

Professional Paper
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The Rise and Fall of the National Farmer's Union as a Liberal Force During the Cold War Era

The rise of the National Farmer's Union as a liberal force in 1929 to its fall in the early 1960s is a story of social conflict culminating during the Cold War Era. During this period many individuals joined the Farmer's Union to fight against economic, political, and social injustices. The National Farmer's Union united individual small family farmers and laborers across the northern plains into a powerful liberal fighting force during the Cold War period. Unfortunately, the forces of the age demanded the Union abandon its liberal ideology or face extinction. The question remains how and why an organization once at the forefront of the fight against the injustices of the American system could accommodate itself to the very system it had once despised in order to survive.

The National Farmer's Union was a powerful liberal farm group created in response to the circumstances of southern tenant cotton farmers after the Civil War.¹ During the reconstruction period the deflating value of greenback currency and increased farm production had led to lower prices for farm products.² Leveraged beyond their ability to pay, receiving lower prices for their products, and decreased purchasing power for their money, many southern farmers joined farm organizations in an effort to survive.

After the Civil War struggling farmers joined the Grange and Farmer's Alliance organizations to regain their autonomy. Both organizations touted Populist Party ideology attacking the injustices of bankers, railroads, monopolies, and state politicians.³ Grange and Alliance members demanded antitrust laws, popular elections, banking regulations, currency inflation, and other political reforms to end corporate exploitation of

¹ Simon Barrett, *The Mission, History, and Times of the Farmer's Union* (Nashville: Marshall and Bruce Company, 1909), p. 103.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

farmers.⁴ Both groups supported cooperative buying and selling, political and economic reform, and government ownership of key industries to protect the farmer.⁵

Isaac Gresham, founder of the National Farmer's Union, actively organized the Alliance across the south and participated in the Populist revolt before organizing the Union.⁶ According to Gresham, the Alliance and the Grange failed to survive because they provided farmers with few economic benefits and allowed partisan politics to corrupt their organizations.⁷ The failure of the Alliance and the Grange left a gap the Farmer's Union would willingly fill.

In response to the need for a new farm organization, Gresham and ten other men in Smyrna, Texas created the National Farmer's Union in 1902.⁸ The 1902 charter stated that the Union existed to assist farmers in marketing, obtaining better prices for products, and protecting all farming interests.⁹ The Farmer's Union picked up the farmer's fight for fair prices, cooperative marketing, political equality, and economic reform.

As soon as the founders chartered the Farmer's Educational and Cooperative Union of America farmers flooded into the organization. Across most of the states the credit and mortgage systems had bankrupted almost the entire farming population and farmers looked to the Union to relieve their poverty.¹⁰ Farmer's Union believed that its cooperative purchasing and selling empowered farmers to bypass the credit system and control more of the market.¹¹ The Union asserted further that member cooperation could

⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶ Ibid, p. 16.

⁷ Ibid, p. 16.

⁸ Ibid, p. 17.

⁹ Ibid, p. 106.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 119.

¹¹ William Pierce Tucker, *The Farmer's Union: A Study in Social and Political Thought and Action* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1945), p. 14.

raise low farm prices, help farmers bypass greedy processors, and eliminate unjust distributors robbing small family farmers of farm profits.¹²

In 1902 economic changes within the United States had altered American agriculture forever. Since the Civil War agriculture had industrialized to produce larger crops and marketed its surpluses via railroads, in large industrial centers, and with the help of banks. Farmers depended upon mechanization to meet the demands of growing national and international markets for their products.¹³ Farming communities profited from growth, but Farmer's Union officials argued that in the process they were enveloped in a system rooted in selfishness, greed, and avarice.¹⁴

Between 1902 and 1905 Farmer's Union charters were established in twelve different states with a membership of over 200,000 people.¹⁵ In 1904 the Union passed several resolutions supporting free labor and created a permanent political partnership with the AFL. In the same year Union leaders established permanent staff lobbyists and supported the active political representation of farmer and labor interests at every state capitol. At this time, active Union members built cooperatively owned elevators and warehouses. Despite the organization's huge strides forward, by 1905 internal dissension over money and political decisions caused problems within the Union.¹⁶ Union members disagreed over whether their economic interests or their political reforms should take priority in organization policy.

In 1906 Newt Gresham died and Charles S. Barrett governed the organization as president for the next twenty-two years. By 1907 Union membership reached a total of

¹² John A. Crampton, *National Farmers Union-Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁵ Gladys Talbott Edwards, *The Farmer's Union Triangle* (Jamestown: Farmer's Union Educational Service, 1941), p. 22.

