

Trade Unionism Versus Socialism

Samuel Gompers

Commentary

The Knights of Labor lost members during the 1890s to their chief competitor, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). From its inception in 1886 until his death, the AFL was identified in the public mind with its president, Samuel Gompers (1850-1924). Gompers dominated the AFL, but he had many enemies. Businessmen usually opposed him because they did not want their workers unionized. The general public was suspicious for many reasons, including beliefs that unions were anti-business, were trying to destroy the individual liberties of workers, and were under the control of subversive and violent foreign immigrants.

In the early days of the AFL, both businessmen and the public often associated Gompers and the AFL with socialism, but this rhetorical problem declined as Gompers' opposition to socialism became increasingly well known. Thus the speech on "Trade Unionism Versus Socialism," although delivered to the 1903 AFL convention, should be analyzed in terms of the public audience as well as the audience of union delegates. The speech was hailed in the journal of the well-known National Civic Federation (an organization composed mostly of leading industrialists). It also printed a picture of Gompers with the caption, "Socialism's Ablest Foe."

Socialists were a serious rival from the AFL's inception until about the 1920s. Most socialist leaders were not members of the AFL, but they attacked Gompers via speeches and publications. A few socialists were AFL members, and they tried unsuccessfully to change the union's policies from those that Gompers advocated. The fundamental disagreements were three. First, socialists wished to establish "industrial unions" composed of workers within a particular industry (mining or steel, for instance), whereas the AFL organized "trade unions" composed of particular crafts, each of which should be autonomous. For example, Gompers belonged to the Cigarmakers' Union, which was one of several trade unions that affiliated with the "federation." Implicit in the first issue was a second: socialists wished to unionize unskilled, as well as skilled, workers; whereas the AFL was primarily (some would say exclusively)

concerned with recruiting skilled tradesmen. Third, socialists urged all laborers and other "oppressed people" to join together in a political party that would overthrow the capitalist system, abolish private property and nationalize industry—by revolution if necessary. The AFL, although sometimes engaging in political activities such as lobbying for particular legislation and endorsing specific candidates, was unalterably opposed to forming a labor party or subsuming the AFL to either existing party. It endorsed the capitalist system and, in theory if not always in fact, opposed violence.

Gompers was contemptuous of all abstract theories, whether they were Powderly's visionary worker co-operatives or the socialists' revolutionary doctrines. He frequently used the term "*bread and butter unionism*" to describe his pragmatic philosophy. He meant simply that trade unions should get the best possible wages and working conditions. If negotiations would not work, then strikes and boycotts should be used.

Gompers' first major dispute with socialists was in 1890. Problems began when the Central Labor Union (CLU) of New York City was taken over by socialists. Some anti-socialists then formed the New York Federation of Labor (NYFL), which received an AFL charter. The CLU and the NYFL resolved their differences, and the NYFL returned its AFL charter. Later, the NYFL requested that its charter be reactivated, but Gompers refused because one of the NYFL's affiliated "unions" was the Socialist Labor Party. Gompers argued that only trade unions could belong to the AFL. Socialists appealed his decision, but Gompers was upheld at the AFL convention in 1890.

The rivalry intensified. In 1893, a socialist member of the AFL, Thomas Morgan, proposed that the AFL form a "political labor movement," but Gompers successfully opposed it. Meanwhile, the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), which was a political party, not a union, was falling under the control of Daniel DeLeon. Recognizing that efforts to wrest control of the AFL from Gompers were failing, DeLeon in 1895 formed the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance (STLA) that would hopefully replace the "conservative" AFL. DeLeon called it the "new unionism." Gompers called it "dual unionism." Gompers opposed the STLA not only because it was a union based on socialist philosophy, but also because he feared that any competition between unions would weaken the union movement. A good example of his opposition to "dual unionism" was his refusal to compete with the railroad unions (called "brotherhoods"), even though the large and powerful brotherhoods were organized on a craft basis but refused to join the AFL.

DeLeon's STLA eventually collapsed as his control of the socialist movement declined, but socialists formed another competitor to the AFL, the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). In 1902, the AFL demanded that the WFM join the AFL, and the WFM replied by forming, and then affiliating with, a broader union, the American Labor Union (ALU). The new "dual union" claimed jurisdiction over all unions in the United States, endorsed industrial unionism and adopted the platform of the Socialist party.

