

The Agrarian Struggle Rural Communism in Alberta and Saskatchewan 1926-1935

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During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Prairie Communists made their most conspicuous attempt to convert the Western farmers to revolutionary socialism. Their objective was to channel the growing conflict between the non-competitive small farmers and the emerging industrial producers along class-conscious lines. Restricted, however, by the demands of the International and by the Toronto-based executive of the Party, the Prairie Communists failed to develop either a programme or a local leadership which might win the support of small farmers. In failing to gain ideological and organizational legitimacy, rural communism condemned itself to remain a tool of the militant conservatism of the marginal producers.

C'est à la fin des années 1920 et au début de la décennie suivante que les communistes des Prairies ont tenté le plus fortement de convaincre les fermiers de l'Ouest et de les rallier au socialisme révolutionnaire. Leur but était de ramener à la question de la lutte des classes le conflit grandissant entre les petits fermiers et les producteurs industriels, conflit engendré par la misère des uns et l'émergence des autres. Néanmoins, retenus par l'Internationale et par la direction du parti située à Toronto, les communistes des Prairies ne purent ni lancer un programme politique ni mettre sur pied une direction régionale qui auraient pu leur valoir l'appui des petits fermiers. En manquant de s'implanter, tant sur le plan idéologique qu'organisationnel, le communisme rural s'est ainsi condamné à ne rester qu'un instrument du conservatisme militant des producteurs marginaux.

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx wrote that "in the sphere of agriculture, modern industry has a more revolutionary effect than elsewhere ... it eliminates the peasant, that bulwark of the old society, and replaces him with the wage labourer ... The irrational, old-fashioned methods of agriculture are replaced with scientific ones. Capitalism completely tears asunder the old bond of union which held together agriculture". In Canada, this capitalization process was as disruptive of agriculture as in Europe. Though there was no North American peasant class, the impact of mechanization and rural depopulation on a people nurtured on the free land myth was revolutionary. Just as industrialization in an urban setting created deep social tensions and conflicts between classes and within classes, so too did it transform perceptions and relationships in the agrarian context. The chief manifestation of this dynamic was the real and relative decline in the size of the farm population, coupled with a radical increase in the dimensions and outputs of the remaining production units. The psychological result of this process was rural dissent. Admittedly, agricultural and urban capitalism were differentiated by the fact that, unlike the worker, the farmer was both owner and labourer, capitalist and proletarian. To this extent, the industrialization of agriculture was a self-directed process; the farmer chose to mechanize and accepted the costs of that decision. But not all agriculturalists in Western Canada enjoyed the same

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opportunities. For most producers, mechanization was impossible, either because their land was unsuitable, or costs were too high. Some simply did not recognize the need for change. Eventually, those who failed to adapt to the industrial mode of production lost their holdings. Between 1930 and 1960, over half of the farmers on the Prairies gave up farming and left the land.

Historians generally have not concerned themselves with the rural economy or its influence upon farm protest. Though there have been many studies of Western agrarian dissent, there have been few attempts to link the farmer's political vision with his changing socio-economic position. Students of Canadian communism have been among the most urban and elitist in their disposition. Ivan Avakumovic's investigations of the Communist Party's associations with the Prairie farmers reflect this bias. Unable to admit that a "propertied class" could be drawn to communism, Avakumovic underestimates the extent of Party support and dryly dismisses the Farmers' Unity League as a minor sectarian organization directed from Moscow. Studies of the radical left have tended to perceive mass protest from an elitist perspective. Norman Penner, for example, describes the Communist Party as a "rigid military-like apparatus", successfully "controlling all the activities of its members, subordinating them to the higher committees ... making no allowances for adaptability to different ... traditions and cultures." While this is a reasonably accurate depiction of what the Party wanted to be, it is dangerous to make assumptions about actions on the basis of the policy-statements of the leadership. As Theodore Draper once put it, though "the party demanded complete, unconditional adherence to its full program from its members, relatively few gave it that total commitment in theory, and fewer still in practice." Just as it now seems vital for agricultural historians to return to the farm, so too is it important for students of Canadian radicalism to focus in on the radicals. There is far more to the story of rural dissent than marketing structures, crop prices and foreign agitators.

I

Revolutionary socialism has enjoyed a varied existence among the farmers of Western Canada. It emerged from a confluence of two distinct streams: one comprised of Saskatoon-based free lance radicals, and another made up of purely local talent. The latter was concentrated in the Sturgis area of Saskatchewan, where a farm worker named Shannon introduced his employer, Fred Ganong, to socialism in the pre-war period. Ganong had taken immediately to Marxism and, along with his brother Ottie and some of their neighbours, had organized a socialist debating club. When Louis McNamee brought the militant Farmers' Union of Canada (FUC) to Sturgis in the summer of 1923, the tiny group of home-grown revolutionaries took charge of the local, and for the next three years they formed the backbone of the farm movement in the area.¹ In Alberta, the spread of communism was largely the work of Carl Axelson, a former wobbly from the U.S. who had settled on a small farm near Bingville. A handsome though unstable agitator, Axelson had used a dramatic endorsement of the contract wheat pool as a pitch for his first appearance at the 1923 Convention of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA).² Within the year he had been

1. Walter WIGGINS, "Pioneers" (unpublished MS, copy in author's possession). Mr. Wiggins' daughter, Ms. Cathy Fischer, hopes to have this valuable manuscript published. Thanks are due to Ms. Fischer for allowing access to the memoir.

2. Ivan AVAKUMOVIC, "The Prairie Farmer and the Communist Party of Canada: The Interwar Years", *Western Perspectives*, Vol. 1, ed. D.J. BERCUSON (Toronto: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1974), p. 81.

joined by John Glambek, a Dane who had come to socialism via the Postal Clerks' Union in Chicago, and together they set about advertising agrarian socialism through the medium of a Progressive Farmers' Educational League (PFEL).³ Originally, neither the Sturgis group nor the PFEL had any direct contact with the Communist Party (CPC); their philosophy was one of praxis, differing from that of the mass of farmers only in the tone of their propaganda and the aggressiveness of their tactics.⁴

The Saskatoon-based socialists were a more diverse and cosmopolitan collection. Some, like H.M. Bartholomew and Ben Lloyd, were professional radicals who had been prominent in the Socialist Party of Canada.⁵ Others, such as George Stirling, traced their Marxist roots to the Non-Partisan League. A final group, which organized itself into the "Economic and Educative Committee of the FUC", under the leadership of Ernie Bolton and J.W. Robson, was comprised of proto-social creditors who believed that communism could be achieved by nationalizing banking and credit.⁶ Like their Sturgis-based compatriots, these Saskatoon radicals found their way into the Farmers' Union, quickly emerging as a powerful force within the movement.

The Farmers' Union of Canada was an organization divided. Originally a movement of militant debt-ridden farmers, the Union began to change after its unsuccessful campaigns on behalf of a contract wheat pool in 1923 and 1924. In those years, a new group of farmers, drawn largely out of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association, entered the organization. These farmers were financially more secure than were the Union's original members, and consequently, less interested in a radical response to the debt problem. "Two schools of thought" thus began to develop, one favouring the continuation of militant struggle against the banks and mortgage companies, the other opting for a moderate response which emphasized debt adjustment rather than debt amortization. As entry of new members into the FUC meant expansion, to many in the Farmers' Union, the solution to the escalating conflict between these two views was not difficult to find. If the FUC were going to become powerful it had to become a "solid one hundred percent organization," which could appeal to all elements in the farm population.⁷ This required disproving the common belief that the "mentality behind the Farmers' Union of Canada was Communistic and promised nothing but evil."⁸ In mid-1924 Lou McNamee, the loud and autocratic president of the FUC, turned on the radicals and announced that socialism was just "damn fool work."⁹ In August, McNamee forbade Hugh Bartholomew to speak at FUC lodges, and by year's end he had expelled both him and the leading socialist on the Union's executive, N.H. Schwarz, from the organization. A.C. Weaver, the editor of the Union's newsletter si-

3. UFA, 15 October 1924; *The Worker* 20 November 1926.

4. The CPC appears to have been unaware of the existence of the Sturgis group, reporting its activities for the first time in *The Worker* in July 1925. As for the PFEL, one recent study presents convincing evidence that the Party had little to do with the League's formation and often actually restrained it. See M. Ann CAPLING, "The Communist Party of Canada in Alberta, 1922-1929" (M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 1983), p. 94.