¹⁶ William Pierce Tucker, *The Farmer's Union: A Study in Social and Political Thought and Action* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1945), p. 19.

935,937 in thirteen states.¹⁷ The Union reached its peak strength in the Southern states. Cotton, grain, and tobacco dominated the interests of the Union membership in mass meetings throughout the Southern region. Union members operated cotton cooperatives, grain warehouses, and meat packing plants throughout many important regional cities.¹⁸ With Southern states leading the way, Union officials issued charters throughout the border regions, Rocky Mountain region, and the Pacific Coast by 1909.

Between 1909 and 1920 the National Farmer's Union experienced a period of slow expansion while developing a complex membership. Several strands of dissent wove a unique political fabric into the Union membership. The Socialist Party, Nonpartisan League, Farmer-Labor Party, and Progressive Party transformed the Farmer's Union organization from within.¹⁹ The Farmer's Union integrated ideas and membership from each organization into their association.

Between 1910 and 1917 the Socialist Party attracted diverse groups of farmers, laborers, and small business owners throughout the United States. Socialist Party candidates won elections throughout the Midwest, Oklahoma, and the West.²⁰ Socialist Party members sought to replace the current major political parties completely transforming the American political system. The Party wanted a "cooperative commonwealth" to replace the unjust economic order in American society.²¹ The Socialist movement laid an important foundation for Farmer's Union agrarian dissent. As the influence of the Socialist Party declined many Party members joined the Farmer's Union.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

¹⁹ William C. Pratt, "Rural Radicalism on the Northern Plains, 1912-1950," *Montana-The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Winter 1992): p. 44.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 44.

²¹ Ibid, p. 44.

By 1915 some former Socialist Party members sought to reform the major political parties from within by nominating their candidates for Republican primaries.²² These former Socialist Party members created the Nonpartisan League and were particularly successful in North Dakota. The League maintained a strong anti-corporate ideology advocating state ownership of banks, grain elevators, mills, packing -houses, plants, and public ownership of utilities.²³ The League advocated state sponsored farm insurance for disease or hail, unemployment insurance for labor, and an inexpensive farm credit program.²⁴ The Farmer's Union and Nonpartisan League programs were nearly identical in principle and practice. The Farmer's Union absorbed many former League members and their ideology.

During the 1920s the Farmer-Labor Party grew throughout the Western United States. The Farmer-Labor political platform was a combination of the Socialist and Non-Partisan League ideology.²⁵ The Nonpartisan League's entry into Minnesota politics resulted in the formation of the third party Minnesota Farmer-Labor party.²⁶ Minnesota Nonpartisan League farmers made an alliance with the Minnesota State Federation of small businessmen to form the Minnesota Farmer- Labor Party.²⁷ The Farmer-Labor Party gained power in the Minnesota state legislature and served as a model for the National Farmer's Union labor alliances

The Farmer- Labor Party platform molded the National Farmer's Union economic policy. The Farmer-Labor Party argued government should not only protect business interests, but should protect those squeezed by the market.²⁸ The Farmer- Labor groups evolved because farmers, wage earners, and laborers were marginalized by the

²² Ibid, p. 44.

²³ Mike Malone, "Montana's Political Culture-A Century of Evolution," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 35 (Winter 1981): p. 49.

²⁴ Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States-The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Economy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 6.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 25.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 79.

economy. The Farmer-Labor Party and the Farmer's Union suggested the government should balance profit with the protection of the weak in American society.

The Farmer-Labor coalition emphasized the need for: open shop laws, collective bargaining protections, rural tax credits, state ownership of terminal elevators, warehouses, flour mills, stockyards, packinghouses, and creameries, state farmer's insurance, and government purchase of surplus agricultural commodities.²⁹ When the Farmer-Labor Party collapsed, its members incorporated valuable experience and ideas into the Farmer's Union organization.

