

# MINNEAPOLIS



*VIEW DOWN Minneapolis' Fourth Street South about 1910*

# *and the Pragmatic Socialism of* THOMAS VAN LEAR

David Paul Nord

IN JANUARY, 1903, a young investigative reporter named Lincoln Steffens published an article in *McClure's Magazine* called "The Shame of Minneapolis." That article, along with five others Steffens wrote on municipal corruption, came to be regarded as a classic piece of muckraking journalism, and with its appearance Minneapolis suddenly took a place among the other great American cities of the new century — publicly revealed as unplanned, unkempt, and ungoverned. Minnesotans were shocked (if not really surprised) to read in a national periodical of the ruling cliques, organized gambling, bribes, indictments, convictions, and fast trains out of town for "Doc" Albert Alonzo Ames, the Mill City's popular but harried mayor.<sup>1</sup>

Minneapolis survived the Ames scandals, but during the next fifteen years it experienced much of the other turmoil that shook the nation's cities in the Progressive era: the struggle for home rule, the conflict over public utility regulation, debates about new forms of municipal government, and the fight over union organization and

the open shop. These were problems that confronted many American cities, as they tried belatedly to come to terms with the industrial-urban revolution. But the response of Minneapolis was not altogether typical of the new American city. In 1916 the voters of this traditionally Republican stronghold chose Thomas Van Lear, a Socialist, as their mayor. Although the Socialist party elected a number of mayors during these years of vigorous reform, few of them held office in major cities. In fact, of the cities which turned for a while to municipal Socialism, only Milwaukee was larger than Minneapolis.<sup>2</sup>

The story of how this came about involves the personality of Van Lear; the political party structure in Minneapolis and throughout Minnesota; the growth of the city's labor movement; and some serious municipal issues. But perhaps the most important factor was a fluidity of ideology in Minneapolis which allowed for the creation of a broadly based, umbrella-type Socialist coalition. This, in turn, was traceable partly to Van Lear's leadership.

THOMAS VAN LEAR was born in Maryland in 1869 and went to work in the coal mines of Appalachia at the age of eleven. On his eighteenth birthday he joined the Knights of Labor. Later he quit the mines, moved to the Midwest, and entered the army, where he served four years, including a year's re-enlistment during the Spanish-American War. After leaving the army, he went to Minneapolis to work at the trade of machinist. There he soon became a popular union figure, serving as business agent for the Minneapolis lodge of the International

---

<sup>1</sup>Steffens' exposé, which first appeared in the January, 1903, issue of *McClure's Magazine* (vol. 20, p. 227-239), was later published in a volume which included all six of his articles on municipal corruption. See Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*, 61-97 (New York, 1904).

<sup>2</sup>James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925*, 107-109, 116-118 (New York, 1967).

*Mr. Nord teaches journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He received his master's degree in American business and labor history at the University of Minnesota. This article is based on his master's thesis, which is a study of Minneapolis politics during the Progressive era.*

Association of Machinists (IAM) and later as agent for District 32 of the IAM, which included railroad machinists on roads from St. Paul to the Northwest Coast. He was also a vice-president of the international union for one term, a delegate to the Minneapolis Trades and Labor Assembly (forerunner of the Minneapolis Central Labor Union), and an original member of the board of control of the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, the official voice of organized labor in Minneapolis. Within the IAM he was widely known as an advocate of industrial unionism. As chairman of its committee on extension of organization he consistently pressed for an amalgamation of all metal trades unions into one powerful organization.<sup>3</sup>

Van Lear's total devotion to unionism stood out in nearly all his activities. Gradually, however, he began to view political action as a necessary phase of the workingman's struggle. In a revealing Labor Day oration in 1912, he noted that the capitalists had begun to move the fight from the industrial to the political field with misapplied antitrust laws, court injunctions, police action, and the use of troops to break strikes. They had "used their power to control the government, until today the real government of the United States of America is a government instituted from Wall Street." Therefore it was time for the workingman to move into the political field, too. "Working class political activity," he declared, "does not decrease the interest in unionism, it infuses into the whole working class movement enthusiasm, hope, confidence and militancy." He urged his listeners to "strike at the ballot box."<sup>4</sup>