5. Examples of the writings of both Lloyd and Bartholomew may be found in the *Western Clarion* from the early twenties.

6. For more on Stirling, see *The Western Labor News*, 18 June 1920. Also, George F. STIRLING, "Mind Your Own Business" (Saskatoon, 1926); for the Economic and Educative Committee, see its various pamphlets in the Saskatchewan Archives; A.E. BOLTON and N.S. BERGREN, "The Dawn of Freedom for Farm Slaves" (Saskatoon, n.d.), and J.W. ROBSON, "Our Monetary System" (Saskatoon, n.d.).

7. *The Progressive*, 31 July 1924; Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), Farmers' Union of Canada (FUC) Papers, B2 VI 8, G.H. Williams to L.P. McNamee, 25 January 1924.

8. *Regina Leader*, 4 July 1925; see also D.S. SPAFFORD, "The Left-Wing, 1921-1931", in *Politics in Saskatchewan*, eds. Norman WARD and D.S. SPAFFORD (Don Mills: Longmans, 1968), 47-48.

9. SAB, FUC Papers, B2 VI 5, L.P. McNamee to W. Thrasher, 8 February 1925.

multaneously turned on the "Economic and Educative Committee" and announced that "it had no right to misrepresent the Union cause." The real problem, as both Weaver and McNamee realized, was that prosperous farmers were hostile to the socialist message. Since this was the very element which the leadership was trying to attract into the movement, Marxism was "making impossible Union organization for the future."¹⁰ In both the *Regina Leader* and *The Winnipeg Free Press*, McNamee denounced socialism and confidently predicted that the radical element in the movement would be "smashed".¹¹

Saskatchewan socialists met these developments with confusion. Disunified and isolated from each other, they were unable to challenge the attacks of the Union's leaders. Despite their professed skill at "boring from within", the radicals were incapable not only of resisting the conservative offensive, but also of preventing the 1925 merger of the FUC and the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association.¹² The socialists organized too slowly. In the summer of 1925, they formed a Farmers' Political Association to act as a lobby group within the new United Farmers of Canada (Saskatchewan Section) [UFC (SS)]. The Political Association represented a broad fusion of social democrats, such as George Williams and Lewis Gabriel, Sturgis communists, like Walter Wiggins and George King, and the Saskatoon radicals, Bartholomew, Lloyd, Stirling and Schwarz.¹³ The goal of the Association was similar to that of the PFEL in Alberta; it sought to unify all left-wing elements and to prevent the moderates from "directing the farmers into the hands of their class enemies ... merchants, lawyers, bankers and the like."¹⁴ To implement this programme, the radicals moved to transform *The Furrow*, a broadsheet founded in February, 1926, as an organ for the nascent Saskatchewan hog pool, into a mouthpiece for agrarian dissent.¹⁵

The Saskatchewan radicals' higher profile brought them to the attention of a Toronto-based group determined to direct left-wing activity across the Dominion. For some time, the Communist Party of Canada had been under pressure from the Comintern to develop an agrarian programme that would conform to the agricultural line delineated by Lenin at the Second Congress of the International in August, 1920.¹⁶ The CPC's first agrarian programme had been adopted in 1923, but for several years the Party had done little more than propose unfulfillable resolutions.¹⁷ Finally, with the appearance of a unified left-wing under the auspices of the Political Association and the PFEL, the CPC roused itself from its slumbers and in the summer of 1925 moved to press radicalism into its prefabricated mold. The Party's policy was to manage local socialist activity and subordinate each individual group to the Toronto decision-making apparatus. To accomplish this task, the Party began assisting the Sturgis group and the PFEL. The leverage gained through this financial

10. SAB, N.H. Schwarz Papers, "Declaration"; *The Worker*, 2, 9 August and 13 November 1924; SAB, FUC Papers, B2 VI 5, A.C. Weaver to L.P. McNamee, 3 October 1924.

11. SAB, FUC Papers, B2 VI 5, L.P. McNamee to W. Thrasher, 8, 15 February 1924.

12. The SGGa and the FUC merged to form the United Farmers' of Canada (Saskatchewan Section). *The Furrow*, 18 April and 22 July 1927; Carl AXELSON, "Educating the Farmer", in *The Canadian Forum*, IX (September 1929): 417. The only widely accessible work on the FUC is D.S. SPAFFORD's "The Origins of the Farmers' Union of Canada", in *Saskatchewan History*, XVIII (Autumn 1965): 89-98. Unfortunately, Spafford bases his analysis almost entirely on the Union's constitution and reports of Union activities in *The Progressive*, neither of which provides information on the penny auction movement.

13. *Western Producer*, 25 June 1925.

14. *The Furrow*, 13 February 1926.

15. RCMP Records, Farmers' Unity League file, "The Furrow", p. 3.

16. Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Department of External Affairs Papers, Vol. 3130, file 89, "Letter from the E.C.C.I. to the Workers' Party of Canada" (n.d.).

17. PAC, Communist Party of Canada (CPC) Papers, Convention Series, contains minutes of the annual conventions of the CPC. See the records of "The Third National Convention of the W.P.C.", 18 April 1924.

and organizational support, enabled the CPC to press the Political Association into a merger with the Educational League. Unity alone was not sufficient, however, for the Party was anxious to direct agrarian radicalism along the lines dictated by the International. According to the Comintern's "Thesis on the Agrarian Question", communist agitation was to identify the class struggle inherent in agricultural production. The object was to reveal the four-fold division of small and middle peasantry, agricultural proletariat and Kulaks, and to promote the union of the poorer elements with the urban proletariat. This, it was stated, could only be achieved "by persuading the middle peasantry to maintain a neutral attitude and by gaining the support of a large part, if not the whole, of the small peasantry."¹⁸ Unfortunately, the local radical elite rejected the Party's line on the agrarian struggle. Hugh Bartholomew, who as editor of *The Furrow* had become the *de facto* leader of the radical fringe, had already reached his own conclusions on the character of rural capitalism. Bartholomew attempted to base the left-wing's policies upon the conflict "between agrarian capital and industrial capital, rather than upon the class struggle on the farm."¹⁹ A formidable theoretician and a loyal Communist Party member, Bartholomew nonetheless rejected the notion of a divided countryside and insisted that the "overwhelming mass of farmers" shared the interests of the proletariat because debt had alienated them from their land. In fact, "they are completely divorced from the land they till though that divorcement is still concealed from their eyes by fictitious land titles ... they have actually been reduced to the level of landless peasants and are completely at the mercy of finance capital."²⁰ Obviously, if the CPC was going to establish its control over Western farm radicalism, the editorial policy of *The Furrow* had to be changed.

To achieve the ideological cohesion it desired, the CPC secured a letter of resignation from Bartholomew and contracted J.M. Clarke to move from Vancouver, "much against his will", into the editorial office of *The Furrow*.²¹ A shy, awkward young Scot who had earned his reputation for being a loyal Leninist while serving as secretary of the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union, John Magnus Clarke was seen to be the force that would pull the farmers into the Comintern's orbit.²² But he was to disappoint the Party's hopes for Clarke was not only an unwilling resident of Saskatoon, but also too gifted a socialist thinker to become the docile instrument of the CPC's policies. From the outset, Clarke strove to acquire a firsthand understanding of agricultural conditions irrespective of the Party line.²³ From his cramped office-apartment on the second floor of the Grainger Building in downtown Saskatoon, Clarke churned out a steady flow of polemic which developed with his research discoveries. He quickly realized that the Comintern's approach to the agrarian question was inapplicable to the Canadian context and he criticized Party ideologues who attempted to make the "facts fit into an existing theory."²⁴ In a series of "Draft Agrarian Programs" and in his editorials in *The Furrow*, Clarke moved to correct the inaccuracies in the Communist Party's policy. Thus he began a process that might have transformed

18. A copy of the "Draft Thesis on the Agrarian Question" may be found in *The Communist*, X (December 1931): 1047-52; an abridged version was first printed in Canada in the *Western Clarion*, 16 May 1921.