In 1903, shortly before the AFL's annual convention, the WFM went on strike against mines in Colorado. The strike was publicized highly, partly

because violence erupted. It was broken after WFM leaders were arrested and the governor refused to obey a judge's order to release them. Then violence accelerated. Technically, the AFL was not involved, but a resolution was introduced at the convention to extend sympathy to the WFM. Other pro-socialist resolutions, similar to ones that had been defeated regularly at AFL conventions, were also introduced. It was in opposition to these motions that Gompers gave the following speech. The text is reproduced from the January 1904 issue of the AFL's magazine, the *American Federationist*, vol. 40, pp. 44-45.

Trade Unionism Versus Socialism

Mr. Chairman and fellow-delegates. I am always impressed with an earnest man's utterances, and to me a man who makes a statement and gives me an assurance, my disposition has always been to be credulous and to believe him. When an organization makes a declaration, my disposition is to believe it. I am always inclined to believe a man or an aggregation of men to be honest, but when I discover that a man has made professions of one thing and his actions belie his words, then I am like the Missourian; after that, so far as he is concerned, he must show me.

Vice-President Duncan has not the opportunity to reply to his critics, because of his calling attention to the conduct of the men who clothed themselves in the mantle of socialism, and assumed a position of superiority, mentally, in honesty, in work, and in ennobling purposes. It is because their professions are in entire discord with their actions in this convention that it is necessary to call their position in question.

I shall not refer at this time to their very many detailed acts of treachery to the trade union movement; but I shall refer to some of the declarations made upon the floor of this convention by delegates participating in this discussion and show you that though they may believe themselves to be trade unionists they are at heart and logically the antagonists of our movement.

I want to say, and I am sure it will come as a shock to the brother, for between Mr. Hayes and myself—I mean Max Hayes—personally there has, I think, existed a very close and sympathetic bond of friendship, but here we differ—I am a trade unionist; he thinks he is.

Delegate Hayes, I firmly believe, was ill when he came to this convention. He could not accept a duty which was meant as a compliment, and has been so regarded by other men, to perform committee work; but if ever a man made an effort and showed that he was sacrificing his vitality he did in making his address upon a speculative theory which, undoubtedly, he thought more important than the doing of the essential work of the convention.

Our friends, the socialists, always when with us have an excellent conception of the trouble in our industrial life. They say, as we say, and as every intelligent man or woman says, that there are miseries which surround us. We recognize the poverty, we know the sweatshop, we can play on every string of the harp, and touch the tenderest chords of human sympathy; but while we recognize

the evil and would apply the remedy, our socialist friends would look forward to the promised land, and wait for "the sweet by and by." Their statements as to economic ills are right; their conclusions and their philosophy are all askew.

The action of the committee has been found fault with because they did not bring in a substitute for the resolutions presented, but instead took a course that will bring this matter fairly and squarely before the convention. At the last convention in New Orleans, through placing us in a false position, the resolution upon this question came within an ace of being adopted, but this year the committee has made this question a plain, broad proposition.

The vote that will be recorded here today against the report of the committee will be fairly and squarely recorded in favor of socialism; and the vote that is recorded in favor of the committee's report will be against socialism. And it will be recognized as such throughout the land.

There has not been a legislative body before which the other officers of the Federation or I myself have appeared, nor an association of employers, nor individual employers with whom we have met in conference but that we have been confronted with this socialistic amendment, so-called, which came near being passed at New Orleans. It has made, and will make, our work doubly difficult, because these employers have refused and do refuse to confer for the adjustment of difficulties and disputes when they are led to believe by declaration that property is in danger of confiscation.

We have been asked how many trade unionists there are in Congress. I venture to say that there are more trade unionists in Congress and in our state legislatures holding clear cards than there are elsewhere in similar positions the world over. Do you suppose the socialists want trade unionists elected to Congress and to the legislatures?

(Delegate J. Keyes. "No.")

Of course, no. Of course, Socialist Brother Keyes, "no." I am proud of you, Brother Keyes, for your honesty in admitting it. But what Brother Keyes has just admitted on the floor is very true of every other socialist in the convention. As a matter of fact, wherever there has been a trade unionist candidate for any political office if there have been half a dozen socialists in town they have always tried to defeat the trade unionists.

Now, there has been a remark made about the passage of the military law by Congress. I agree it would have been a good thing if we could have prevented the passage of that law, but the delegate said that if we even had a minority in Congress it could not have become law. I point him to the fact that in Germany they have the largest number of any party in the parliament of that country, and yet they have the most tyrannical military laws of any country on the globe.