Exactly when Van Lear joined the Socialist party is not clear, but it was some time before he made his first run for mayor in 1910. Until that year the Socialist party of Minneapolis had been dismally weak in municipal elections. Called the "Public Ownership party," it had been organized as a local affiliate of the Socialist Party of America shortly after the national party was founded in 1901. Its first candidate for mayor had run in 1904 and garnered 2,682 votes out of a total of 40,391 votes cast. This proved a high point for the Socialists in pre-Van Lear elections; their vote, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total, fell in 1906 and dropped even further in 1908. In the latter year their candidate received only 977 votes out of 41,671. This was rock bottom in Minneapolis — 345 votes less than the Prohibition party candidate.<sup>5</sup>

Two years later, however, Van Lear nearly won election. He was edged out in a tight, three-way race, receiving 11,601 votes against 12,754 for the Republican candidate, William E. Satterlee, and 12,788 for the incumbent Democrat, James C. Haynes, who thus barely retained the office he had held with the exception of one term since 1902. The *Labor Review* described Van Lear's campaign as a "phenomenal run." And so it was. He had

gained more than ten times the votes cast for the Socialist candidate in 1908, carrying all six labor wards and running extremely well in the traditionally Democratic wards. In its analysis of the election returns, the *Review* gave most of the credit for the strong showing to Van Lear's own energy and style.<sup>6</sup>

The tall, balding labor leader was widely respected in Minneapolis as a straightforward and honest friend of the little man. The *Labor Review* noted that "people know to look at him that he is square," and even one of his political opponents admitted that "he was the idol of the working people."<sup>7</sup> He was a tireless and apparently dynamic campaigner. Unfortunately, none of his 1910 speeches has been preserved, but a segment from one of his talks recorded by a reporter in 1914, when Van Lear made an unsuccessful race for Congress, gives some idea of his hard-hitting oratorical style. He told an audience during a debate at the Citizens' Club that "when fat, slick, well-fed, well-dressed men, who never missed a meal in their lives, come down here and tell you workingmen that you should be patient and satisfied with things as they are, I think you ought to tell them to go to hell." At that, the reporter noted, "pandemonium broke loose."<sup>8</sup>

Although popular, Van Lear was not so charismatic that the force of his personality alone could have revitalized the Socialist party. He also brought with him an organization and the support of union labor in general. Before 1910 the Socialist political organization in Minneapolis was little more than a skeleton; Van Lear and his followers put flesh on it. His own campaign for mayor was spearheaded by a committee drawn from the Minneapolis locals of the IAM, and afterward these machinists stayed to spark new life within the party itself. They established locals in most wards and set up a variety of city-wide foreign language Socialist clubs. Both types of groups grew rapidly after 1910 and began to carry on sustained educational and organizational work and to sponsor dances, rallies, picnics, and other entertainment. The Socialist press also made its appearance in Minneapolis about this time. Both the *New*

<sup>3</sup>Biographical information on Van Lear is from the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, April 4, 1907, p. 7, November 10, 1910, p. 1; *New Times* (Minneapolis), April 4, 1914, p. 1, 3; *Minneapolis Journal*, November 8, 1916, p. 1; Mark Perlman, *The Machinists*, 288 (Cambridge, 1961). Van Lear's personal papers have not been preserved, nor have many important letters from him been found in other manuscript collections.

<sup>4</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, September 6, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1904, p. 630, 1906, p. 670-677, 1908, p. 739-744.

<sup>6</sup>Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1910, p. 965-970; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, November 10, 1910, p. 1, 4.

<sup>7</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, November 10, 1910, p. 1; George E. Leach, "The Personal History of Major-General George E. Leach," 31, Leach Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>8</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, October 30, 1914, p. 1.

