) was not intended to make money, and it thoroughly upheld its founders' expectations in that regard. Indeed, its large deficits soon became a serious problem for the association. Subscription rates of two dollars per year (one dollar for members) did not begin to pay the costs of publication, especially when solicitors' fees were subtracted. As the paper's circulation climbed, so did the deficit. By November, 1936, when paid subscriptions reached their

peak of 44,000, the paper was losing two thousand dollars a month.²¹ Nevertheless, for almost a decade, few homes in Minnesota with potential Farmer-Labor voters failed to receive some copies of this effective political newspaper. As the party leaders saw it, their press paid off at the polls.

THE GREAT cost of publishing the *Leader* was only a part of the heavy financial drain on the association. Its organization was large and expensive, in spite of the strict economy that the great depression made necessary. Although the numerous members of the field staff earned part of their support by selling newspaper subscriptions, the expenses of maintaining the association's central office as well as bearing a share in the campaign costs of candidates placed a crushing burden on the treasury.

²⁰ *Farmer-Labor Leader*, April 15, 1934.

²¹ Minutes of Executive Committee, November 21, 1936.

Disbursements for ordinary purposes averaged \$320 per month in 1930. After December, 1933, when the association expanded its activities, current monthly expenses were rarely less than \$500. Outlay for the period from April 1 to December 1, 1936, totaled \$12,786.98—a monthly average of \$1,598.²²

Farmer-Labor party financiers faced a difficult task. Their program was hardly one to appeal to wealthy donors. Moreover, the depression severely strained the economic resources of the farmers and workingmen who comprised the movement's main strength. Letters in the association's files from devoted supporters reveal that payment of even the two-dollar membership fee often involved considerable personal sacrifice.

Out of this two dollars, one went to the *Leader*; the local club retained twenty-five cents; the county central committee received fifty cents; and the state association fell heir to the remaining twenty-five cents as its allotment. At times the state committee appears to have received a larger share, and by 1936 the amount allotted to the county and state committees had been reversed.²³

From 1926 until 1933 labor unions provided most of the money for the organiza-

tion's activities. No other contributors were either significant or consistent. In January, 1930—a fairly typical month—the state headquarters received only \$16.50 in fees from individual members. In the same month, however, unions provided the association with \$122.25. The unions made similar contributions (rarely over \$175 per month) from the late 1920s until 1936.²⁴

Affiliated unions were assessed a monthly levy of two cents per member, except for city central bodies, which were assessed one cent. Not all paid their dues, but some of them, such as the milk drivers' union, contributed regularly, and others made intermittent payments.²⁵ This money was the lifeblood of the association in the early years. The organization and the party itself might not have survived without it.

The effect on the association's treasury of the club membership drive in 1933 reversed this situation. By December of that year the association received \$169.38 from the unions and \$1,099.43 from individual memberships. In March, 1934, the latter figure had climbed to a peak of \$3,052.18, dropping off sharply thereafter, but still remaining well over the monthly union contribution. For the years 1934 and 1935 monthly receipts from membership fees averaged \$552, and from union dues, \$113. Fragmentary records from 1936 indicate that the pattern changed little in that year.²⁶ This marked improvement in income after the membership drive suggests that the officers may have had monetary motives for establishing the local clubs.

ADVERTISEMENTS and rebates from salaries indirectly supplemented the association's income. Money from these sources went into a sustaining fund for the *Leader*, whose accounts were kept separately from those of the association office. The paper normally carried a few inches of advertising—largely want ads and announcements for specialty houses and printing firms. Late in 1932, however, a different type of advertisement began to appear, greatly increasing

²² Cash Book, vol. 2, 3, 4; Report of the State Secretary-Treasurer, 1937, in Association Papers. Business accounts of the *Leader* were kept separately and are not included in the association's papers.

²³ *Constitution of the Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota* (1934), article 6, sections 1, 2; Convention Proceedings, 1936, p. 146, both in Association Papers.

²⁴ Cash Book, vol. 2, p. 2; vol. 3, 4; *Farmer-Labor Leader*, April 9, 1931; interview with Mr. Frank Starkey, St. Paul, July 30, 1954.

²⁵ *Constitution* (1934), article 6, section 3; Cash Book, vol. 1, 2, 3, 4. Between 1936 and 1939 the two-cent assessment was raised to two and a half cents. See *Constitution* (1939), article 3, section 1, copy in Association Papers.