19. PAC, CPC Papers, Convention Series, "Minutes of the Sixth National Convention of the Communist Party of Canada, 1929", p. 16.

20. Public Archives of Ontario (PAO), CPC Records, Box 14, file 1, H.M. Bartholomew, "The Agrarian Question in Canada" (n.d.).

21. RCMP Records, FUL file, *The Furrow*, p. 3.

22. *Canadian Tribune*, 14 June 1972.

23. In 1927, Clarke headed a "Research Board" of the PFEL "for the purpose of gathering and filing all available statistics relative to agriculture." Through this agency, he developed his understanding of the prairie economy. *The Furrow*, 22 July 1927.

24. *The Worker*, 13 April 1929.

the communist movement into the leading agent of agrarian dissent. His contribution was two-fold, for in creating an attractive programme of struggle for the impoverished farmers, he also developed what remains among the most insightful and original analyses of the process of capitalist development in Canadian agriculture.

II

According to Clarke, the problem with the Comintern's approach to the agrarian question was that it based the mobilization of the rural poor on two fundamental misconceptions: the direct class exploitation of small by large farmers and the harmony of interest between the debt-ridden producers and the agricultural proletariat.²⁵ Clarke asserted that an optimistic concentration upon mobilizing farm workers ignored the overwhelming difficulties involved in their organization. Farm labour in Canada was migratory and seasonal in character; generally it worked the woods of B.C. and northern Alberta, the cities, mines and railroads of the west, and when the demand warranted, the wheat fields at harvest time. All efforts to mobilize migrant workers had been undermined by this geographical dispersion and Clarke had sufficient experience with the mobility of lumber work to appreciate the difficulties involved. Furthermore, an alliance of small farmers and workers was infeasible because of the mechanization process which aggravated the conflicts implicit in contractual employment. Mechanization created a deflationary price pressure which effectively undermined the economic position of the non-competitive small farmers. Unable to limit unit production costs by technological adaptation, the poor farmers were compelled to lower overheads by reducing expenditures on labour. Rather than drawing small farmer and worker together, the dynamics of capitalism increased tensions by forcing the employer to assume a progressively more exploitive attitude towards his employees. In this sense, the poor producers and the farm workers confronted each other not as allies, but "as class enemies, as exploiter and exploited."²⁶

In addition to criticizing the Comintern's depiction of the rural proletariat, Clarke attacked the belief that the class struggle in the countryside was derived from the direct exploitation of the "poor peasants" by the "kulaks". Though he did not deny the existence of "class" conflict in the rural community, he proposed that its clear expression was muted by a pervasive bourgeois ethic. In his view, all farmers were deluded by a Turnerian "free land myth" which served to muffle social conflict and maintain an illusion of unlimited economic expansion and upward mobility. One consequence of the dichotomy between this myth and the reality of rural life was that the ideology of the lowest stratum of farmers "wavers between that of the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and finds its expression in a multitude of demands for more or less utopian reforms".²⁷ This ideological misperception was anchored in the particular character of agrarian class relations which were a product not of internal but of indirect conflicts. "The theory that in Western Canada, rich farmers directly exploit poor farmers is a delusion," Clarke wrote. "It does not exist except in the very few isolated cases where a farmer has bought up a considerable amount of land and then rented this land to his less fortunate neighbours, or in the even fewer cases where

25. *Canadian Labor Monthly*, March 1929; *The Worker*, 16 March 1929.

26. University of Toronto Library (UTL). Robert Kenney Collection, Box 9, file: Agrarian Reform, Leslie Morris and J.M. Clarke, "Draft Agrarian Program of the Communist Party of Canada" (1930), p. 12.

27. *The Worker*, 13 April 1929.

a rich farmer holds a mortgage on a poor farmer's land."²⁸ Altering the focus of analysis, he then argued that rather than exploiting each other, all farmers were at the mercy of the finance capitalist and that the different positions each class of farmer occupied in relation to the urban bourgeoisie determined its social interests.

"Usury", Clarke wrote, "is the main avenue for the control of agriculture, the toiling farmers and their families by the lords of finance. This control extends to all sections of the rural population and includes the rural bourgeoisie."²⁹ But while similarly enslaved by finance capitalism, the rich farmer, in contrast to the poor farmer, was "the class representative of finance capital."³⁰ This paradoxical situation was produced, according to Clarke, by the degree to which the rich farmers profited from the domination of the urban capitalist. While poor farmers were unable to pay the interest charges on debts and mortgages, and suffered evictions and foreclosures, wealthy farmers profited from their loss. Decreases in the number of small producers meant that rich farmers could expand their holdings, improve the cost effectiveness of their machinery, and thereby increase the productivity of their operations. Furthermore, large farmers benefited from the credit system, which allowed them to borrow the necessary money to continue expanding and they shared with the urban bourgeoisie a common interest in technological innovation. Clarke saw these divergent interests reflected in the policies of the various farm organizations, for "it is chiefly inside of these bodies that the clash finds its expression." Within organizations such as the UFA and the UFC(SS), "the rich farmers advocate policies which coincide with their class interests, and the class interests of the rich farmer are almost invariably the opposite of the class interests of the poor farmer."³¹

The object of communist agitation in the countryside, Clarke asserted, was the mobilization of the poor farmers for militant struggle. However, owing to the indirect nature of class rivalries, he rejected the Comintern's belief in the direct struggle between rich and poor farmers and instead argued that the real battle for economic emancipation must be fought against the finance capitalists. Clarke believed that the farmers should be induced to organize a general resistance to foreclosures and evictions, which he argued was similar to that of taking strike action in industry. He further advocated that the radicals adopt a programme calling for the issuance of interest-free state credit, the legislation of a standard price for all agricultural commodities based on the small farmers' cost of production, the abolition of the Board of Grain Commissioners and the control of the grading process by the farmers themselves.³²

Clarke's agrarian thesis was a sharp departure from the official policy of the Communist Party and it was clearly designed to align revolutionary theories with existing conditions.³³ Noting that the poor farmers did not see the rich farmers as their enemies, he charged that radicals must reveal to them the subtle collusions inherent in agricultural economics. He understood the antipathy between the farmers and their employees, and he recognized the difficulties which the Party would face in attempting to bridge their di-

28. UTL, Kenney Collection, Box 9, Agrarian Reform, J.M. Clarke, "Memo on the Agrarian Question for Comrade Morris", p. 3.

29. UTL, Kenney Collection, Morris and Clarke, "Draft Agrarian Program ...", p. 7.

30. UTL, Kenney Collection, Clarke, "Memo on the Agrarian Question ...", p. 4.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

32. UTL, Kenney Collection, Morris and Clarke, "Draft Agrarian Program ...", p. 45.

33. For an alternate view see Ivan AVAKUMOVIC, "The Communist Party of Canada and the Prairie Farmer", p. 79; or Norman PENNER, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 82-84.

vergent interests. Perceiving the basic conservatism of the small farmer, he argued that the radicals must design a programme of immediate demands that would be “objective enough to lead the farmers to struggle and, at the same time, evade the pitfalls of reformism.”³⁴ He knew that the poor farmers had not developed a revolutionary consciousness despite their “rising discontent” and he emphasized that for all their militancy, they continued to be “beclouded with all the usual humbug, though perhaps to a lesser degree than formerly.”³⁵

In October, 1930, the leaders of the Farmers’ Educational League transformed their organization into a “militant body” designed to unify “debt-ridden farmers around a program of immediate action and united struggle.”³⁶ *The Furrow* was given a more aggressive tone and prominent socialists began elaborating Clarke’s call for “committees of action, pledged to resist any attempt to throw debt-ridden farmers out of house and home”.³⁷ Pressure for a change in League strategy had been accumulating for some time; the demand had been increasing for the PFEL to “adapt ... to the situation” by separating itself from the established farm organizations — the UFA in Alberta and the UFC (SS) in Saskatchewan — and launching a direct “appeal to the people.”³⁸ The stimulus for the League’s reorientation came both from the Communist Party, which had adopted a programme calling for greater direct involvement in the farmers’ movement, and from the Depression, which had created the conditions demanding “radical change”. Radicals across the country predicted that the Depression signalled “the breakdown of the capitalist economy” and they moved to develop strategies which would prepare the select “for their future emancipation”.³⁹ For John Magnus Clarke it seemed as though the long years of journalistic agitation were finally reaching fruition. “There is no doubt about the rising tide of discontent of the Prairies,” he confided in his old friend, Tom McEwan, “it compensates for living in this howling wilderness for three and a half years.”⁴⁰ With great vigour, the revolutionaries seized the opportunity and moved to transform the poor farmers’ reviving militancy into class war.