The final strand of the complex Farmer's Union ideological tapestry was Progressive Party ideals. Progressives left a legacy of moralistic opposition to corporate political power and support for direct political action within many farming communities.³⁰ Progressives supported initiatives, referendums, direct primaries, direct elections, workmen's compensation, and farmer's economic organizations.³¹ The Robert LaFollette Progressives of Wisconsin reorganized farmers into distinct economic organizations to regain economic and political power. Despite Progressive victories, many farmers bypassed the Progressive Party and joined the Farmer's Union.³²

As other farm organizations declined in influence, the National Farmer's Union absorbed their members and ideology. Farmer's Union membership and cooperatives grew during the World War I period. By 1920, the number of buying, manufacturing, processing, and marketing cooperatives had increased by 10,000. Wherever Farmer's Union cooperatives were strong, membership remained strong. The grain and livestock cooperative elevators, terminal markets, and wholesale exchanges in St. Paul and Omaha blossomed during this period. With the growth of Northern cooperatives the

²⁹ Ibid, p. 74.

³⁰ Mike Malone, "Montana's Political Culture—A Century of Evolution," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 35 (Winter 1981): p. 49.

³¹ Ibid, p. 49.

³² Ibid, p. 47.

center of power of the Farmer's Union shifted from the South to the North.³³ The business arm of the organization had clearly begun to outpace the political arm.

The end of World War I marked the beginning of one of the most severe depressions in U.S. agriculture. In response to the economic downturn, from 1920 to 1928 Farmer's Union membership grew rapidly in the spring wheat states of Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Montana, and Iowa hit worst by the depression.³⁴ Struggling Farmer's Union members called for federal legislation guaranteeing cost of production income, the protection of cooperative marketing, and the creation of a federal corporation to purchase and regulate surplus agricultural production.³⁵ By 1927 the Farmer's Union Northwest Organizing Committee expanded the work of the Farmer's Union in Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana, registering 60,000 more members.³⁶

During the 1930s the Farmer's Union members in Minnesota, the Dakotas, Wisconsin, and Montana created the Farm Holiday Association.³⁷ The Farm Holiday Association was considered the, "direct action arm of the National Farmer's Union," across the Western United States.³⁸ Milo Reno, the President of the Iowa Farmer's Union called farmers to a buying, selling, and tax paying strike unless the federal government passed legislation to relieve farmers' suffering.³⁹ Farm Holiday members blockaded products bound for large cities and prevented farm foreclosure sales by mob actions.⁴⁰ Holiday members held penny sales where angry farmers forced intimidated

³³ Ibid, p. 33.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 34.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 38.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 40.

³⁷ Gladys Talbot Edwards, *The Farmer's Union Triangle* (Jamestown: Farmer's Union Educational Service, 1941), p. 41.

³⁸ William C. Pratt, "Rural Radicalism on the Northern Plains, 1912-1950," *Montana-The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Winter 1992): p. 48.

³⁹ William Pierce Tucker, *The Farmer's Union: A Study in Social and Political Thought and Action* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1945), p. 43.

⁴⁰ Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States-The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Economy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 91.

creditors to sell them their land for nominal sums.⁴¹ The Farm Holiday Association branch of the National Farmer's Union exemplified the severity of the farm crisis during this time period.

By 1933 most Farmer's Union members supported the Agriculture Adjustment Act and other New Deal agricultural legislation. The Union supported maximum farm production, cost of production price controls, technological innovations to aid family farms, and low cost credit for farmers.⁴² New Deal legislation and World War II profits stabilized the agricultural markets and the business arm of the Union exploded during the 1940s. By 1944 the Union businesses included: oil companies, exchanges, livestock shipping associations, grain elevators, creameries, insurance companies, trucking companies, a hospital, and multiple marketing agencies.⁴³ Union members survived the crisis and made unprecedented profits from cooperative businesses.

In 1940 the Farmer's Union elected James G. Patton president and initiated a new era for the organization.⁴⁴ Union farmers had benefited from World War II, but the prosperity they enjoyed failed to carry over into the postwar years.⁴⁵ By 1948 wages and corporate profits had increased by large margins. Total farm income decreased from \$17.8 billion in 1947 to \$13 billion in 1950, with the average single farm's income decreasing from \$3500 to \$2700 per year.⁴⁶ Despite Farmer's Union gains, farmers in Montana, the Dakotas, and Wisconsin lost \$1 billion in purchasing power between 1948 and 1949.⁴⁷

⁴¹ William Pierce Tucker, *The Farmer's Union: A Study in Social and Political Thought and Action* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1945), p. 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁴ Bruce E. Field, *Harvest of Dissent: The National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Union President Patton claimed that between 1940 and 1949 the farm sector alone, compared to other segments of the US economy, was in rapid decline.⁴⁸ From 1947 to 1950, farmers received \$4.8 billion less net income for their products in just three years.⁴⁹ Patton claimed economic distress in the farm community resulted from low gross income and prices received for products, not from rising farm costs or prices paid.⁵⁰ Despite Farmer's Union efforts the agricultural community suffered.

