

A centennial view

The AFL and a national BLS: labor's role is crystallized

From the labor federation's first convention in 1881 to the establishment of the Labor Department in 1913, relations between the union movement and the BLS often were influenced by the needs of the times and by the personalities of Samuel Gompers, and Commissioners Carroll Wright and Charles Neill

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The American trade union movement, which last year celebrated the centennial of its founding, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which soon will observe its own 100th anniversary, grew up together, sometimes in confrontation, but more often in mutual—though distant—respect. The relationship between the American Federation of Labor and the Bureau was affected both by the needs of the times and by the personalities of the leaders, AFL President Samuel Gompers and BLS Commissioners Carroll D. Wright and Charles P. Neill.

This article reports on some of the common and divergent interests of the two organizations, from their beginnings until 1913, when BLS became part of the present Department of Labor.

Campaign for a bureau

The convention in 1881 of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States

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and Canada, which marks the centennial beginning of the AFL-CIO, included in its statement of principles and action a call for a national Bureau of Labor Statistics:

“... we recognize the wholesome effects of a Bureau of Labor Statistics as created in several States, and we urge upon the Congress the passage of an act establishing a national Bureau of Labor Statistics, and recommend for its management the appointment of a proper person identified with the laboring classes of the country.”¹

Earlier, the short-lived National Labor Union had called for a Department of Labor in 1867. By 1878, when the Knights of Labor called for national and additional State bureaus of labor statistics, Massachusetts (1869), Pennsylvania (1872), Missouri (1876), and Ohio (1877) had established such bureaus.²

The efforts of the labor organizations, and the growing awareness of the national political parties of the potential governmental influence of labor and the socio-

economic effects of industrial growth, culminated in the establishment of a Bureau of Labor within the Department of Interior in 1884. The uncertainty of Federal policies during this period resulted in metamorphoses of the agency as an autonomous, but non-Cabinet-level Department of Labor from 1888 to 1903; combination with other agencies in the new Cabinet-level Department of Commerce and Labor in 1903; and ultimately transference to the new Department of Labor in 1913.

Samuel Gompers, along with other union officials, strongly supported the establishment of a national Bureau in the Senate hearings on Capital and Labor in 1883. He felt that there had been excessive pleading of ignorance by Congress of workers' conditions to justify Congressional inaction on labor matters. A national Bureau "would give our legislators an opportunity to know, not from mere conjecture, but actually, the condition of our industries, our production, and our consumption, and what could be done by law to improve both [sic]." He cited the useful role of existing State statistical agencies as exemplified by a recent investigation of factory working conditions by the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor under the direction of Carroll D. Wright.³

Wright also appeared as an expert witness at the hearings, providing a look at such a bureau's role, which largely paralleled Gompers' view. He had administered the State bureau "as a scientific office, not as a Bureau of agitation or propaganda, but I always take the opportunity to make such recommendations and draw such conclusions from our investigations as the facts warrant." He stressed the need for Federal "investigations into all conditions which affect the people, whether in a moral, sanitary, educational, or economic sense," and thus "add to the educational forces of the country a sure and efficient auxiliary." He saw the resultant statistical progress of the Nation as indicating "its great progress in all other matters."⁴ This background and philosophy were major factors in Wright's subsequent appointment as U.S. Commissioner of Labor.

In 1884, backed by the then powerful Knights of Labor and the newly organized Federation, the establishment of a national Bureau was part of both parties' platform.⁵ In that same year, overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress voted to establish the Bureau of Labor in the Department of the Interior. Approved by President Chester Arthur on June 27, the action provided for a Commissioner of Labor appointed by the President for a 4-year term. The Commissioner's mission was to "collect information upon the subject of labor, its relation to capital, the hours of labor and the earnings of laboring men and women, and the means of promoting their material, social, intellectual and moral prosperity." After considering sev-

eral candidates, President Arthur finally appointed Wright, whom the Senate confirmed about 6 months after the act's passage.⁶

Wright swiftly established professionalism and impartiality in the national Bureau, as he had in Massachusetts. Striving to obtain labor interest, he invited Gompers and other delegates to visit the Bureau during the 1885 Federation convention. Gompers had known Wright for years, and had long been actively interested in the role of government labor agencies. The two men had previously discussed the plans and methods of the newly established New York State Bureau of Labor Statistics. Their meeting left mutual favorable impressions.⁷ The Bureau's value was further confirmed by the Commissioner's first annual report, a comprehensive treatment of the causes of the depression of 1882-86. The study was included in Gompers' periodic references to the intensification of the displacement of manual labor by machinery over the years.⁸ While the report noted the advantages of mechanization, it also asserted that the effect of the temporary displacement of labor was to assist "in crippling the consuming power of the community."⁹ Among the remedies suggested for coping with the depression, Wright included some general proposals suggesting that capital and labor "each shall treat with the other through representatives" in disputes, and that "the party which declines resort to conciliatory methods of arbitration [is] morally responsible for all ill effects growing out of the contest."¹⁰