Since the First World War, the position of the small farmers in Western Canada had been steadily deteriorating. As Clarke realized, the crux of the small farm problem was that the unit of a quarter-section, and in many cases of a half-section, was unable to produce wheat on a competitive basis with the larger, more mechanized and cost-efficient farms. As one western economist noted, “because the price of wheat is [being] forced down ... by the lower selling possible on the larger acreage ... reasonable returns on a half-section cannot be assured.”⁴¹ The industrialization of wheat farming was creating a situation under which an individual’s income was directly linked to the size of his unit operation.⁴² By the

34. UTL, Kenney Collection, Morris and Clarke, “Draft Agrarian Program ...”, p. 39.

35. PAO, CPC Records, 1A0530, J.M. Clarke to Tom McEwan, 17 December 1930.

36. *The Furrow*, November 1930.

37. *The Furrow*, October 1930.

38. *The Furrow*, 30 April 1930.

39. G. VAN HOUTEN, *Canada’s Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921-1976* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1982), p. 90; PAC CPC Papers, Convention Series, “Sixth Plenum of the Central Executive Committee: Resolutions of the Enlarged Plenum”, February 1931, p. 35; *The Furrow*, November 1930.

40. PAO, CPC Records, 1A0530, J.M. Clarke to Tom McEwan, 17 December 1930.

41. Glenbow-Alberta Institute (GAI), Walter Norman Smith Papers, Box 2, file 26, A.H. Brinkman to J.G. Gardiner, 7 December 1939.

42. S.C. HUDSON, “Factors Affecting the Success of Mortgage Loans in Western Canada” (Ottawa: King’s Printers, 1935), pp. 26-27; R.W. MURCHIE, *Agricultural Progress on the Prairie Frontier* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1936), pp. 218-40 and 260.

early thirties, analysts were concluding that a one hundred and sixty acre farm was unable to meet its operating costs without a diversification into dairying or market gardening.⁴³ For the administrators of Saskatchewan's Debt Adjustment Board, the position of the smaller farmers was quite simply "hopeless" and they grieved over their inability to develop a "debt paying capacity."⁴⁴ Lacking in an income adequate to meet expenses, the small operator was unable to maintain his equipment or risk experimenting with new technological innovations. Consequently, his economic position worsened over time and his continued existence came increasingly to depend upon his creditors' tolerance.

Not surprisingly, small farmers became militant during periods of economic instability, when credit was tight and prices were falling. The first outbreak of mass unrest came in the early twenties, when the FUC led a resistance to foreclosure movement and called for a moratorium on debt. The protest was short-lived, however, for with the economic recovery of 1924-25, the movement collapsed and the FUC was absorbed into the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association. In June, 1929, the Wheat Pools announced that they would be forced to reduce their initial payments to an unprecedented low of sixty cents a bushel and six months later, the price had fallen to such a level that the Western premiers could petition Ottawa to peg wheat at only seventy cents.⁴⁵ Small farmers, whose costs of production exceeded the value of their goods, found themselves again confronted by the problem of having to pay previously acquired fixed charges with sharply declining incomes. Confidence in rapid recovery faded quickly. As one farmer remarked, "there has been no time during the twenty-four years we have been in Canada, that the moral [sic] of country folk have been so low."⁴⁶

Familiar faces, whose appearance was the traditional harbinger of revolt, began to reappear on the Prairie. In Alberta, George Bevington, the monetary reformer who had first made a name for himself in the radical days of the early twenties, "began to stage a come-back", and he stumped the Province with a call for the nationalization of the banks and a moratorium on farm debt.⁴⁷ Far to the east, in Kelvington, Saskatchewan, a much radicalized Louis P. McNamee emerged from retirement and unsuccessfully attempted to organize a National Farmers' Union, a movement pledged to the resistance of foreclosures, the "nationalization of money", and socialism.⁴⁸

In December, 1930, the communists moved to harness this rising discontent through the formation of the Farmers' Unity League (FUL), an independent, militant replacement for the Educational League. At a series of conferences held on successive days in Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon and Edmonton, the revolutionaries set out their programme of struggle. The ideology of the new organization reflected Clarke's theories on the class division in agriculture and presented the poor farmers as the "sole power in country districts for the struggle against all forms of capitalism." The League's immediate demands included a minimum income of one thousand dollars to be paid by the state, free medicine and hospitals, non-contributory social insurance and old age pensions and a moratorium on farm

43. Baldur KRISTJANSON, "Land Settlement in Northeastern Alberta" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1949), p. 50.

44. SAB, George Edwards Papers, George Edwards, "The Problem of the Quarter-Section Farm" (n.d.), pp. 4-5.

45. *Western Producer*, 4 September and 27 November 1930.

46. GAI, George Coote Papers, Box 7, file 53, J.C. Meledy to G.C. Coote, 11 June 1931.

47. GAI, Smith Papers, Box 3, file 23, W.N. Smithy to N.F. Priestly, 7 August 1930.

48. *The Furrow*, December 1930.

debt.⁴⁹ The League's strategy was the brain-child of Jack Clarke and his distinctive vision of agrarian economics. Unfortunately, it was not to be implemented without a struggle. Socialists protested from the outset against Clarke's attempts to dilute the League's agitation and called for a more doctrinaire application of the Leninist line. George Williams, who had left the PFEL in 1928 when it failed to officially endorse his nomination for the presidency of the UFC(SS), attacked the communists for their preoccupation with the "immediate struggle". Calling for "scientific socialism" and not militancy, Williams urged the two hundred and fifty farmers attending the Saskatoon Foundation Conference of the FUL not to be obsessed with local issues, but to search for comprehensive political solutions. Williams had failed to consider the real character of the new movement, however, and his appeal was rebuffed.⁵⁰ Economically anxious and socially excoriated, the poor farmers who joined the FUL were not concerned with achieving the cooperative commonwealth, but rather with preventing their expulsion from agriculture. They were interested not in revolutionizing society but in saving their homes. Realizing this, the communists eagerly sought to build the FUL into a potent instrument of small farm dissent. The challenge was to be whether they could transform that dissent into class-conscious struggle. It was on this battleground that Prairie communism would stand or fall.

III

In Moscow, everyone was perturbed. For years, the International had been pestering the Toronto leadership of the CPC to develop a programme of struggle for the countryside, but no one had expected anything like this. In early October, 1930, Stewart Smith, Canadian communism's seemingly permanent contribution to the International, had received a copy of J.M. Clarke's "Draft Agrarian Program" from Tim Buck, the new General Secretary of the CPC. Smith, whose mind had already benefited from too many lessons at Moscow's Lenin School, was understandably shocked by Clarke's approach. "I feel ... it has to be rewritten from the first to the last line," he told Buck, and he then dutifully presented the document to the Krestintern, the reigning authority on agrarian socialism.⁵¹ As Smith had expected, the delegates to the Peasant International were exceedingly disturbed by Clarke's discussion of the agrarian problem and they hastily warned the executive of the CPC to revise the "Draft Program".⁵² It was, Smith explained, studded with "great shortcomings and gross deviations," and it revealed all the "opportunistic theories" and "basic deviations of Comrade Clarke." For the communist ideologues, Clarke had committed the venal sin of reviving the "old opportunistic theory of the class antagonism between the proletariat and the poor farmer" and he had further dishonoured himself by advocating debt adjustment, state credit and a minimum farm wage. This, Smith cautioned, was little other than "pink reformism" and he advised Buck to remember that "the only solution we have to offer [the farmers] ... is the abolition of capitalism."⁵³

49. *The Furrow*, January 1931.