²⁶ Cash Book, vol. 3, p. 1, 31; vol. 4; mimeographed reports of receipts and disbursements for April, July, August, and September, 1936, in Association Papers. There were in addition miscellaneous contributions which varied widely from month to month but never approached membership fees in volume. In election months the association also received large amounts specifically earmarked for campaign expenses.

the amount of space devoted to paid matter. In the issue of August 30, 1932, for instance, the following business firms purchased space: C. W. Olson Iron Works; General Tractor and Equipment Company; Clement F. Sculley (grading and excavating); W. S. Nott (contractors' supplies); Superior Brick; Thorman W. Rosholt (construction and industrial equipment); Commonwealth Electric Company (electrical engineers); Hertl Coal; Northern Coal and Dock Company; Northwestern Fuel Company; and Kunz Oil.

The appearance of this type of advertising took place almost simultaneously with an expansion of public works and a state construction program. The association was receiving a welcome return on the favors its candidates distributed in their official capacities. It is only surprising that the usually alert managers of the *Leader* required several years to discover this small source of revenue, well known to major-party politicians. Perhaps it took this long for the third party to prove its political strength and to overcome its scruples about associating with businessmen.

The party was also slow to claim other "honest graft" available to experienced politicians of that era, such as profits from insurance and bonding. In May, 1931, the Olson administration did begin to publish legal notices in sympathetic newspapers, but these constituted so small a proportion of the state's papers that Republican publishers continued to receive much of the work.²⁷

As early as December, 1930, however, the Farmer-Labor party asked state employees to contribute three per cent of their earnings to the sustaining fund. Two years later, when Governor Olson appointed Irwin C. Strout to the position of budget commissioner, an office that controlled the classification and wages of state employees, the association put more pressure on government workers.²⁸

State Commissioner Carl R. Erickson was quoted in the *Leader* of August 30, 1933, as saying: "A large percentage of the state employees, from Governor Olson down, are contributing 3 per cent of their salary to-

ward sustaining the *Farmer-Labor Leader*, but no employee has ever been forced to do so." The paper's editor went on to comment: "All of the state employees ought to be, if they are not, sympathizers with the Farmer-Labor party. What would be more natural than for them to voluntarily 'kick-in'?"

Campaign funds were obtained from a variety of sources. Olson himself led the drive to pay for the party's race in 1930. Mrs. Frederick W. Wittich, a leading figure in the League of Women Voters, formed the Olson All-Party Volunteer Committee, modeled after the all-party clubs for Alfred E. Smith in the presidential campaign of 1928. Five thousand residents of the Twin Cities, including many Republicans, joined the organization.²⁹ Thereafter, friction between the association and the all-party groups became a continuing irritant in Farmer-Labor party politics. Olson's throng of admirers in all camps contributed to his campaigns, which the party's state central committee managed. Funds for other candidates came from the association, individual contributors, and especially from county committees and labor unions.

If the Farmer-Laborites had been content to rely on such diverse and informal sources of revenue for their other operations, the association might have avoided the public distrust which eventually focused on its highly professional permanent organization, and the party it controlled might have continued longer as an independent influence. Although it is clear in retrospect that the association's growing concern with spoils and patronage damaged the movement, the organization was a vital factor in the long and surprisingly successful career of the

²⁷ Teigan to C. F. Gaarenstrom, May 2, 1931; to William Friedell, May 2, 1931, Teigan Papers.

²⁸ Naftalin, "History of the Farmer-Labor Party," 255; George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 148 (Minneapolis, 1951).

²⁹ Teigan to J. V. Himsl, February 25, 1932, Teigan Papers; Olson to Irene Welby, August 1, 1935, Association Papers; *Farmer-Labor Leader*, October 15, 1930; Mayer, *Floyd B. Olson*, 52, 113, 145, 247, 278.

Farmer-Labor party. Its opponents frequently revealed their envy of its activity, and a veteran political campaigner rated the association more effective than the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party that elected a

³⁹ Interview with Mr. Williams.

THE PICTURE on page 304 is from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The cartoon on page 306 is from the *Farmer-Labor Leader* of December 30, 1931, and the one below, depicting Olson with the united support of "Farmer" and "Labor" is from the same paper, January 15, 1930.

United States Senator and a state ticket in 1954.³⁰

Finally, it should be recalled that Floyd B. Olson, a dynamic political personality who might have won high office on his own merits, chose to work with the association and to build the party through this agency. Although changing times and internal problems eventually brought about its obsolescence, the Farmer-Labor Association was an impressive testimonial to American political ingenuity.

THE VERY THOUGHT OF IT SCARES 'EM





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