*Times* and the Norwegian-language *Gaa Paa* ("Forward") covered party activities and avidly supported Socialist campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

The results could soon be seen. Over the country Socialism had been on the rise in 1910. In that year, for example, Emil Seidel had been elected mayor of Milwaukee, and he had carried twenty-one other Socialists into municipal offices with him. Not so in Minneapolis, where Van Lear was the solitary star, and all thirteen Socialist candidates for alderman had run a distant third behind the representatives of the two regular parties. After 1910, however, several Socialists were elected each year to a variety of Minneapolis offices. It is indicative that Alfred Voelker and Charles Johnson, the first two Socialist aldermen, elected in 1912, were both machinists who had never before run for office.<sup>10</sup>

The machinists could provide organization, but election depended upon general support from organized labor and other groups as well. The year 1910 had found Minneapolis labor at a political crossroads. Unlike neighboring St. Paul, where trade unionism had taken deep and early root, Minneapolis remained an open shop town. The principal force dedicated to keeping it that way was a powerful semisecret organization of employers known as the Citizens' Alliance, which had been formed in 1903. The political stance of the city's unions was largely dictated by opposition to the Alliance, and because the employers had strong ties with the Republican party, labor had for several years supported Mayor Haynes, a Democrat.<sup>11</sup>

This support was wearing thin, however. Haynes' chief of police, Frank T. Corrison, was widely believed



THOMAS VAN LEAR

<sup>9</sup>*New Times*, November 9, 1912, p. 1, 4, November 25, 1916, p. 3; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, October 4, 1912, p. 1; John H. M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924*, 161 (New York, 1970). The *New Times*, which began publication in 1910, was edited by Alexis Georgian, a fiery Russian immigrant who later drifted into the Communist party. The *Gaa Paa* (1904-18) was edited by Andrew O. Devold, who was elected to the state legislature as a Socialist in 1915 and who later moved into the Farmer-Labor party. Neither paper was an official organ of the Socialist party, but both were loyal to it.

<sup>10</sup>Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, 161; Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1910, p. 953-964; David P. Nord, "Socialism in One City: A Political Study of Minneapolis in the Progressive Era," 206, M.A. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1972, copy in University of Minnesota Library; *New Times*, November 9, 16, 1912, p. 1; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, October 4, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>For an account of the pre-World War I years of the Citizens' Alliance, see Nord, "Socialism in One City," 49-57. This study is based largely on material in the Citizens' Alliance Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>12</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, August 15, 1907, p. 8, October 29, 1908, p. 9, 10, November 10, 1910, p. 4, November 1, 1912, p. 1, June 16, 1916, p. 1.

to be antilabor, if not actually a tool of the Citizens' Alliance. During a 1907 machinists' strike Van Lear had accused Corrison of allowing special police recruited by the Alliance to be used as strikebreakers. In 1908 both the IAM and the editors of the *Labor Review* opposed Haynes and blocked his official endorsement by the Trades and Labor Assembly until late in the campaign, when they finally withdrew their objections. In 1910 the Assembly renewed its endorsement of Haynes, but rank and file workingmen were less than enthusiastic, and Van Lear became the "official" labor candidate in both 1912 and 1916.<sup>12</sup>

THE SOCIALISTS also gained the support of many independent citizens outside the ranks of organized labor. People in Minneapolis during the first two decades of the twentieth century were altering their traditional voting habits. It had been a solidly Republican city at the turn of the century, and it continued to go Republican in most

state and national elections throughout the Progressive era. On the local level, however, the voters began to elect more Democrats after the Ames scandals broke in 1901–02. The repeated success of Haynes (in 1902, 1906, 1908, and 1910) is perhaps the best evidence that Minneapolis was not completely satisfied with Republican leadership. In 1908–10 the Democrats for the first time held twelve seats on the twenty-six-member board of aldermen.<sup>13</sup>

A persistent issue in these campaigns was the question of public utility regulation. This was a problem which bedeviled many American cities in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the very concept of a public utility was still taking shape. With the sudden onset of urbanization late in the nineteenth century, cities had hastily begun to install water, gas, electric, and street railway systems — usually through franchises to private developers. Often liberal and lucrative franchises were passed out before serious thought had been given to planning in the public interest. Since many of these franchises were for long periods of time, sometimes as much as fifty years, citizens began to feel that they were at the mercy of the so-called public service corporations. This general uneasiness led reformers to demand greater municipal control or even public ownership.