Farmer's Union officials cited these statistics as evidence that small family farms were victims of corporate farms and corporate America. The Farmer's Union observed, "factories in the fields of America". By 1949 three-fourths of America's farms were less than 180 acres, but farms over 500 acres were increasing by 15 percent each year.⁵¹ Montana farms in particular had numbered 46,904 in 1925 and only 23,324 in 1974, exemplifying the national trend toward fewer large operations.⁵² Across the United States big operators and absentee owners drove farm families from their land and destroyed the traditional family farm pattern of American agriculture.⁵³

By 1950, Farmer's Union President, Jim Patton claimed that American political life protected big business and victimized the American farmer. Farmer's Union officials believed corporate America had monopolized politics since the defeat of the Populists and the Non-Partisan League.⁵⁴ Officials claimed large businesses made the rules of the market place advantageous to themselves not the family farmer. Small businesses and family farmers were ruthlessly crushed beneath the weight of giant corporations.⁵⁵ The

⁴⁸ *The People's Voice*, 17 May 1963.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *National Union Farmer*, December 1955.

⁵¹ John A. Crampton, *National Farmers Union-Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 52.

⁵² Mike Malone, "Montana's Political Culture-A Century of Evolution," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 35 (Winter 1981): p. 54.

⁵³ *National Union Farmer*, November 1955.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵⁵ *Montana Farmers Union News*, 26 January 1949.

Farmer's Union believed family farmers could not compete with the advantages of corporate size and power.⁵⁶

In response to these threats the National Farmer's Union's policy platforms from 1950 to 1958 aggressively sought the preservation of the family farm and the transformation of America into a more just society. At its heart, the Farmer's Union was both an ideological organization and a political interest group with a particular class-consciousness. Each generation of the Farmer's Union had claimed to defend the farmer, the land, and the common people but during the Cold War the Farmer's Union challenged the very foundations of American democracy. With a long history of agrarian liberalism, the Union had always capitalized upon a sense of disadvantage, and advocated pacifism, cooperation, and preservation of the family farm ideal in the face of corporate domination.⁵⁷ During the Cold War the Farmer's Union demanded liberal changes in American capitalism and democracy.

By 1950 Farmer's Union members felt their way of life was threatened and resorted to charged rhetoric to gain public support for their cause.⁵⁸ Farmer's Union members utilized the mythology of the farm family and attachment to the land to gain support. The Union manipulated public opinion by connecting their cause to respect for the land, the stability arising from property ownership, the importance of a close knit family unit accompanied by rigid morality, American individualism, and the belief that the farmer forms the best citizen of democracy.⁵⁹ The Union equated conservation of the family farm with the preservation of American Democracy to gain membership and public support.

⁵⁶ *National Union Farmer*, December 1955.

⁵⁷ John A. Crampton, *National Farmers Union-Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The Union professed the future of America would forever be linked to the egalitarian distribution of goods throughout American society. Farmer's Union liberalism seemed to demand a broader distribution of social goods to preserve freedom for all people.⁶⁰ The Union policy program stated, "History was the struggle of plain people to free themselves from the yoke of slavery and tyranny to emperors, to feudalism, to capitalism controlled by a few royalists. The Union acts in opposition to the vested power of property."⁶¹ The rhetoric of the organization suggested these middle-class farmers were egalitarian, but self-interest appeared to be an equally powerful motivator of their behavior.

Although professing egalitarian convictions, the National Farmer's Union members adamantly defended their private property rights and guarded their farm profits.⁶² In 1950, most Farmer's Union members owned and operated a slightly above average farm with a slightly above average income.⁶³ Farmer's Union members made more money, sold more, operated larger farms, employed more people, had more formal education, and enjoyed a higher status in the community than those farmers who did not belong to the organization.⁶⁴ Farmer's Union members supported free enterprise, the family farm operation, and profitable cooperatively owned businesses. The business arm of the organization seemed to drive Union policy more than the organization's egalitarian convictions.

Historian Mike Malone reported that, "Farmer's Union members tended to be Republican entrepreneurs with a legacy of party irregularity, anti-corporate ideology, and anti-Eastern radicalism on the left in conservative regions."⁶⁵ Farmer's Union members had remnants of advanced liberal traditions from the Socialist Party, Nonpartisan

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 51.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 52.