50. Interview with J.L. Phelps, 16 January 1983; PAO, CPC Records, 1A0530, J.M. Clarke to Tom McEwan, 17 December 1930.

51. PAC, CPC Papers, file: Tim Buck, Correspondence, 1930-31, Stewart Smith to Tim Buck, 7 October 1930.

52. PAC, CPC Papers, Convention Series, "Minutes of the Sixth Plenum of the C.E.C.", February 1931, pp. 34-35; PAO, CPC Records, Transcript: *Rex vs Buck et al.*, Vol. II, Evidence, pp. 341-42.

53. PAC, CPC Papers, file: Tim Buck, Correspondence, 1930-31, Stewart Smith to Tim Buck, 20 October 1930.

Greatly embarrassed, the Central Executive of the Party bowed to the Krestintern's wisdom and removed Clarke from the editorship of *The Furrow*, dispatching him to Moscow for rest and reorientation.⁵⁴ Clarke's dismissal in June, 1931, was to prove disastrous to the CPC's agrarian work, for without his guidance, the Farmers' Unity League swiftly atomized. All those best suited to replace him at the League's ideological fulcrum were removed from the revolutionary scene within a year of his departure. Hugh Bartholomew, who was the Party's only experienced farm journalist despite his previous intellectual deviation, committed suicide in the summer of 1931, tormented by charges of child molesting.⁵⁵ One year later, Carl Axelson, the founder of the PFEL, shot himself in the head in an Edmonton hotel room.⁵⁶ The other leaders were on their way out of the movement; N.H. Schwarz was working as a hotel clerk in B.C., Ernie Bolton was reading up on Major Douglas, and George Stirling was organizing the nascent CCF. Those who remained lacked both the socialist training of their departed brethren and the capacity to formulate an attractive ideological synthesis. Fred Schunaman, who replaced Clarke as the editor of *The Furrow*, was an energetic worker, but he neither understood the processes of agricultural economics, nor possessed the propagandistic skills necessary to encourage the farmers' radical vision. Of the other League members, only Walter Wiggins and Hopkins Mills were sufficiently acquainted with the socialist approach to undertake the task of leading the FUL. An immigrant from Glamorganshire, Mills was a formidable platform speaker and an outstanding agitator, but his writing ability was limited and his organizational skills were questionable.⁵⁷ Wiggins, the League's president, was an Irish Canadian from Western Ontario, who having served in the Fort Gary Horse in the Great War, became converted to socialism by the Ganong brothers while homesteading near Sturgis.⁵⁸ A kind and sincere man of considerable personal charm, he was extremely effective when forging grass roots contacts. But Wiggins was not a man suited to the drudgery of preparing educational propaganda; his thinking was not systematic and his radical invective was a product not of his mind but of his heart.⁵⁹ Though the League continued to generate an emotional intensity after 1931, it did not succeed in maintaining its ideological depth. Unquestionably, the CPC was in large measure responsible for this situation, for after the Party repudiated Clarke's programme, it again lost interest in the agrarian work and failed to propose an alternate policy.⁶⁰ Having been stripped of its leadership and programme, the FUL lost its creative will. The League gave up trying to tailor communism to western realities and consequently its ideological message became increasingly irrelevant. Although the FUL continued to be successful at the local level, the basic inapplicability of its Moscow-conceived programme meant that it was never able to make communism

54. Letter: Mrs G. Hadland to the author, December 1982.

55. Ivan AVAKUMOVIC, *The Communist Party of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 24.

56. *The Furrow*, September 1932.

57. For a sympathetic biography of Mills, see Ivor MILLS, *Stout Hearts Stand Tall: A Biography of Hopkins Evans Mills* (Vancouver: Evergreen Press, 1971).

58. WIGGINS, "Pioneers", pp. 32-36.

59. The best example of Wiggins' passionate, if shallow, invective can be found in his tract, "The Progressive Farmers' Next Step" (Saskatoon: The Furrow Press, n.d.), esp. pp. 10-13.

60. The Sixth Plenum of the CPC prepared a revision of the FUL's programme, but the changes were never effected. All the Party offered were periodic warnings that "closer contacts must be developed", and qualifications of policy statements which led the League organizers to contradict frequently their own programme. For the CPC's revised policy, see PAC, CPC Papers, "Minutes of the Sixth Plenum ...", pp. 33-37; the League's amorphous programme is outlined in *The Worker*, 12 January 1935; Tim Buck's warnings may be found in PAO, CPC Records, A1918-9, Tim Buck to Walter Wiggins, 19 June 1931, and also in PAC, CPC Papers, folder: "Agriculture", "Organize the Common People of the Countryside", p. 3.

attractive to its supporters. Thus, the FUL degenerated into a mechanism for militant struggle rather than class war, and condemned by this limited role, it became not so much a leader in the fight for the cooperative commonwealth as a follower in the poor farmers' revolt.

This ideological castration was reflected in the weakness and decentralization of the FUL's organizational structure. Restricted by a shortage of funds and a deficiency of trained organizers, the League relied upon a loose network of independent committees of action. These local units were often completely isolated from each other and despite the efforts of League organizers to group the committees into "districts" or "regional" councils, no unifying structure was ever established.⁶¹ The constant "lack of coordination among units" resulted in a "sense of isolation" among members "which tends to lead to a feeling of weakness." As Tom McEwan, the general-secretary of the Workers' Unity League, complained during one of his periodic supervisory trips to the west on behalf of the CPC, "large numbers of units in our districts are absolutely isolated from each other.... The central office [of the FUL] appears to recognize the need for Councils of Action [to centralize local activities] but they have never taken the steps to translate the theory into action ... and most of the units do not understand the purpose and work of the Councils of Action."⁶² Given this decentralization, it is hardly surprising that League organizers never even knew the actual size of the membership in the movement. Schunaman calculated the readership of *The Furrow* to be around two thousand, though he had to admit that many subscribers were not members of the FUL.⁶³ That this weakness was a product of the organization's own structural and philosophical deficiencies is revealed in the fact that there was considerable popular sympathy for the communists which the FUL was simply unable to capitalize upon fully. In the Athabaska by-election of February, 1932, Carl Axelson polled over twenty three hundred votes, winning fifteen percent of the total and helping defeat the incumbent Liberal candidate. Two months later, a League "Farm Relief Petition" containing twelve thousand signatures was presented to R.B. Bennett, and in some areas as many as eight hundred farmers would gather under FUL auspices to prevent a tax sale or hold a penny auction.⁶⁴

The FUL was at its most effective in the revitalization of the old FUC idea of resisting foreclosures with "binder twine sales" and "penny auctions". Crowds of obstructionist farmers closed off admission routes to the sales and thereby controlled the bidding without directly challenging the authorities. Often, no bidders but friends of the debtor were present; ridiculously low bids were offered and the sold property was returned to its previous owner.⁶⁵ The nucleus of this anti-foreclosure activity was the small farm area of the Park Belt, but demonstrations against mortgage sales speckled the map of the entire Prairie. Clearly, the resistance movement was a direct consequence of depressed conditions; the FUL did little more than provide a name to a spontaneous impulse. Nonetheless, the role of the League should not be underestimated. No other farm group condoned the extra-legal methods farmers used when dealing with forced sales, and without League support, local

61. *The Furrow*, August 1932.

62. *The Furrow*, December 1931.

63. *The Furrow*, December 1931.

64. *The Furrow*, March, April and November 1932; *Canadian Annual Review*, 1932, p. 153.

65. The FUL outlined its strategy for resisting foreclosures in a series of bulletins distributed to the locals. The most complete statement is PAO, CPC, Records, 10C2445, "The Farmers' Unity League of Canada, Bulletin 7". The best account of a penny auction movement is in John Shover's exceptional work *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), Chap. 5.

organization would have been far more difficult. The problem for the communists was that while farmers joined the FUL locals. When protesting against the banks and trust companies, they would not listen to communist propaganda. In large measure this was because the CPC's farm programme, with its references to kulaks, its concentration on the rural worker, and its faith in land collectivization, had little attraction for the dirt farmer.