The growing status of the Bureau, and a campaign by the still powerful Knights of Labor resulted in the transformation of the Bureau in 1888 into an independent Department of Labor, without Cabinet status. Reflecting Wright's concerns, the enabling act specifically called for studies of: the domestic and foreign costs of production of dutiable goods for the ongoing tariff debates, national trade and industrial production, the causes and circumstances of strikes, and other special topics. The basic functions of the agency had not changed, but for 15 years it was more independent. Moreover, Congress, in a separate statute relating solely to railroad disputes (Arbitration Act of 1888), had authorized the President to designate the Commissioner of Labor, with two other *ad hoc* commissioners, to act as a board of inquiry in such disputes. This investigatory provision was used only once—during the aftermath of the Pullman strike of 1894.¹¹

Gompers and Wright

Although the AFL had not pressed for an independent labor department, it maintained a keen interest in the work of the agency. Gompers' thoughts on the development and expansion of information on the status of workers, labor-management relations, and the statistical supports for these developments, were expressed regu-

larly during Wright's stewardship. He requested studies that would explore "the influence of the labor organizations upon the moral and national welfare of the wage earners in particular, and the whole community in general." Increased contact between the Department of Labor and State bureaus, according to Gompers, would achieve greater uniformity, simultaneous investigation, and assistance by the States.¹²

Asked to comment on the forthcoming 1890 census, Gompers called for inclusion of the number of unemployed, and the duration of their unemployment.¹³ Gompers endorsed the establishment of a permanent Census Bureau in the Department of Labor, citing Wright's performance in Massachusetts.¹⁴

By 1893, there were a national Department of Labor and 32 State Departments of Labor and Bureaus of Labor Statistics, with factory inspectors in 19. Gompers could cite these as the results of successful labor efforts in obtaining measures which "a few years ago were regarded as chimerical and useless expenditures of public money [which] have come to be looked upon as a prime necessity to the proper conduct of governmental affairs." He also suggested that the men appointed as administrators should be sympathetic to the laws enacted and should not be subject to political change. Furthermore, he proposed that the U.S. Department of Labor follow the example of its British counterpart, by publishing a regular journal or bulletin which would provide information on existing industrial and other working conditions.¹⁵ (In 1895, the Bureau began publishing a bimonthly *Bulletin*, a forerunner of the *Monthly Labor Review*.)

Congress was soon to authorize the establishment of the Bulletin of the Department of Labor in response to an AFL proposal, which drew conditional support from Wright. By endorsing the proposal he obtained congressional approval for departmental independence from Congress in the preparation and publication, and the opportunity to deal with current issues of vital importance, "rather than theoretical or debatable matters."¹⁶

Direct requests from labor organizations to the Department of Labor were infrequent. However, proposals which Wright circulated to the unions did cause Gompers to react. He advised the Department to conduct a study of the padrone system, publish abstracts of government contracts so that unions could check on enforcement of the 8-hour law, and he opposed a proposal for a census of unions.¹⁷ These suggestions were met expeditiously.¹⁸ Gompers duly noted Commissioner Wright's response at the annual AFL convention.¹⁹

While opposed to a census of unions, Gompers had only limited success in persuading the affiliated unions to provide information to the AFL which could be used to reflect the status of membership, finances, and support recognition for the AFL. This only made him more

alert to Department of Labor reports on the subject, as he responded quickly to the release of the 10th Annual Report on strikes, "which sets forth clearly that in those States or localities, the industries in which the workers were organized, the largest numbers of successes were secured and concessions granted."²⁰ When Wright found that unions did not always cooperate in investigations and studies, Gompers urged cooperation. "Let there be light," he wrote, "confident that impartial investigations create numberless sympathizers in our great cause."²¹

Labor-management disputes

Wright and Gompers played prominent roles in two landmark labor-management disputes during this period. The investigative reports and recommendations on the Pullman dispute in 1894 and the anthracite coal strike in 1902 bore the imprint of Wright's evolving awareness of the importance of labor organization and its capacity to balance employer domination and achieve stability and continuity through agreement. Gompers could appreciate the fair treatment accorded the labor position in these reports, trailblazing in an era of employer opposition to incipient union organization. But he was against the recommendations for legislation for government involvement in strikes.