⁶² Ibid, p. 208.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 56.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 59.

⁶⁵ Mike Malone, "Montana's Political Culture-A Century of Evolution," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 35 (Winter 1981): p. 46.

League, Farmer-Labor Party, and Progressive Party.⁶⁶ Across the northern plains Farmer's Union members echoed previous farm organizations' policies of anti-corporate programs, state owned banks, cooperative grain elevators, cooperative businesses, and public ownership of utilities.⁶⁷ Farmer's Union members were entrepreneurs with some reform-minded liberal tendencies.

In the early 1950s the Farmer's Union believed American capitalism left many farmers and laborers suffering on the edges of society. Those who lacked inherited resources to weather panics, depressions, and recessions suffered a great deal.⁶⁸ Less developed states were crippled by every adverse business cycle in the national and international economies.⁶⁹ Farmer's Union leaders echoed previous farm organization concerns, demanding government protect farmers and laborers in these sensitive regions.⁷⁰ Patton suggested government should have an egalitarian function whereby it perfects the market to prevent it from harming the family farmer and laborer.

Throughout the early Cold War Era Farmer's Union leaders united with workers because it benefited them politically. Labor officials provided a necessary ally in the fight for family farm legislation.⁷¹ The farmer and the urban laborer realized working together made sense in the face of corporate power.⁷² During the Cold War period Patton and the Farmer's Union worked intimately with organized labor to try to tip the balance of power in their direction.

James Patton stated the common interests of all working and farming people demanded social justice. Patton utilized the rhetoric of social justice to gain public

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.49.

⁶⁷ Ibid. p.48.

⁶⁸ Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States-The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Economy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 6.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 70.

⁷¹ *The People's Voice*, 2 May 1958.

⁷² *The People's Voice*, 12 January 1964.

support for the Farmer's Union platform.⁷³ Patton suggested the freedom from want and oppression was basic to American democracy and required: parity income for farmers, decent housing and jobs for workers, and universal education for all people.⁷⁴ He added both working and farming people benefited when the minimum wage was raised to lift 32 million Americans above poverty level and when farmers earn parity for their products.⁷⁵ Patton intertwined the interests of farmers and laborers gaining public support for Union efforts.

The National Farmer's Union printed vast quantities of information documenting the vital relationship between farmers and workers. The Union provided statistics to prove that people with good high paying jobs purchased more agricultural products, and prosperous farmers bought more of labor's products.⁷⁶ Farmer's Union and Labor officials believed establishing the interdependence between the farm, rural communities, rural cities, and large industrial centers were vital to their cause.⁷⁷ Like farmers, Union officials claimed, wages of labor had not kept pace with wages of management and corporate profits.⁷⁸ Family farmers and laborers were supposed to work together to raise farm profits and improve wages.

Throughout Patton's presidency, Farmer's Union and CIO officials joined together to try to guarantee workers, farmers, small businesses, and professionals the right to bargain collectively.⁷⁹ Family farmers and wage earners worked together against right to work laws and the special interest groups that supported them.⁸⁰ The Farmer's Union stated that the union shop principle, collective bargaining, and strong unionism

⁷³ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 9 October 1963.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁶ *The People's Voice*, 17 January 1958.

⁷⁷ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 12 December 1962.

⁷⁸ *The People's Voice*, 4 July 1958.

⁷⁹ *The People's Voice*, 30 May 1958.

⁸⁰ *The People's Voice*, 18 April 1958.

must be protected to preserve the American way of life.⁸¹ Working together these two groups had supported the Wagner Act firmly establishing collective bargaining and the union shop. The greatest achievement of the Farmer's Union and its labor associates was the passage of the Full Employment Act in 1946, guaranteeing collective bargaining and labor rights.⁸² The Farmer's Union believed collective bargaining and the employment rights of both farmer and laborer had to be protected.

The 1957-1958 Farmer's Union policy platform stated a farm program must provide farmers the same protection as federal law provided laborers. Union officials stated the monopolization of agriculture by large food distributors had led to price fixing and hurt the independent farmer. Small family farmers could not compete with the large corporate farming machine. Farmer's Union officials suggested a program of farm credit, parity income for family farmers, a food stamp program for the needy, and world distribution of surplus production to protect family farmers and preserve their way of life.⁸³ Officials believed low farm income had deprived millions of farmers of the ability to make a living and resulted in business and industrial cutbacks.⁸⁴ Union officials and their labor associates agreed legislation had to be passed to stabilize the family farm economy.