But for the poor farmers, a policy of simple resistance was not enough. Opposing foreclosures could not alter the grim realities of impoverishment and debt. Ruined by falling prices and legally defenceless against their creditors, many farmers were ready to consider a more revolutionary solution to their economic problems. "The outlook for the Western farmer is certainly blue," wrote one observer in 1931, "and it may be necessary to tinge it with red before justice is done to him."⁶⁶ But the FUL remained unmoved. The Party was committed to the urban struggle and criticized the League's work. Isolated even among front organizations, the FUL failed to develop a sense of its own legitimacy. It could only heighten the intensity of existing agitations in favour of a moratorium on debt. Unfortunately, this form of propaganda did little to improve League fortunes, though it did perhaps produce psychological victories for the farmers. Confronted by incessant demands for debt relief, many Western politicians became convinced that the League was stronger than it seemed, and that the farmers were "in a revolutionary frame of mind and find nothing good in what we have done or tried to do."⁶⁷ This did not, however, effect a change in government policy. For Premier Brownlee of Alberta, individual negotiation and personal restraint were the only reasonable solutions to the debt problem and he refused to announce a general moratorium.⁶⁸ J.M.T. Anderson's Cooperative Government was no more anxious to pass comprehensive protective legislation. Though a Debt Adjustment Board was established in Saskatchewan in 1935, its powers were limited. Of 1683 petitions from creditors requesting the right to foreclose, 956 were allowed by the Debt Adjustment Board and a full two-thirds were approved over the opposition of the debtor.⁶⁹ The failure of the FUL to either effect a change in the laws or bring about the revolution led many League members to abandon the penny auction movement and search for other methods of defending their interests. Increasing numbers of radicals abandoned the League, some drifting to Social Credit, others reviving Clarke's call for a guaranteed wheat price and a minimum agricultural wage.⁷⁰

The Rumsey local of the FUL was the first to propose the calling of a farm strike to protest "against the intolerable conditions under which the poor farmers are forced to live." Petitioning the League office in December, 1932, the Rumsey radicals asserted that a mass "non-production strike" would be the most effective weapon in the struggle "against the relentless robbery of the banks, through the Provincial and Municipal authorities, [and of] the mortgage and machine companies." Fred Schunaman, *The Furrow's* editor, was drawn immediately to the idea, but he cautioned that there was more than one variety of strike

66. GAI, George Coote Papers, Box 11, file 94, J.J. Duggan to G.C. Coote, 5 June 1931.

67. Address by Premier Brownlee to the UFA Executive, July 13, 1935, in Carl BETKE, "The United Farmers of Alberta, 1921-1935: The Relationship Between the Agricultural Organization and the Government of Alberta" (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1971), p. 166.

68. Public Archives of Alberta (PAA), Premiers' Papers, 170A, J.E. Brownlee to N.F. Priestly, 17 June 1932.

69. P.A. RUSSELL, "The Cooperative Government's Response to the Depression", in *Saskatchewan History*, XXIV (Spring 1971): 92.

70. *The Furrow*, August, 1932; PAA, Premiers' Papers, 158C, Sam Olesky to J.E. Brownlee, 30 August 1932.

action which could be taken. Schunaman suggested that the farmers could choose between non-production, which meant a curtailment of the acreage sown to wheat; non-delivery, or the picketing of elevators and the prevention of grain sales until demands were met; and non-payment, which implied the sale of produce and a refusal to pay creditors, accompanied by a resistance to seizures and foreclosures.⁷¹ The Rumsey farmers' suggestion inaugurated a lively debate in the pages of *The Furrow* which only subsided when the FUL called a conference to decide upon what type of strike action to endorse.⁷² Unfortunately there is no record of whether the strike convention was ever held, for the League soon was dealt a devastating blow. In May, 1933, *The Furrow's* credit at the printers was curtailed, its office in the Grainger Building was closed, and for the next eight months it was forced to cease publication.⁷³ Without access to *The Furrow* it is impossible to chart League activities. Only a few facts surface: in June, 1933, an FUL candidate contested the Mackenzie by-election in Saskatchewan, and four months later the League sponsored a Hunger March on the Regina Legislature.⁷⁴ The League, however, must have had some success popularizing its strike idea, despite the demise of its organ, for one year after the Rumsey local first broached the idea, a farm strike was held in Northern Alberta.

IV

The center of League activity in Alberta was the predominantly Ukrainian farming area between Edmonton and the Saskatchewan border. Farms in this region were smaller than elsewhere on the Prairie, with quarter- and half-section production units predominating. Owing to the forested nature of the terrain and the difficulties involved in clearing, the proportion of improved to total acreage was significantly less than the western average. Investment ratios in farm machinery and livestock were among the lowest in Alberta, with a tradition of non-competitiveness exacerbating the simple financial difficulties involved in modernization.⁷⁵ Here, low earnings and an escalating level of indebtedness were the salient features of economic life throughout the Depression. Over half of the farms in the area reported mortgage indebtedness in 1931 and within the quinquennium the number of debtors in the region exceeded that of any other census district of Alberta by five hundred percent. The total amount of debt in this small farm belt was \$15,650,500 in 1930, an average of \$2,780 per mortgaged unit. By 1935, the average debt had fallen slightly, but the number indebted had increased by twenty percent. This burden was made more unbearable by the astonishingly low value of the agricultural products sold. In 1930, the sale of farm products brought an average income of \$1,216 to each operator and within five years that amount had fallen to only \$850. In short, the average farmer at the outset of the Depression earned barely enough to pay forty-three percent of his debt and by 1935, he could cover only one-third of his crop liens and mortgages with his total income. When amounts are deducted for production costs and familial subsistence, the income of local farmers was insufficient to pay for even the interest on farm debts.⁷⁶

71. *The Furrow*, December 15, 1932; GAI, George Coote Papers, Box 17, file 167, clipping: "Nationwide Farm Strike Advocated", 5 November 1932.

72. *The Furrow* February 1933.

73. *The Furrow*, March-April, 1933; *The Worker*, 16 September 1933.

74. *The Worker*, 10 June and 11 November 1933.

75. KRISTIANSON, "Land Settlement in Northeastern Alberta", pp. 11-12.

76. *Census of Canada* for 1931 and 1936. The volumes used were those relating to agriculture and census district 10 covers most of the region east of Edmonton. Comparisons were made only with the older settlement regions south of the McLeod-Saskatchewan River line. This does not include the areas around Peace River and Athabasca.

Tensions caused by this financial situation finally erupted during the 1933 harvest, when a dispute developed between the farmers of Myrnam and the local elevator agents. The problem arose in mid-November, when a rumour circulated among the farmers that the five elevators in Myrnam had been instructed to grade all grains delivered as poor in quality or "tough". Complaints had immediately been lodged with the Board of Grain Commissioners, but the companies in question had successfully disproved the charges by producing receipts demonstrating that they had purchased "dry" high quality wheat after November 15, when the charges had been made.⁷⁷ The rumours persisted, however, and on 4 December, 140 farmers voted to boycott the elevators until a formal investigation had been undertaken by the Grain Commissioners and until the local agents had been replaced by the elevator companies. A strike committee was established, roads leading to the elevators were picketed and an appeal for support was sent out to both the United Farmers of Alberta and to the Farmers' Unity League.⁷⁸

Paradoxically, despite front-page coverage in major Alberta newspapers, it took nearly a month for the Board of Grain Commissioners to dispatch an investigatory legation to the Myrnam area. In early January, 1934, Commissioners Blatchford, Thompson and Creighton appeared with representatives of the grain companies and an officer of the RCMP to inform the farmers that although they sympathized with their demands, "the Board of Grain Commissioners has no power to act in this case as it is up to the companies represented here to take the necessary steps."⁷⁹ By week's end, the Mounted Police had moved into the area and the farmers' pickets had been forcibly dispersed.⁸⁰ Angered by the Government's intervention, the strike committee attempted to broaden its protest by making a bid for the support of the UFA. Although few in the Myrnam area were UFA members and although the Association had previously ignored the committee's appeal for support, the strike leaders were clearly hoping to pressure the Brownlee government by threatening its power-base in the United Farmers organization. On 17 January, a Ukrainian named William Halina appeared before the UFA convention in Calgary and appealed in English to the delegates for support. Denying the presence of both "agitators" and "communists", Halina explained that the Myrnam farmers wanted only to have the offending elevator agents removed "because we have lost faith in them." Vocal opposition to the strike immediately became manifest as one delegate after another rose to explain that as "a director of one of the companies named", he objected to the "charges of unjust practices." Tactfully, the convention avoided an outbreak of hostilities by appointing an "impartial committee" to research into the Myrnam strike, though the predisposition of the delegates was revealed in the fact that of the three individuals appointed to investigate the dispute, one was a member of the provincial legislature and another was a director of one of the companies involved.⁸¹ The investigatory report, submitted three days later, denied the existence of unfair grading at Myrnam, though the committee admitted that owing to time constraints it had based its conclusions solely on evidence volunteered to it by the Department of Agriculture, the Board of Grain Commissioners and the companies involved.⁸² The theories of J.M. Clarke were being corroborated; the interests of the wealthy, share-holding agriculturalists were not those of the poor farmers. Soon after the UFA rejected the Myrnam

77. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 14 December 1933.