Perhaps because of the Republican party's long tenure in Minneapolis, the suspicion was widespread that it had intimate ties with selfish "special interests" — particularly the enfranchised utility corporations. Much of Haynes' political strength stemmed from his apparent integrity on this issue. The Democratic party, however, was not always consistent in its opposition to the public utility corporations or on other questions. In 1908 four of the ten Democrats on the city council voted in favor of a new electric utility franchise which Haynes himself had denounced and later vetoed. Apparently the voters were not favorably impressed, for not one of these councilmen was re-elected in 1910.<sup>14</sup>

Frightened by Van Lear's strong showing in that year, Minneapolis Democrats and Republicans united to push through the 1911 legislative session a nonpartisan primary law. It provided that the two candidates receiving the highest vote totals in a nonpartisan June primary would be on the ballot in November. In 1912, the year of the first municipal election held under the new law, things at first went according to plan. The winners in the primary were Charles D. Gould, a Democrat, and Wallace G. Nye, a Republican. But Van Lear was nominated later by petition and soon became a leading contender again. When it looked as if the Socialist might win in a three-way race, Gould was persuaded by a visit from a group of the city's leading bankers, brokers, and industrialists to withdraw. The final vote was 19,963 for Van Lear, 1,258 for Gould, and 22,384 for Nye, the Republican "nonpartisan."<sup>15</sup>

This seeming political suicide on the part of the Democratic candidate not only raised suspicions of corruption, but tended to confirm the Socialists' claim that there was no significant difference between the two major parties. The impression was strengthened in 1916 when the Democratic organization once again failed to back a candidate of its own. Indeed, throughout Minnesota at this period the Democratic party was rapidly losing viability as a major opposition force. It had been a minority party in the state since the Civil War and had historically been controlled by cliques and dependent upon ethnic voting patterns which time and changing issues were beginning to erode. On the local and state levels, it had never made the transition to a broadly based organization which spoke for the liberalism associated with William Jennings Bryan and Woodrow Wilson. Third party movements were quick to fill the resulting vacuum. In Minneapolis it is clear that the Socialists attracted a large protest vote — that of people who were concerned with municipal problems and were dissatisfied with the performance of both regular parties.<sup>16</sup>

Van Lear's primary interest in labor unionism led him to a kind of socialism which was extremely flexible and pragmatic. As the *Labor Review* pointed out in 1910, he was "well known to workingmen generally as a man who cared little for a party name but everything for principles that were reformatory and uplifting." During the campaigns of both 1912 and 1916, Van Lear issued a statement on "What a Socialist Can and Will Do When Elected Mayor of Minneapolis." In it he said "Socialism cannot be put into effect in any one city. . . . But we know that every Socialist elected will use all the power of the office he is elected to in combatting the evils of the present day, and the final disappearance of these evils of capitalism will be hastened by the introduction of social, political and economic measures, which have the effect of bettering the lives of the workers, and strengthening their position in society."<sup>17</sup>

Van Lear, however, was not a reformer only. He believed in a class struggle which would eventually lead to a co-operative commonwealth. For Van Lear this be-

<sup>13</sup>Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1906, p. 670–677, 1908, p. 739–744, 1910, p. 965–970.

<sup>14</sup>*Minneapolis Journal*, October 21, p. 1, October 31, 1908, p. 5, 8; Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1908, p. 400, 1910, p. 965–970.