During the Pullman dispute, marked by Presidential use of Federal troops and injunction, the U.S. Strike Commission, with Wright as chairperson, was established by President Grover Cleveland. This was only after the failure of the strike by the American Railway Union led by Eugene Debs. The commission was established as an investigative body under the Act of 1888. Gompers, along with Debs and others, appeared before the commission. During the hearings, Wright asked Gompers whether sympathetic strike action such as that of the Pullman strike was justifiable when it could "paralyze, to any degree, the commercial industry of the country." Gompers replied, "I believe that labor has the right—the natural as well as the inherent right to endeavor to improve its condition . . . If industry or commerce is incidentally injured it is not their fault; the better course and the most reasonable course would be for employers to grant the reasonable requests that labor usually makes and thus avert the disaster of commerce or industry that you have mentioned." The social losses of widespread unemployment, both persistent and intermittent, were greater than disadvantages from strikes, he insisted, citing Wright's earlier reports. To Wright's queries regarding legislation for arbitration, Gompers expressed opposition, fearing it would lead to compulsory arbitration, with labor at a disadvantage.²²

The recommendations of the Wright-chaired commission cited the quasi-public nature of railroad corpora-

tions as permitting the exercise of congressional authority over strikes in protecting the public. It urged employers to recognize unions, stressing that their interests were reciprocal, though not identical. A permanent commission was proposed to investigate and make recommendations in disputes having a major impact on the public, with enforcement by the courts. It was advised that yellow dog contracts be outlawed.²³

Gompers eloquently praised the commission's report, although he implicitly disagreed about special legislation for mediation and arbitration in the railroad industry. He wrote, "Whatever may be the ultimate result of U.S. interference between the railroad managers and the railroad laborers of this country, we have confidence that none today will refuse to bestow a generous meed of praise on Carroll D. Wright and his companion commissioners for their lucid and conscientious report on the Chicago strike of 1894."²⁴

The commission's recommendations became the basis for the consideration of legislation to deal with disputes having a major impact on the public. Ultimately, the result was to revise the 1888 statute by the Erdman Act of 1898, applicable to the railroads, providing for mediation, and for arbitration on request. The Commissioner of Labor and the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission were designated as mediators. Yellow dog contracts were prohibited, but this provision was later voided by judicial decision.²⁵

President Theodore Roosevelt's handling of the anthracite coal strike of 1902 contrasted with the Pullman situation. Wright and Gompers helped to ensure impartiality on the part of the Federal Government in the investigation of the ongoing strike, the dispute resolving machinery, and the resultant findings and recommendations.

At the President's request, Wright personally investigated the dispute. He also acted as intermediary between Roosevelt and Gompers as to means of settling the dispute. Wright prepared a well-received report. Subsequently, with the United Mine Workers willing to accept arbitration, Roosevelt prevailed on the mine operators to cooperate, and a commission was appointed. Wright was a member and recorder of the commission, and his earlier recommendations were apparent in the commission's award, which settled the strike. A side effect of the commission's role was abortive congressional consideration of a so-called national arbitration bill, which Gompers feared would lay the groundwork for compulsory arbitration. As he stated before the 1902 AFL Convention, Gompers believed that "the men of organized labor want arbitration, but only arbitration as a last resort after conciliation has absolutely failed, and then arbitration only, voluntarily entered into by both the organized workers and employers, the award voluntarily and faithfully adhered to by both sides."²⁶

Department of Commerce and Labor

The labor effort to obtain a Cabinet-level Department of Labor was not a primary concern of the AFL for much of Wright's stewardship. This issue was only articulated as the pressure for a Department of Commerce and Industry representing business needs intensified in the late 1890's. Raising the Department of Labor to Cabinet-level status was proposed in a bill in 1894, and discussed in an article in the *American Federationist* entitled "Should the Commissioner of Labor be Made a Cabinet Officer?" The writer, who responded to Wright's opposition to the bill on the grounds that it would politicize the office, called attention to the growth in the importance of labor and labor-management developments as warranting such action.²⁷ In 1897, Gompers expressed his opposition to a proposal for a Department of Commerce and Industries to absorb the autonomous Department of Labor "introduced by a U.S. Senator, generally known for his hostility to labor's interests," and instead supported a bill for a Department of Labor with a seat in the Cabinet. The need was reasserted in 1901.²⁸