78. *The Worker*, 16 December 1933; *Edmonton Bulletin*, 8 December 1922.

79. *The Furrow*, February 1934.

80. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 11 January 1934.

81. *Calgary Herald*, 17 January 1934.

82. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 20 January 1934.

farmers' appeal a settlement was reached between the strike committee and the grain companies. Several of the local agents were replaced by the companies and in exchange, the strikers dropped their charges of low grading and abandoned their demand for a reimbursement by the companies for all grains "undersold". On 11 March, 1934, Western Canada's first farm delivery strike came quietly to a close.⁸³

Throughout the Myram strike, the role of the Farmers' Unity League remained obscure. Lacking in funds and hard pressed by its creditors, the League headquarters was unable to lend any organizational support to the strikers. Assistance might have been provided by local units since League members had been the first to debate the strike idea and many FUL branches existed in the Myram area. But the link remains unsubstantiated. Clearly, though it would be rash to discount the communist element, their importance should not be exaggerated. That Halina could deny the presence of communist agitators is indicative of their isolation. The delivery strike, which had begun as a left-wing idea, had become a tool of non-communist farm militancy. Poor farmers were willing to use the Farmers' Unity League, but not to obey it.

Nonetheless, if the communists can be faulted for their failure to lead the strike, the United Farmers of Alberta was guilty of directly opposing it. The Brownlee government's response to the unrest at Myram was repression. The RCMP was sent into the area with the simple objective of opening highways and restoring order as swiftly as possible. The reaction of the UFA association was no more laudatory, for the delegates at its convention displayed a complete lack of sympathy for the strikers. Gradually, small farmers concluded that the UFA had become an organization representing only the grain companies and the larger farmers of the southern Prairie, a realization that may have contributed to the spread of Social Credit doctrine and the defection of UFA voters in the small farm regions in the 1935 provincial election.⁸⁴ What is remarkable about the Myram strike is that despite its isolation, the strike committee effectively maintained its boycott on grain deliveries for over three months. The secret to the strikers' solidarity lay in their continued use of elevators outside of the picketed area.⁸⁵ To this extent, the strike remained solid because it was not a strike at all but rather a boycott of selected elevator companies. This fact escaped the farmers, however, and many of them became convinced that the Myram protest was a promising experiment in a new form of popular dissent. Moderate concessions had been obtained through limited action and poor farmers and their communist supporters concluded that the strike would have been more successful had its geographical area been extended. Before the year was out, the Myram farmers were given an opportunity to test their theory.

V

Alberta's second farm delivery strike began at Mundare, a town lying some eighty kilometers south-west of Myram, in early November, 1934. Unlike their predecessors, however, the Mundare strikers evidently devised their protest to be more than a local disturbance, for they sought to ameliorate the conditions of the poor farmers across the

83. *The Furrow*, March 1934.

84. For an analysis of election returns, see Thomas FLANAGAN, "Political Geography and the United Farmers of Alberta", in *The Twenties in Western Canada*, ed. S.M. TROFIMENKOFF (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1972), pp. 138-69.

85. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 December 1933.

mortgage belt. Directing their first strike petition not to the middlemen but to the provincial government, the Mundare strike committee demanded that the elevator companies install grain cleaners at their own expense at all points, that a cost of production minimum price for all farm products be legislated, and that a more "equitable" system of grading be established.⁸⁶ By emphasizing the need for better methods of grading and free grain cleaning, the protesters were hoping to improve the price of their wheat by eliminating the possibility that they would be under-paid by the elevator agents. In the Park Belt region, the quality of wheat was more varied and generally lower than it was in the south. In this area one-quarter of the grain delivered was regularly graded as tough by the purchasing agents.⁸⁷ Since the grading system stressed such characteristics as colour and plumpness of the kernel, the cleanness of the grain was often crucial if the farmer was to obtain the correct price for his wheat.⁸⁸ Large producers generally owned their own cleaners, but poor farmers could not afford to install their own systems and they often found it impossible to pay the elevator agent for the cost of the service, even where it was available.⁸⁹ Consequently, many small farmers believed the agents used the impurities in their grain as a means of lowering the purchasing price by down-grading wheat qualities. Thus the Mundare strikers' demands represented more than local concerns, they represented the small farmers' desire to achieve justice for their industry.

The delivery strike began on 6 November 1934, when 400 farmers gathered at Mundare town hall to prepare a petition of grievances. Detachments of eight to ten men were sent out to patrol the major highways and picket lines were established around the local elevators.⁹⁰ Vegreville's Chief Inspector Scott, of the RCMP, immediately moved police units into the area and by the evening of the first day of striking, fourteen farmers had been arrested and two had been hospitalized.⁹¹ Scott's impetuous actions probably worried the government, for on November 8, the RCMP units in the town were withdrawn and Chief Commissioner Blatchford was hurrying towards Mundare from Winnipeg, drawn "by the excessive seriousness of the situation." The following day, Blatchford met with the strikers and explained to them that their protest "was the most futile thing they could do", indicating that their refusal to deliver wheat would have no effect upon prices since there was enough surplus grain stored in eastern terminals to feed the country for the next three years. Inspector Scott, who accompanied Blatchford, was even more admonitory, warning his mostly Ukrainian audience that the RCMP would do everything it could to maintain law and order and informing them that they "had a lot to be thankful for in that they were living in the British Empire."⁹² Within two days, the strike had spread to encompass all of the major shipping points around Mundare, closing some twenty elevators in the area between Royal Park and Lamont.⁹³ By 14 November, farmers in Willingdon, Hairy Hill, Smokey Lake, Two Hills, Kaleland and Manville had joined in non-delivery and had recognized the authority of the Mundare leadership as the provincial strike com-

86. GAI, O.S. Longman Papers, Correspondence: The Southern Alberta Beet Growers, file 4, 1936, "Alberta Strike Bulletin"; *The Furrow*, November 1934.

87. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 20 January 1934.

88. Vernon C. FOWKE, *Canadian Agricultural Policy: The Historical Pattern* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 242-43.

89. D.A. MacGIBBON, *The Canadian Grain Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1932), pp. 91-92.

90. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 9 November 1934.

91. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 8 November 1934.

92. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 9 November 1934.

93. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 11 November 1934.

mittee.⁹⁴ Sixty elevators had been closed by this time and the strikers confidently predicted that their protest would paralyze trading across the whole of central Alberta.⁹⁵

But their optimism was to prove illusory. By 1 December, grain sales had resumed at Hilliard, Mymam and Vegreville, and Grain Commissioner Ramsay reopened Mundare with a promise to supervise the grading of all wheat delivered.⁹⁶ The provincial strike committee attempted to avert the disaster by transforming the protest from non-delivery to boycott and it urged farmers to deliver their grain over the platform, thereby avoiding the elevators and their agents.⁹⁷ The strike leaders in Willingdon sought to revive the movement's unity by turning themselves into the executive of a United Farmers of Canada (Alberta Section), and they called on poor farmers to join in building a permanent organization pledged to obtaining the "costs of production" through "direct action".⁹⁸ The grain strike was doomed to collapse, however, for it was condemned by an internal weakness. Though the delivery strike was the supreme manifestation of the poor farmers' ability to cooperate, it was flawed by having as its real victims the strikers themselves and not the grain dealers. By not delivering their wheat, the farmers were depriving themselves of their only source of income and for small operators already deeply in debt, this implied a risk to their ownership and their subsistence. The limited geographical extent of the Mymam strike had been the paradoxical source of its strength. By spreading throughout Alberta's eastern Park Belt, the Mundare strike ultimately destroyed itself. When all of the local points were closed, the farmers were forced into a situation they could not hope to control. Unless the strike could have spread rapidly to encompass a majority of the west's wheat producing area, it was bound to fail, as the farmers' capacity to endure a curtailment of income was far less than that of the major grain companies. Unfortunately, the chances of the strike spreading over an extended area in 1934-35 were limited, for across the Prairies the "leading farmers" had "declared their intention to disregard the strike entirely."⁹⁹ Organizations dominated by the large farmers, such as the UFA and the Wheat Pool, refused to endorse the strike, and the weakness of the FUL in the southern areas of the Prairie restricted the non-delivery action to an isolated area of poverty in the heart of the Park Belt.¹⁰⁰