<sup>15</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, November 1, 1912, p. 1; *Minneapolis Journal*, November 3, 1912, p. 1; *New Times*, June 10, 1916, p. 1; Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1912, p. 1193–1196.

<sup>16</sup>*Minneapolis Journal*, November 3, 1912, p. 1; Carl H. Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota, 1899–1918*, 182, 183 (St. Paul, 1971).

<sup>17</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, November 10, 1910, p. 4; *New Times*, October 26, 1912, p. 1, October 21, 1916, p. 1, 4.

FRIMOD VILGHEIE BRUDERSKAB

# Gaa Paa!

KORNEREN BENSJESSEN 1918

**GAA PAA!**  
 Udgivet af Gaa Paa! Komiteen  
 Redaktør: Ole Frimodt Vilgheie  
 Adresse: 1100 Hennepin Ave.,  
 Minneapolis, Minn.

De Kjøber her Indlægget til  
 Gaa Paa! for \$1.00  
 Indlægget for \$0.50

Adresser til Gaa Paa!  
 1100 Hennepin Ave.,  
 Minneapolis, Minn.

—KARL MARE—

---

1918 AARGANG

### Krigen og Politikken

Den første og største årsag til krigen er den økonomiske ulighed mellem de rige og de fattige. Denne ulighed er blevet endnu større på grund af den tekniske udvikling, som har gjort det muligt for de rige at udnytte de fattige endnu mere effektivt. Derfor er det nødvendigt at gennemføre en grundig reform af vores økonomiske system.



**THOMAS VAN LEAR**  
 Som er og blir Borgermester af Minneapolis.

### Exportgift på Halm

Den danske Halm eksport til USA er blevet meget vigtig for os. Derfor er det vigtigt at sikre, at vi får den bedste pris for vores halm. Det betyder, at vi skal have en god aftale med de amerikanske myndigheder.

### Vore Kandidater

Vi har valgt følgende kandidater til den kommende valgkamp: Ole Frimodt Vilgheie, Karl Mare, og Ole Frimodt Vilgheie. De har alle en lang og ærbar tjeneste i vores parti og i vores samfund.

THE NORWEGIAN weekly, *Gaa Paa*, promoted the campaign of Van Lear in June, 1918. The slogan under his photograph, which translates, "Who is and will become the Mayor of Minneapolis," was unduly optimistic about the forthcoming election.

lief was not the product of rigorous scientific inquiry into the nature of the socioeconomic system. It was a vague notion that history was at a crossroads. The utility regulation question and the open shop movements were, he thought, only the most blatant examples of the struggle between the capitalists and the working class. It seemed during the Progressive era, especially in cities such as Minneapolis, that capital might win the battle and thoroughly crush the labor movement. There was no indication that the employers behind the Citizens' Alliance desired any kind of accommodation, and, in response, labor asked for none. It was a time of conflict and of polarization. Van Lear believed that municipal political action could curb the power of the capitalists and set the stage for labor's eventual victory.<sup>18</sup>

The Minneapolis Socialist party in general reflected a similar attitude. The municipal platforms adopted during these years by the Socialist party always stressed local issues, such as public ownership of utilities, home rule, and improved city services. Yet each platform clearly dedicated the party to the ultimate goal of socialism. "We wish it distinctly understood," the 1912 platform declared in boldface type, "that we advocate these remedial measures only as a means to the one great end of

the cooperative commonwealth." These platforms explicitly affirmed the existence of a class struggle. Moreover, they warned that a Socialist administration in Minneapolis should not be confused with socialism as an economic system. Socialism could exist only when the means of production were taken from the capitalists and when labor finally received the full value of its product.<sup>19</sup>