It is all very well to make a declaration, but the facts are another thing. We are told we ought not to rely upon an indiscreet remark by a socialist here and there; but if not, then why rely upon the remarks of trade unionists here and there? Yes, an indiscreet remark— but the difficulty here and outside of the conventions of the A. F. of L. is to find a socialist who is not all the time guilty of making indiscreet remarks. He is at it all the time.

When the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, backed by Mr. DeLeon—and I will not ask pardon for mentioning his name, because if a man is consistent he is entitled to have his name mentioned—

(Delegate J. Mahlon Barnes rose to speak. Delegate Carey, of Haverhill, also called out: “I object.”)

You don’t know what I am going to say. You were members of that party when the Socialist Alliance was started.

(Delegate Max Hayes: “Let me explain.” Cries of “Sit down” and “Hear him.”)

I am stating the facts, that is all. They broke away because of the domination of this man DeLeon, and started out to form a new Socialist party, and declared what Delegate White declared here on the floor of the convention to-day was their policy, that the trade unionist must be unhampered and fought from within.

(Delegate Hayes: “That is more than any republican or democrat would say.”)

For that reason I am not with those parties, and one of the reasons I am not with your party is because I want to be in line with the declaration that the trade union policy, the movement and the work, must be unhampered by your political nostrums.

When the Socialists formed the American Labor Union in rivalry to the A. F. of L., I took occasion to continually say in the *AMERICAN FEDERATIONIST* that it was but another attempt to form another Socialist trade and labor alliance without its practical courage to openly declare its enmity to the American trade union movement.

Is it not a fact that no matter what we achieve, we are belittled by the Socialists? Even the Labor Day we have achieved for all the people of our country—the proposition comes in here to abolish it and to make Labor Day in line with the Labor Day of continental Europe, May 1st. The A. F. of L. in 1879 addressed a letter to the French workingmen, suggesting to them to celebrate the 1st of May when the carpenters were to inaugurate the eight-hour day; and from that suggestion, made by your humble servant, they have made the 1st of May of each year their holiday, and how do they celebrate it, usually on the Sunday before or the Sunday after. They take no holiday, but they sometimes celebrate in the evening of May 1st.

In no country on the globe has labor ever taken a day for itself without asking consent, or begging or apologizing for itself, except in this country. And yet the Socialists want us to give up our own Labor Day and celebrate on May 1st, I suppose in the evening.

The secretary of the Socialist party has severed his connection with the reformed (?) Socialist party, because of his being opposed to the hostile tactics of that party to the trade unions; and, being at heart a trade unionist, he was forced out of his position. Since that time he has given to the world the real reasons why he was forced out—because he dared to stand up in defense of trade unions and against the policy of antagonizing the trade unions and hoisting up the American Labor Union.

Is it not true, to a very great extent, that your Socialistic American Labor Union, except the miners and a very few others, is made up very largely of expelled members of the trade unions who broke faith with their fellow-workmen? Do you Socialists here deny it? Your official papers say so, and your socialist organizers' reports admit it. Are your socialist unions not boycotting the International Boot and Shoe Workers' Union label and the International Papermakers' Union label, and other international unions, and where they do not boycott them, hold the threat over the heads of some other unions, compelling them either to submit, or forcing them to waver in their fealty and loyalty to the movement?

The cigarmakers' union of Denver has had this condition of things confront it. They were threatened with a socialist boycott of their label, and their president and those poor fellows, many of whom can not labor elsewhere, must submit to the dictates of the Socialist organization, for they have no other alternative except to get out of Denver. Because they can not otherwise work and support themselves, they must submit, or be boycotted by Socialists out of the beneficent climate of Denver, and driven elsewhere, to pine away from the ravages of that dread disease from which so many suffer and by reason of which they sought that climate for the relief afforded.

Men of labor, if you were in the office of the A. F. of L. for a time and you knew the things that transpire in the labor movement in a general and in a specific way, for they are all focussed there, and we know what is going on and we know the enemies of the labor movement—you would have your opinion clear cut upon this subject. Why, we have spent more money in organizing in Colorado itself than in any other state, notwithstanding that, industrially considered, it ought to cost very little.

I want to tell you Socialists that I have studied your philosophy; read your works upon economics, and not the meanest of them; studied your standard works, both in English and German—have not only read, but studied them. I have heard your orators and watched the work of your movement the world over. I have kept close watch upon your doctrines for thirty years; have been closely associated with many of you, and know how you think and what you propose. I know, too, what you have up your sleeve. And I want to say that I am entirely at variance with your philosophy. I declare it to you, I am not only at variance with your doctrines, but with your philosophy.

Economically, you are unsound; socially, you are wrong; industrially, you are an impossibility.