

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

July 1, 2013

Fighting Bob LaFollette and the Progressive Era

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" Santayana, George (1863-1952)

I've heard so much about "Fighting Bob" LaFollette and the Progressive Era since Scott Walker became governor that I decided to do some research to find out what it's all about. Since Walker became governor he has rolled back union protections, made it harder to get unemployment compensation, deprived tens of thousands of poor people of health insurance and gutted our environmental protections. He is essentially giving away our state's resources to his wealthy supporters at the expense of everyone else.

The Progressive Era lasted from the early 1890s to 1914. The ascendancy of the progressive movement during the 1890s was a hard-fought battle between corrupt party bosses and progressives who wanted to put control of our government into the hands of its citizens.

Bob LaFollette was a Republican, as were many of the progressives. At that time, there were no primary elections. Candidates were selected by caucuses which were controlled by party bosses who would reward their supporters with patronage after they were elected. It wasn't until the early 1900s that the progressives were able to elect enough candidates to change the system to include primary elections.

Fighting Bob earned his nickname based on his fiery speeches and charisma. Trains were the primary means of inter-city travel and he went on whistle-stop tours of the state, stopping at numerous towns to give rousing speeches in support of the progressive agenda.

Fighting Bob won election to the governor's office based on a conciliatory campaign, playing down the differences between the progressives and party bosses. But once elected, he came out strongly for change. In his two terms as governor, he united Republican progressives with Democratic and Socialist progressives. He served 4 years as governor, after which he became a United States senator and spent the rest of his career in national politics.

Although Fighting Bob was one of the first progressives and was largely responsible for the rise of the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, most of the major changes in Wisconsin occurred after he went to Washington.

Subsequent governors followed a social agenda and initiated many of the programs we now take for granted: labor protection, progressive income taxes, protection of state waterways, conservation and protection of natural resources and regulation of businesses. For decades, it has been taken for granted that the initiatives started in the Progressive Era are the basic principles upon which Wisconsin government should be based. There is no one alive now who remembers the hard-fought battles to enact these policies.

We are now facing a new wave of conservatives who are challenging those progressive principles. For many citizens who feel that they have no voice and pay too much in taxes, the conservative message resonates with them. They cannot imagine what our state was like when employees (including children) had no protection, had to work long hours in unsafe conditions and had no recourse if they were permanently injured or killed. There were no banking regulations so bank deposits were not safe. In the 1800s northern Wisconsin was completely deforested by clear-cutting, rivers were polluted and dammed up by private companies and animals were hunted virtually to extinction.

Scott Walker wants to return us to the pre-Progressive Era where corporations control everything and the rest of us exist only to provide cheap, expendable labor to enrich the corporate owners. It's time for Wisconsin's citizens to take a stand against corporate interests.