Although the Socialists made no attempt to hide or sugar-coat their ideology, the red scare never became a very effective issue in Minneapolis. Perhaps the reason for this lay in the many possible interpretations of socialism and socialist terminology. The class struggle, for example, could be read strictly in terms of local conditions, as well as Marxian precepts. The determination of the Citizens' Alliance to crush the labor movement in Minneapolis lent drama and credibility to the idea. In analyzing the 1916 election, Alexis Georgian, editor of the *New Times*, wrote that "the struggle was conducted strictly on class lines. The line of cleavage was clear and incisive. On the one side was ranged the Street Car Company supported by the other powerful business interests of the city. On the other side was ranged the working people and others who are neither directly nor indirectly interested in preserving the private ownership of social utilities."<sup>20</sup> Thus, even for self-proclaimed Marxists like Georgian, the class struggle meant, in a sense, the good people versus the corrupt business interests. It is little wonder that such a definition of the class struggle attracted to the Minneapolis Socialist party many moderate middle-class people, as well as workingmen and serious radicals.

This fluid ideology seems also to have been typical of the socialism of the International Association of

<sup>18</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, August 15, 1907, p. 8; *New Times*, October 26, 1912, p. 1, October 21, 1916, p. 1; *Farmer-Labor Leader*, August 15, 1934, p. 3; Citizens' Alliance, *The Citizens' Alliance of Minneapolis: What It Is, What It Stands For, What It Does, What People Think of It*, 10, 15 (Minneapolis, n.d.).

<sup>19</sup>*New Times*, August 24, 1912, p. 4 (quote), October 24, 1914, p. 3, March 18, 1916, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>*New Times*, November 11, 1916, p. 1.



in 1916 was a struggle over renewing the franchise of the Minneapolis Street Railway Company — the first really pressing local issue to emerge in any of Van Lear's campaigns for mayor. The exclusive right to operate a street railway system in Minneapolis had been granted in 1873 for a period of fifty years, to end on July 1, 1923. In 1914, however, the corporation, which was by then controlled by a New Jersey holding company known as the Twin City Rapid Transit Company, asked for an early renewal. Without such an assurance of continued control, corporation officials argued, they would find it impossible to borrow funds to make needed improvements and extensions of service to the growing city. Since Minneapolis was not at that time operating under a home rule charter, approval by the state legislature was necessary before a new franchise could be granted. Under pressure from the company and the Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association, the 1915 legislature passed an enabling act which empowered the city council to open negotiations, and on August 27, 1915, the council directed City Engineer Frederick W. Cappelen to appraise the property of the streetcar company. His report was completed a year later, in September, 1916 — just in time to add fuel to the campaign fires.<sup>27</sup>

Any new franchise agreement was certain to provide for a fixed annual percentage return on investment. Thus, the higher the valuation, the greater the profit. The company's own estimate of its invested capital was 35 million dollars; Van Lear and his supporters guessed the

---

<sup>27</sup> For discussion of the franchise question see William Anderson, "The Fate of the Five-Cent Fare," in *National Municipal Review*, 9:78–83 (February, 1920); H. M. Olmsted, "The Twin Cities and the Holding Company," in *National Municipal Review*, 12:376–380 (July, 1923); M. H. Hedges, "Who Corrupts Our Politics?" in *The Nation*, July 19, 1922, p. 66–68.

<sup>28</sup> F[rederick] W. Cappelen, *Report on the Value of the Properties of the Minneapolis Street Railway Company as of January 1, 1916*, 1:ii (Minneapolis, 1916); *New Times*, June 10, 1916, p. 4. For an excellent summary of the various valuation reports, see Delos F. Wilcox, *Report Upon the Value of the Street Railway Property of the Minneapolis Street Railway Company As of January 1, 1922*, 1:42–43 (Minneapolis, 1922). A good example of the Socialist critique of the Cappelen report is in a Van Lear campaign flyer entitled *The Street Railway Franchise: Why Does the Street Railway Company Want a Renewal of the Franchise Now?* (copy in the Minnesota Historical Society library).