As early as 1949 the Farmer's Union voiced their opposition to the corporate exploitation of American citizens and the economies of other countries by U.S. corporations.⁸⁵ Patton argued, "American corporate imperialism," was the greatest threat to American democracy, not communism.⁸⁶ The Farmer's Union accused the United States of allowing corporations to extend their monopoly capitalism across the world

⁸¹ *The People's Voice*, 9 May 1958.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸³ *The People's Voice*, 29 November 1957.

⁸⁴ *The People's Voice*, 9 October 1963.

⁸⁵ *National Union Farmer*, 27 April 1949.

⁸⁶ *National Union Farmer*, 27 April 1949.

using the language of democracy.⁸⁷ Officials claimed the United States government connected itself with cartels, monopolies, and other disreputable corporations in order to further capitalism not contain communism.⁸⁸ The Farmer's Union condemned these actions as the greatest threat to American democracy and repugnant to the ideals America professed to defend.

The Farmer's Union opposed American intervention in Korea and Southeast Asia. Instead of military intervention the National Farmer's Union endorsed the 1950 Point Four Plan for Peace.⁸⁹ The Plan utilized the United Nations to aid land reform, develop natural resources, institute sweeping medical and health care aid, and stimulate domestic industry, economy, education, and self-government in struggling nations.⁹⁰ The Farmer's Union believed the true answer to communism at home and abroad was true democracy not corporate monopoly.⁹¹

Farmer's Union officials warned American intervention abroad was further evidence the country was far too militarized and threatened to destroy our way of life. They argued family farmers in particular were victims of the uncontrollable power of the military-industrial complex because war cut into family farm profits.⁹² The Cold War seemed to underwrite the rise of corporation farming and the elimination of the family farm. Non-defense related spending on conservation, rural telephones, rural electrification, farm tenancies, and other farm assistance was being cut every day despite the growing farm crisis.⁹³ War ordinance plants, high wages in military factories, and the military draft pulled thousands more farmers off the land creating a scarcity of labor. American intervention abroad cut into family farm profits and Farmer's Union officials resented it.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁸⁸ *National Union Farmer*, 23 March 1949.

⁸⁹ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 27 September 1950.

⁹⁰ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 22 November 1950.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁹² *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 27 April 1949.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 130.

During the Cold War period nothing was considered more unpatriotic than to question the capitalist crusade against communism. In 1946 the National Farmer's Union issued an official statement accusing the US government of extending totalitarianism throughout the world in the guise of American democracy and capitalism. In response to the Farmer's Union foreign policy position journalist, Robert Cruise McManus, accused the Farmer's Union of "infiltrating agriculture with communists" in a 1948 Farm Journal article.⁹⁴ The McManus accusations set in motion a series of events that forever altered the reputation of the Farmer's Union.

On September 7, 1950 Republican Senator Styles Bridges perpetuated these allegations when he read a speech on the floor of the Senate written by, Robert McManus, accusing the Farmer's Union of being a communist organization.⁹⁵ As a director in the Farm Bureau, Styles Bridges realized he could eliminate the Bureau's chief rival farm organization by destroying its reputation. Consequently, Farm Bureau officials charged the Farmer's Union with, "advocating communist causes, parroting communist propaganda, and refusing to denounce communist activities."⁹⁶

In response to the allegations the National Farmer's Union sued the Farm Bureau for slander.⁹⁷ The trial received extensive media coverage throughout the United States. The Farmer's Union was found not guilty of all charges and the Farm Bureau ordered to pay damages, but the reputation of the Farmer's Union never fully recovered from the Communist accusations.⁹⁸

Following the 1950 trial, the FBI, State Department, and House Un-American Activities Committee investigated the Farmer's Union for communist activity.⁹⁹ Investigators singled out North Dakota Farmer's Union President Glenn Talbott and

⁹⁴*The People's Voice*, 1 January 1951.

⁹⁵*The People's Voice*, 22 September 1950.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹⁷*The People's Voice*, 1 January 1951.

⁹⁸Bruce E. Field, *Harvest of Dissent-The National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 132.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 139.

