

The National Farmers' Union

The decline of the Grange and the Alliance left an open field in most areas for another farm organization to carry on the crusade for economic and social justice. The Farmers' Union now entered this field. Founded at Point, Texas, in 1902, it spread rapidly in Texas and in the neighboring states.

Several factors contributed to this movement in the South. The secret nature of the order (repealed in 1917) and its low dues appealed to the farmers in the low income group. The nefarious mortgage and credit systems, inherited from the reconstruction period after the Civil War, and the sharp practices in the market aroused the poor farmers in angry protest to join any organization that would combat these evils. The farmers' institutes, promoted at this time by the Texas Agricultural College, suggested the value and need of organization. The emotional appeal of the organizers was also a motivating factor.

The Union grew rapidly, and state organizations were established in a number of southern states. After much dissension, arising out of poor business management, personality conflicts, and the determination of the Texas Union officials to

control the membership in other states, a convention was held in 1905. The Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union (generally known as the National Farmers' Union) was organized, a constitution was adopted, and Charles A. Barrett was elected president, a position he held for twenty-two years. Membership was limited to farm owners and tenants, country school teachers, ministers, physicians, and country newspaper editors, while persons engaged in banking, law, or merchandising were declared ineligible.

The trend in membership of the Farmers' Union has been similar to the trend in other rural organizations: a rapid increase soon after organization and then a precipitous decline followed by a leveling off and a later gradual recovery. This trend is reflected by the Farmers' Union. Membership rose rapidly to a high peak of around 400,000 farm families in 1914, evened off during the World War I period, and then underwent a sharp decline to a low mark of 100,000 in 1925. The Union maintained about the same number until 1940 when it began a gradual upward turn to 146,000 farm families in 1947, representing thirty-six states. The highest concentration of membership was in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma, followed by Minnesota, Colorado, and Montana.

The basic principles of the National Farmers' Union are: (1) to attain equity and justice by

maintaining a democratic political system and by building a cooperative income system; (2) to cooperate with organized groups who genuinely seek to provide economic security, preserve democratic processes and principles, and provide economic abundance for all the people; (3) to advance a system of cooperative businesses, owned by producers and consumers, as the only means to attain these ends; and (4) to assure agriculture an equal position with other important and essential groups.

The National Farmers' Union is militantly active politically in demanding legislative action to improve the economic and social position of the farmer. It proposes to bring this about primarily by the organization of business cooperatives which come under the five heads of selling, buying, manufacturing, insurance, and credit associations. The Union also maintains that the economic structure of society must be fundamentally changed. Farmers must go into business and retain all the profits. To this end it promotes the organization of cooperatives for the purchase of supplies; the management of plants for the processing of farm products, such as packing plants, flour mills, phosphate plants, pickle factories, creameries, and canneries; and the conduct of fire, livestock, and life insurance companies. Some 350,000 farmers are now members of the Union's cooperative enterprises. Nearly half of them are

located in Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Montana. They include wholesale exchanges, grain elevators and terminal marketing firms, livestock shipping associations, creameries, marketing agencies for poultry, wool, and cotton, oil companies, truck associations, general stores, an oil refinery, and a hospital.

The Farmers' Union entered Iowa in 1915 with the organization of the first local in Monona County. A state organization was effected in Des Moines, October 5, 1917. Milo Reno, who had been active in the Alliance and Populist movements, joined the Iowa Farmers' Union in 1918 and was elected president in 1921. He held this office until 1933.

Under the leadership of this militant apostle of agrarian reform, the Union rose in membership and influence, advancing the cause of the farmer as Iowa went into the agricultural depression of the 1920's and early 1930's. When agriculture reached the low point of the depression in 1932-1933, Iowa became the scene of a farmers' revolt that attracted national attention. This was the Farmers' Holiday Movement.

At the 1931 convention of the Iowa Farmers' Union, Reno secured the passage of a resolution asking for a "farmers' buying, selling, and tax-paying strike," unless Congress enacted adequate agricultural legislation which should include currency inflation, increased income, inheritance and

gift taxes, and the confiscation of great concentrations of wealth in wartime. The Iowa Farm Holiday Association was organized with the election of Reno as president. In the summer of 1932, as the presidential campaign got under way, the Association called a strike to withhold farm produce from markets in order to enforce "cost-of-production plus profits" prices. Units of the Association were formed in other Middle Western states. "The movement lacked cohesion and achieved little in the way of permanent concrete results but it effectively dramatized the severity of the farm problem facing the Roosevelt administration."

The Iowa Farmers' Union has continued to advance the charge that present-day legislation and technology has tended to "exalt the dominance of those already on top." The Union declares that it is the champion of the farm families in the lower income brackets for which its measures are largely designed. The organization of cooperatives owned by producers and consumers is sponsored as "the only means by which the potential abundance of the nation may be made available to all the people and by which true democracy may be maintained and safeguarded." It has urged the adoption by Congress of a federal program of rural education supported by an annual appropriation of one billion dollars providing for a complete revision and integration of "all educational agencies now serv-

ing agriculture." The preservation of the family-sized farm, the protection of which should be a constant and primary aim in the formulation, amendment, and administration of all farm legislation, is particularly emphasized.

The Farmers' Union has represented the radical or left wing of the farmers' movement for economic and social justice since the turn of the century. The strength of the organization has rested on its "grass roots democracy" and its militant leadership. It endeavors to develop a balanced program designed to further the economic, educational, and social advancement of the farm family. The weakness of the Union may be attributed to a tendency to oppose the programs of other organizations rather than to advance more actively a positive program of its own. It has at times overstated its case and made extreme demands for legislative and administrative reforms. In its vigorous and consistent demand for a fuller economic and cultural life for farm families and its support of the interests of the majority of the people, the Farmers' Union has performed an invaluable service.

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