<sup>29</sup> Anderson, in *National Municipal Review*, 9:78 (first quote); *New Times*, June 10, 1916, p. 4 (second quote). Van Lear's assessment of company profits was somewhat exaggerated but largely accurate and generally well known. See, for example, C. G. Goodrich, *A History of the Minneapolis Street Railway Company: Covering 35 Years, 1873–1908*, 33 (Minneapolis, 1909).

<sup>30</sup> For summaries of the situation revealed by a court-ordered investigation in 1922, see Hedges, in *The Nation*, 66–68; Olmsted, in *National Municipal Review*, 12:376–380. Both articles are based largely on the findings of Delos Wilcox in his 1922 report.

actual value of the property at approximately 10 million dollars. Cappelen placed it at about 26 million dollars, basing his official appraisal entirely upon the cost of reproduction minus depreciation. He also allowed 4 million dollars for "going concern value."<sup>28</sup>

Van Lear immediately called upon voters to "stop the \$15,000,000 street-car franchise grab." He argued that the company had been milking the city for more than a million dollars annually above any reasonable return on its actual investment. "If the company," he said, "could be made to expend one-fourth of the money it is paying out in dividends on its watered stock, the city could have all the lines it needed." In support of this, he pointed to cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Columbus, Indianapolis, and Des Moines, all of which, he claimed, had lower fares with better streetcar service than Minneapolis. Public ownership was the remedy that Van Lear espoused. But even if the franchise were granted, he added, it should not be renegotiated until 1923 when the old franchise would expire.<sup>29</sup>

Langum's campaign committee was laced with leading Minneapolis bankers and businessmen who had close ties with the streetcar company through the Northwestern Bank. At one meeting, Charles Fowler, the committee chairman, had claimed to know nothing about the enabling act passed by the 1915 legislature which allowed franchise negotiations to begin eight years early. He said he had not even visited the legislature in 1915. In a letter published on October 28, 1916, by the *New Times*, a committee clerk for the 1915 legislature called Fowler a liar, stating that Fowler had in fact lobbied on behalf of the streetcar company. In a statement that was typical of much public response to the campaign, the letter writer declared: "I am not a socialist, however I shall vote for Thos. Van Lear because I am convinced that he will better serve the interests of the people of Minneapolis." The full extent of the graft and the bribery associated with the Minneapolis Street Railway Company during these years and the high levels of city government involved were not officially revealed until 1922, but by 1916, the smell of corruption was in the air in Minneapolis — and the people voted against it.<sup>30</sup>

A third major factor which assisted Van Lear's election in the presidential year of 1916 was an unofficial coalition with the supporters of Woodrow Wilson. Langum was clearly identified as a Republican and a backer of Charles Evans Hughes. After the election, on November 8, the *Minneapolis Journal* claimed that the leading Wilson men in town had been openly for Van Lear and that "for the last week the cry in downtown Minneapolis wards had been 'Wilson and Van Lear.'" *Journal* reporters had even noticed banners proclaiming "Wilson and Van Lear." The *Minneapolis Tribune* reported a "working agreement" between Wilson and Van Lear supporters as "one of the strong contributing fac-

tors" to Van Lear's electoral victory. The election returns tend to bear this out. Not only did Van Lear run far ahead of the Socialist candidates for governor and president; Wilson swept all eight wards Van Lear carried.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the best way to summarize the Socialists' success is to say that in Minneapolis in 1916 essentially moderate men were confronted by immoderate issues and voted accordingly.<sup>32</sup> Van Lear's version of socialism appeared as an attractive and reasonable alternative in this political context. The city of Minneapolis during the first two decades of the twentieth century was faced with several wrenching problems of the industrial-urban revolution. The political system, shaken by the Ames scandals and disorganized by the nonpartisan primary law, had not yet begun to stabilize. The antiunion drive of the Citizens' Alliance shattered any idea that organized labor might become in the foreseeable future even a junior partner in the industrial government of Minneapolis. In fact, the complete victory of big capital over organized labor was a haunting fear. The public utility corporations seemed to be preparing to tighten their grip on the throat of the public, apparently corrupting councilmen and manipulating state legislators at will.