Montana Farmer's Union President D.W. Chapman as particularly threatening to the American way of life. Both men had ties to the American Peace Mobilization and the Civil Rights Congress, which the Committee believed were communist organizations. The Committee demanded the Union purge its membership of these communist activists.¹⁰⁰

In response to the perceived growing communist threat, the American Legion introduced legislation in Montana to create a state un-American activities committee, which could lawfully interrogate and would have the same duties as a superior court.¹⁰¹ In 1951 the committee legislation passed and the committee was granted full authority to compel witnesses, seize papers, accounts, and documents with full force of the law. American Legion official Ed Gibbons stated the Montana Farmer's Union was one of the state's subversive organizations and would be fully investigated.¹⁰²

In an interview with Marion Hellstern of Glasgow, Montana it was evident to me that Farmer's Union membership had its cost. In 1950, Marion was forced to leave his home and into an automobile, driven to an unknown location, and questioned without the presence of an attorney twice by the FBI. Marion was an active Farmer's Union member with friends in the Communist Party. Marion was offered immunity from charges if he would identify all the Communist infiltrators within the Montana Farmer's Union in his area. Marion refused their offer and was returned to his home. After his interview Marion was expelled from the Presidency of his local Farmer's Union and neighbors ostracized him from social activities in the Glasgow area for one year. Finally convinced he was not a Communist, some of Marion's neighbors started inviting him to social gatherings and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 139.

¹⁰¹ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 26 January 1949.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 2.

allowed him to participate in certain local political activities. Marion mentioned that even today some people question his loyalty to the American government and way of life.¹⁰³

By 1950, the National Farmer's Union issued a statement in their newsletter stating America had completely lost its good judgment when it came to communism. The Union condemned the McCarran Anti-Subversive Law in Congress and the unconstitutional actions of the FBI.¹⁰⁴ The Farmer's Union condemned the Law as a violation of the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and American freedom. The Union believed officials would use the law to harass loyal citizens and inhibit free speech.¹⁰⁵

In response to Senator Bridges' smear on the Farmer's Union, Montana Democratic Senator James Murray defended the organization. Murray stated the organization had supported every program that improved the condition of Montana farmers and citizens without exception.¹⁰⁶ Murray agreed Montana was the victim of the monopolistic practices of the capitalism and most Montana farmers were on the verge of bankruptcies. The Montana Farmer's Union wanted to rescue the state from economic exploitation and farmers from extermination by manipulating farm prices.¹⁰⁷ Murray lauded the work of the Farmer's Union and condemned the actions of Senator Bridges.

Within the same month Republican spokesmen throughout Montana accused James Patton of communist affiliations in an effort to destroy public confidence in the Union leader.¹⁰⁸ Montana Farmer's Union leaders believed Patton had bitter enemies amongst the corporate monopoly leadership throughout the United States. Patton was a constant voice in the press supporting social and economic justice in American society

¹⁰³ Marion Hellstern, Personal Interview, 2003.

¹⁰⁴ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 27 December 1950.

¹⁰⁵ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 22 November 1950.

¹⁰⁶ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 25 October 1950.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 8.

with many enemies.¹⁰⁹ Farmer's Union leaders assured the public that Patton was a loyal American and that several serious federal investigations had found nothing to dispute the fact.

In response to all these allegations the National Farmer's Union Board of Directors issued a statement of defense. The Union stated they were not a communist front organization and could never be deterred from fighting for the family farmer. They stood for freedom and dignity of the individual and opposed the red hysteria throughout the nation.¹¹⁰ In spite of these allegations, the Farmer's Union said it would not abandon its policy platform: price supports, expansion of farm cooperatives, international peace and collaboration, federal health insurance, and the fight against corporate monopoly.¹¹¹

The Farmer's Union issued a public statement of condemnation of the Un-American Activities Committee and other participating individuals. The Union supported and stubbornly defended the right to hold ideas and to express them freely even if they were contrary to dominant public opinion.¹¹² The Union demanded the democratic process be used to determine whose policies and opinion would prevail for the common good. The Union called for the abolition of federal and state Un-American Activities Committees, teacher loyalty oaths, the President's loyalty order program, and all court actions that jailed people because of their political ideas.¹¹³ The National Farmer's Union, "condemned thought control and injustice in American life."¹¹⁴

The Farmer's Union believed the allegations of Senator McCarthy were unproven, un-true, and un-American.¹¹⁵ The Union condemned McCarthy and the Mundt-Nixon Bill his actions inspired because the American people should be able to discuss whatever political issues they desire. If the measure passed any organization that

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 22 November 1950.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 1.