President Roosevelt's enthusiasm for a Department of Commerce and Industries, with Republican control of the Congress, made the matter a foregone conclusion. But the Democratic minority fought hard. The proponents of the bill, including Senator Mark Hanna of Ohio, prominent in the National Civic Federation, which included Gompers along with leading industrialists, saw no conflict in the interests of capital and labor, and insisted that the interests of labor would be well represented in such a department. Wright was praised on all sides in the congressional debate, and it was urged that his role and that of his agency would only gain if transferred to the new department. The AFL and the unaffiliated railroad unions opposed the merger, supporting the establishment of a Cabinet Department of Labor. Only the near defunct Knights of Labor favored the merger.²⁹

The controversy was resolved by altering the name to the Department of Commerce and Labor, which was established in 1903.³⁰ There was ambivalence in the AFL reaction to the new agency. Shortly thereafter, Gompers expressed some hope in that: "while there is cause for regret that the Department of Labor has been deprived of its independent existence, we yet have the assurance of the Honorable George B. Cortelyou, Secretary of the Department of Commerce and Labor, that it is his purpose to have the Department serve the best interests of labor."³¹

AFL interest in a separate Department of Labor waxed during the following decade, as its political interests and influence grew. But the AFL relations with Wright and his successor in 1905, Charles P. Neill, in-

creased and were generally constructive. This was enhanced by President Roosevelt's concern with labor-management relations and the important role he assigned to Wright, and later, to Neill. Roosevelt wrote that the anthracite strike brought him "into contact with more than one man who was afterward a valued friend and fellow worker. On the suggestion of Carroll Wright, I appointed Charles P. Neill as assistant recorder to the Commission, whom I afterward made labor commissioner, to succeed Wright himself."³²

As Gompers sized it up, Neill was recognized by labor officials "as the man in the administration closest to the President." Neill was regularly present when the President discussed major matters with union officials. Gompers' own respect for Neill was reflected in his assessment of the steel industry study, saying that "Dr. Neill performed a very comprehensive and valuable piece of work which caused the officials of the steel corporation to 'cuss him' and gnash their teeth."³³

Compulsory investigation

The role of Government in the 1902 anthracite strike settlement was an augury of the Roosevelt policy of seeking to reduce the impact of strikes on the Nation, recognizing the right of unions to organize, and urging the need for public airing of labor dispute issues. Roosevelt's message to Congress in 1904 cited the positive role of Government in labor matters "merely by giving publicity to certain conditions," and praised the Bureau of Labor for doing excellent work of this kind. He asked that the Department of Commerce and Labor's Labor Bureau provide Congress with information on the labor laws of the various States, and be given "the means to investigate and report to the Congress upon the labor conditions in the manufacturing and mining regions throughout the country, both as to wages and hours of labor, as to the labor of women and children, and as to the effect on the various labor centers of immigration from abroad."³⁴ All of these subjects were concerns of the AFL, and their study was to be effectuated by the Bureau in the next few years.

Subsequently, Roosevelt proposed the compulsory investigation of disputes by the Federal Government, as a means of reducing the incidence of strikes.³⁵ In the hearings on proposed legislation, Commissioner Neill testified in support of this proposal, but only for controversies which became "sufficiently large and sufficiently troublesome to the public as to be a grave menace."³⁶ Although legislation was not enacted, the Bureau was called upon by the President and Congress to make investigations of several difficult situations. Although the AFL did not support labor dispute-handling legislation, the Bureau's investigative reports generally were cited with approbation.

After the anthracite coal report there was a series of

landmark investigations of labor-management relations. They covered the background, origin, and points of view of labor organizations and management. President Roosevelt called for publication of the Bureau's report on the labor disturbance in a Colorado gold field, and coal mines in 1903-04, which contained an account of the violations of civil law and constitutional rights of the State's striking miners. While unaffiliated with the AFL, the Western Federation of Miners received the Federation's support. Wright, in his introduction to the lengthy report, referred to the public attention given to the deportation of striking miners by State militia, pointing to similar actions by citizens committees over a 25-year period.³⁷