Minneapolis voters came to associate the solutions to these problems with socialism, or at least with Van Lear's Socialist party. Some remained reformers; some became radicals. But in 1916, regardless of ideology, when several of these great municipal problems came dramatically to a head, a majority of the city's voters turned to Thomas Van Lear.<sup>33</sup>

Although the election of 1916 was only the beginning for Van Lear's term as mayor, it was in some ways the climax of his political career and the career of the Minneapolis Socialist party. Shortly after he took office, he and his party found themselves hopelessly embroiled in the debates over loyalty and civil rights during World War I. As a result, many of the real issues of municipal government were lost from sight. The war was fought in Minneapolis, and there were casualties. One casualty was the local Socialist party.<sup>34</sup>

By the time of the municipal election of 1918, Van Lear and much of the organized labor movement of Minneapolis had left or been driven from the Socialist party because of their opposition to the party's refusal to support the American war effort. They continued a form of the labor-socialist-reform coalition through a newly organized group called the Municipal Nonpartisan League, which later was expanded into the state-wide Working People's Nonpartisan Political League — the labor counterpart of Arthur C. Townley's Farmers' Nonpartisan League.<sup>35</sup>

In spite of strong opposition from Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist and the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, the Working People's Nonpartisan Political League made strong showings in Minneapolis municipal

elections during the war and after. Van Lear lost very close mayoral races in 1918 and 1921, and Nonpartisan League candidates gradually increased their representation on the city council until, in 1923, they captured a majority of seats — the high point for labor influence in the city council.<sup>36</sup>

By this time, however, virtually all of the old Van Lear coalition of 1916 had moved from the Socialist party to the newly developing Farmer-Labor movement. And by 1925, due partly to the failure of Robert M. LaFollette's presidential candidacy in 1924 and to subsequent antiradical and even antipolitical pressures from the American Federation of Labor, the heart of Van Lear's support, Minneapolis organized labor, was out of the business of political activity altogether.<sup>37</sup> But for fifteen years, from 1910 to 1925, a coalition of reformers, Socialists, and trade unionists had held much of the political power in the city of Minneapolis. At the heart of the coalition had always been more than a few Socialist leaders and dedicated followers who believed that by facing honestly the problems of the twentieth-century city they were making the first step on the long journey toward a co-operative commonwealth.

---

<sup>31</sup> Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1916, p. 1031–1036; Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1917, p. 396; *Minneapolis Journal*, November 8, 1916, p. 1; *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 8, 1916, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> A parallel has recently been drawn between this election and the Minneapolis mayoral race of 1969, in which Charles Stenvig was able to win because he became identified as the only man on the majority side of the one big issue, which that year was law and order. See Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, 233 (New York, 1970). The authors also note (p. 232) that Stenvig ran well in the same wards that Van Lear carried.

<sup>33</sup> The Socialist party platform of 1916 confronted all of these issues in its working program, in addition to thoroughly denouncing the capitalist system. See *New Times*, March 18, 1916, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Nord, "Socialism in One City," 109–141; Weinstein, *Decline of Socialism in America*, 140–143. For a general discussion of wartime repression in Minnesota, see Carol Jenson, "Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 43:43–57 (Summer, 1972).

<sup>35</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, December 20, 1918, p. 1, 3; Minnesota State Federation of Labor, *Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Convention*, 1917, p. 44; Nord, "Socialism in One City," 149–183; Chrislock, *Progressive Era in Minnesota*, 182.

<sup>36</sup> Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, 1918, p. 620–631, 1921, p. 1380, 1923, p. 1400; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 12, 1923, p. 1; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, June 15, 1923, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, February 6, p. 2, February 13, p. 3, 1925; Chrislock, *Progressive Era in Minnesota*, 183–193.

THE PORTRAIT of Van Lear on page 5 is published through the courtesy of the Hennepin County Historical Society. Other photographs are from the Minnesota Historical Society collection.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).