For the Farmers' Unity League, the Mundare delivery strike was a final curtain call which eased the organization off the revolutionary stage. Prominent Communists had initially hoped that the strike would inaugurate "a new stage in the development of the impoverished farmers ... it signals a definite radicalization of the farming masses; a definite swing to the left; a definite growing militancy; a definite breaking with old traditions and methods of struggle."¹⁰¹ Anxious to harness this new movement and make up for the errors committed during the Mymam strike, League organizers had moved swiftly into the strike area and had offered their support and guidance to the dissident farmers. John Magnus Clarke, recently returned to Canada from his years abroad in the Soviet Union and India, was dispatched back to *The Furrow's* office by a Party convinced now of his indispensability. The Canadian Labour Defence League, the CPC's legal front organization vol-

94. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 13 and 14 November 1934.

95. *The Furrow*, November 1934.

96. *The Worker*, 19 December 1934; *Edmonton Bulletin*, 1 December 1934.

97. GAI, J.P. Brady Papers, file: Political, 1926-51, "Farm Strike Bulletin No. 2", 8 December 1934.

98. *The Furrow*, December 1934.

99. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 17 November 1934.

100. William Kardash, the provincial secretary of the FUL, approached the UFA and asked for assistance, but as before, the strikers' petition was rejected. GAI, UFA Papers, Convention Minutes, 1935.

101. *The Furrow*, November 1934.

unteered to act in the defence of arrested picketers; the FUL offices in Edmonton were transformed into the headquarters for the provincial strike committee; and under Clarke's supervision, communist organizers canvassed non-strike areas for support and *The Furrow* agreed to publish and distribute the strikers' bulletins and broadsheets.¹⁰² One League organizer, George Palmer, even made the headlines in the Edmonton papers when he was tarred and feathered by strike breakers after giving a speech in Vegreville.¹⁰³ But for all their good offices, the communists remained unable to either win converts or fundamentally alter the character of the strike. Even at the height of the strike an FUL conference in Edmonton attracted only eighty-four farmers, a grim reminder that despite their best efforts "the League is extremely sectarian, isolated from the mass of the farmers ... [by] its traditions no less than by its composition."¹⁰⁴

VI

Soon after the Mundare delivery strike, at the Ninth Plenum of the Central Executive Committee of the CPC held in Toronto in November, 1935, the decision was made to disband the Farmers' Unity League and to fuse its various elements "with the mass reformist organizations to which it is ... parallel and in general, in competition."¹⁰⁵ The Party passed the resolution eliminating its agrarian wing as part of a general reorientation in favour of an anti-fascist "United Front" of radical elements.¹⁰⁶ The League was attacked as "sectarian" and "isolated" and its methods were characterized by the CPC as being "overburdened" with "theorizations" and "generalities".¹⁰⁷ The leaders of the FUL drifted into a new organization, the Farmers' National Committee of Action (FNCA), a "United Front" body that had been established in August, 1935, in anticipation of the discontinuance of League activities. The objective of the revised organization was similar to that of the old Progressive Farmers' Educational League: the unification of the various radical groups and the encouragement of leftist sentiment among the farmers.¹⁰⁸ In short, the new strategy was to penetrate and not to oppose the rival protest organizations. But the FNCA failed to make any significant impact on the farmers' movement, because its headquarters were established in Winnipeg, far from the center of radical activity. True to the form of agrarian communism, many of the most successful agitators now began to leave the movement. Mills retired from agrarian dissent and moved with his family to Vancouver; Walter Wiggins left Saskatoon for Winnipeg to be the secretary of the Alberta Section of the FUL; Bill Kardash went to fight in Spain with the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.¹⁰⁹ J.M. Clarke, after working briefly as editor of the short-lived *Mid-western Clarion*, escaped to B.C. in 1940 when the rest of the editorial staff was arrested by the RCMP, and lived out the war under an assumed name.¹¹⁰ His last contribution to Canadian radicalism was his editorship

102. *The Furrow*, November and December 1934; *The Worker*, 9 December 1934; *Edmonton Bulletin*, 8 November 1934; letter: K.E. Dalskog to the author, December 1982.

103. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 17 November 1934.

104. PAC, CPC Papers, folder: "Agriculture", "Organize the Common People of the Countryside", p. 3.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

106. VAN HOUTEN, *Canada's Party of Socialism*, pp. 112-18.

107. PAC, CPC Papers, Convention Series, "Minutes of the Ninth Plenum of the C.E.C.", November, 1935, p. 7.

108. SAB, United Farmers of Canada (Saskatchewan Section) UFC (SS) Papers, B2 VIII 5, Ivan Birchard to Frank Eliason, 3 August 1935.

109. Walter Wiggins, "Pioneers", pp. 66-68.

110. Letter: John Weir to the author, 9 February 1983.

of *The Canadian Woodworker*, the official organ of the Woodworkers' Industrial Union of Canada.¹¹¹ By 1936, the communist star over the Prairie had been eclipsed and the revolutionaries had manoeuvred themselves into obscurity.

In many ways, the FUL deserved better; better than the treatment it had received in life and better than that accorded to it by posterity. Though the League had failed to win poor farmers to communism, it had nonetheless been moderately successful in assuming a mantle of farm militancy discarded a half decade earlier. Indeed, for all its communist posturing, the FUL in practice was never much more than a revitalized Farmers' Union of Canada. Evidently it was similar enough to attract many of the same old activists for when the FUL founded a local at Kelvington in 1930, the first name in the lodge book was Louis P. McNamee's.¹¹² As one old radical remarked, "Ah well, you know what Barnum said."¹¹³

If the FUL failed, it was because the ideological goals it set for itself were too ambitious for both its leaders and its followers, for the League sought not merely to lead a struggle, but to change men's thoughts. Having been stripped of its own ideology, the FUL imprisoned itself in a doctrinal framework which restricted its ability to lead the small farmers against the forces of industrial capitalism. Though the League fought for immediate reforms, it alienated its supporters by declaring the very policies it advocated to be insufficient and ephemeral. As one farm leader noted of the FUL, "I don't know how to place this outfit ... they make a big noise about the toiling farmer and they knock the UFC. They profess to be Wheat Pool supporters and yet their activities appear to be opposed to the Marketing Act. They support the CCF and yet their organization claims that the CCF is a tool of capitalism."¹¹⁴ Ultimately, the FUL was more adept at exposing deceptions and leading independently generated protests than it was at evolving a programme which might permanently attract the poor farmers.¹¹⁵ When the demands of the United Front terminated the League's existence, it left not so much a revolutionary consciousness as a vague militant enthusiasm. Rather than converting the masses to communism, the FUL succeeded in reinforcing their belligerence. Protest, in the years immediately the poor farmers.¹¹⁵ When the demands of the United Front terminated the League's existence, it left not so much a revolutionary consciousness as a vague militant enthusiasm. Rather than converting the masses to communism, the FUL succeeded in reinforcing their belligerence. Protest, in the years immediately following the League's demise, found its expression not in support for the CPC, but in a revival of small farm militancy in both Alberta and Saskatchewan under the auspices of the United Farmers of Canada. It was not an inauspicious legacy, only an insufficient one.

111. *The Canadian Woodworker*, 3 November 1948.

112. *The Furrow*, April 1931.

113. SAB, George Edwards Papers, J. Robinson to G. Edwards 28 December 1930.

114. SAB, UFC (SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, J.F. Hogg to Frank Eliason, 1 April 1935.

115. SAB, UFC (SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, Frank Eliason to J.F. Hogg, 14 April 1935.