¹¹² *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 23 November 1949.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 28 April 1950.

followed the Communist Party line of higher wages, shorter hours, higher social security, or objection to atomic war could be indicted and jailed.¹¹⁶ The Farmer's Union believed any voice for peace, for labor legislation, or whisper of disagreement with public officials could end in imprisonment. The Montana chapters of the AFL, CIO, and the Farmer's Union condemned this legislation and the actions of Senator McCarthy as a violation of the U.S. Constitution.¹¹⁷

In November of 1951 the Farmer's Union issued another policy statement attacking the anti-communist hysteria in the United States. The Union condemned any legislation designed to entrap communists that suppressed opinion and belief.¹¹⁸ The Montana Farmer's Union believed any step to dictate or control public opinion was a long step toward totalitarianism and away from democracy. The Montana Farmer's Union condemned McCarthyism, the making of baseless accusations regarding loyalty and personal integrity, and vicious unfounded statements that become public opinion.¹¹⁹ The Union believed guilt by association, implication, and untested accusation ran counter to everything a free democracy professed to represent.¹²⁰

By 1952 Farmer's Union opposition to U.S. foreign policy intensified public distrust of the organization. Harvey Matusow and V.O. Overcash testified as FBI informants and labeled the Farmer's Union a Communist front organization threatening democracy at home and abroad.¹²¹ FBI surveillance teams followed leading members of the Farmer's Union believed to be communist supporters.¹²² Two years of public trials, bad press, Congressional investigation, and innuendo led many Americans to question whether the organization should even exist.

¹¹⁶ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 22 March 1950.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ *Montana Farmer's Union News*, 28 November 1951.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹²¹ William C. Pratt, "The Montana Farmer's Union and the Cold War 1945-1954," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 83 (Number 2): p. 65.

¹²² Bruce E. Field, *Harvest of Dissent-The National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 165.

The National Farmer's Union led the liberal fight when these causes were popular with their membership, had general popular support, and were in their financial best interests. By 1952, most of the organization members could no longer support the liberal Farmer's Union platform in the face of communist allegations. The general outcry of public opinion against the organization and the loss of support from within the membership made the liberal platform impractical. Opposing U.S. economic and political policy failed to bring them financial rewards and could cost them important revenue if they were to lose their cooperatives. The Farmer's Union had lost the popular base and support so necessary for the organization to survive.

In 1952, Farmer's Union President James Patton issued a reversal statement abandoning the Farmer's Union liberal platform. The Farmer's Union now claimed to support American efforts to make the world safe for democracy and capitalism by containing communism. The Farmer's Union officially condemned those who refused to support the fight against communist aggression.¹²³ In an effort to regain public confidence and member support, the Farmer's Union expelled President Fred Stover, the most outspoken critic of American domestic and foreign policy within the organization, revoked the Iowa Farmer's Union charter, and purged the National organization of any members with communist ideology.¹²⁴ In order to survive, the organization "yielded to the pressures of the age and joined in lockstep with the Cold War mentality of the time."¹²⁵

The Farmer's Union organization and the Union Cooperatives had to be preserved at all costs. It appears the Farmer's Union Cooperatives and the business arm of the organization led to the demise of Union liberalism. Economic self-interest led Union members to preserve the GTA, Central Exchange, Farmer's Union Insurance, and

¹²³ Ibid, p. 167.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 162.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 162.

other companies at the expense of the liberal political arm of the organization.¹²⁶ As Union businesses grew the national organization membership changed. The corporate minded younger generation replaced the previous more liberal and ideological depression membership base. The younger generation chose to preserve farm profits at the expense of the liberal Union ideology.

After 1952 the Farmer's Union continued to be identified with some liberal causes, but it no longer partnered with liberal allies. During the Cold War era these former ideals were considered obsolete and suspicious.¹²⁷ For a short time the Farmer's Union had carried the mantle of liberalism previously held by its farm organization predecessors. The Union had represented middle-class farmers willing to admit economic and political advantages could be evenly distributed throughout society.¹²⁸ For a short period the Farmer's Union and its liberal allies led an effort to properly order their society.

Farmer's Union officials chose to accommodate the American political and economic system in order to survive as an organization. The pressure to fight global communism, maintain a strong membership base, and maintain current levels of financial prosperity proved too much to resist. Union leadership chose to abandon their liberal ideology and protect the economic interests of the family farmer. When the National Farmer's Union abandoned its liberal ideology an important era of the liberal farm organization came to an end.

¹²⁶ William C. Pratt, "The Montana Farmer's Union and the Cold War 1945-1954," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 83 (Number 2): p. 69.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹²⁸ John A. Crampton, *National Farmers Union-Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 233.