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Summer 1984

Review of *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* By Lowell K. Dyson

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BOOK REVIEWS

Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers. By Lowell K. Dyson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. Notes, bibliographical essay, index. xii + 259 pp. \$18.95.

By surveying Communist efforts to organize farmers and farm workers, Lowell K. Dyson has done for agriculture what Bert Cochran did for the CIO in *Labor and Communism*—presented a full account of Communist activities uncolored by Red-baiting or apologies. Dyson begins by noting the paradox in Communist efforts: “Communists sought to change the very nature of the American agricultural system, but the programs which won them the broadest hearing among farmers were aimed at preserving the system” (p. xi). Maintaining an even-handed objectivity, Dyson nonetheless conveys a sympathetic understanding of how some farmers came to espouse radicalism.

In the 1920s, Non-Partisan League and Farmer-Labor activities on the northern Great Plains suggested fertile ground for Communist organizing. Dyson points to shifting signals from Moscow to explain why Communists controlled, then wrecked the Farmer-Labor party in 1923–24. In 1926, Communists formed the United Farmers Educational League (UFEL), counterpart of the Trade Union Educational League, with the same objective of proselytizing within existing organizations. In 1930, reflecting Stalin’s switch to “Third Period” concepts, the UFEL became the United Farmers League and broke with other groups. The 1934–35 shift to the Popular Front brought dissolution of the UFL as most members joined the National Farmers Union (NFU). By the late 1930s, Popular Fronters helped to make the NFU the major farm organization supporting the New Deal.

According to Dyson, “the story of the Communist party and American farmers ended during the rise of the Popular Front” (p. 187).

Mergers so diluted Communists’ numbers as to render them almost invisible and powerless. Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, the interests of Popular Fronters and other NFU members coincided in supporting the New Deal and then the war. As late as March 1948, the NFU rejected an anti-Communist resolution, but later that year supported Truman rather than Wallace and soon purged Popular Fronters.

This summary by no means exhausts Dyson’s subjects. He also deals with Communist activity among southern sharecroppers, California field workers, and Finns in the upper Great Lakes region. Dyson recounts the dominant role of Communists in the CIO’s agricultural union and surveys Communist relations with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and New York dairymen.

Except in Sheridan County, Montana, where the sheriff stocked pool halls and barber-shops with the *Daily Worker*, those few agrarian Communists who won public office kept secret their party membership. Nor did any significant organizational leader ever admit party membership. Farmers’ deeply ingrained sense of individualism meant Communist organizers could rarely discuss collectivization of agriculture without alienating most listeners. While Dyson categorizes Communist victories as “marginal” at best, he nonetheless concludes that, due to efforts by dedicated organizers, Communists had as much influence with farmers as with any other part of the American population.

Although parts of this tale have been told before, Dyson not only brings it all together but also adds important new dimensions by his extensive use of documentary sources and his interviews with key participants. *Red Harvest* should be read by students of the Great Plains, agricultural politics, and American radicalism.

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