Under Neill's stewardship, the demands on the Bureau for investigative reports became more frequent. Neill's personal involvement in dispute situations was also compounded by the activation of the Erdman Act mediation provisions on the railroads from 1906 forward, and by his participation in mediation efforts in other situations as a member of the National Civic Federation. A threatened strike of telegraphers against the Postal Telegraph and Western Union Companies was referred to Neill by Roosevelt. Neill, Gompers, and Ralph Easley of the National Civic Federation failed in their effort to mediate the dispute. Subsequently, an intensive study of the telegraph companies, their methods of handling public business, and their labor relations and working conditions was prepared by the Bureau at the request of Congress. Among the findings regarding the situation after the unsuccessful 1907 strike, was that the Postal Telegraph Company formed "an organization of its own employees . . . restricted to employees of the Postal Company, and each employee desiring membership is required to agree not to retain membership or accept membership in any union while in the employ of the company."³⁸ A strike in the Nevada gold field district in 1907 resulted in Roosevelt's sending Federal troops in response to the Governor's appeal, but following this up promptly with an investigating commission which included Neill. Within 5 days, the commission reported that there was no insurrection when the troops were called, and that there was no statutory basis for such action; Roosevelt withdrew the troops.³⁹

A series of strikes among immigrant workers in unorganized or partially organized situations involved Neill and the Bureau of Labor, with AFL activity and interest affected by the varying circumstances. A strike at the Pressed Steel Car Company of McKees Rock, Pa., where immigrant workers protested the failure to post rates of pay, was investigated by Neill, and cited by Gompers as evidence of the need for legislative provisions for better regulation of immigration.⁴⁰

The steel industry became the focus of strike activity in 1909-10, and the AFL was forced to draw on both

economic and political actions, as union organization faltered. In June 1909, U.S. Steel Corp. announced that it would henceforth operate completely on an open-shop basis, provoking a walkout by the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers. During the unsuccessful strike which persisted for a year, the AFL provided support through organizers, and presented grievances against U.S. Steel at a meeting with President William H. Taft.

Conditions in the steel industry were again highlighted when a widely publicized strike of several thousand unorganized workers occurred at Bethlehem Steel in February 1910. The Senate passed a resolution, supported by the AFL, authorizing the Bureau of Labor to investigate the strike.⁴¹ Authorized in March, with daily findings released almost immediately, and a final report published in May, the investigation had much impact. Conducted under the direction of Ethelbert Stewart, later Commissioner of Labor Statistics, the report pointed to the company's widespread practice of a 12-hour workday, 7-day workweek. U.S. Steel was noted as abolishing most Sunday work, as the Bethlehem study got underway.⁴² When Charles Schwab of Bethlehem Steel protested that the report was unfair in failing to clarify that these conditions existed throughout the American steel industry, Commissioner Neill did issue such a statement.⁴³ Gompers commented that the reported conditions emphasized the physical hazards of overwork.⁴⁴

A month after the publication of the Bethlehem report, the Senate authorized the Bureau to examine working conditions in the iron and steel industry. The resultant study, published within a year, was based on personal visits to plants with about 90 percent of the industry's employees. Wages, hours of work, and accidents were covered in the report. Its four volumes showed continued 6- and 7-day workweeks with 12-hour days, and questioned the need for Sunday work in view of U.S. Steel's workweek adjustment. The majority of the labor force was found to consist of recent immigrants who had come from rural backgrounds, were unskilled, and could neither speak nor understand the language of supervisors and skilled workers. Attention was called to the dilution of skills in the industry as mechanical developments spread, adding further to the large proportion of unskilled workers.⁴⁵ Gompers cited excerpts from the report to reply to "public opinion" that labor was well-treated in the industry.⁴⁶

Gompers had occasion to analyze the findings of the Bureau of Labor concerning the Lawrence, Mass., strike of textile workers in 1912. He commented on the low wages of women employed in the mills, and the "outburst of unorganized workers" over the unannounced *pro rata* reduction of earnings because of the statutory

reduction in hours of work for women and children, from 56 to 54 hours per week. The Bureau commented on the onset of the strike "started by a few unskilled, non-English speaking employees, which developed into an organized strike of more than 20,000 employees, with increases obtained."⁴⁷

Field of work expands

The basic statistical work of the Bureau grew during its residence in the Department of Commerce and Labor. Despite the extensive demands on Commissioner Neill and the Bureau for special studies, new continuous statistical series were developed. The food price collection in 150 cities was continued from Wright's time. The annual collection of union wage scales in many cities was begun in 1907, and a regular strike statistics series was launched. Special studies and reports were directed at particular industrial situations.⁴⁸

The involvement of Commissioner Neill and the Bureau of Labor in other matters of direct concern to the AFL was prominent and regular. During the Roosevelt and Taft administrations, labor's political influence grew, despite the opposition by much of industry to dealings with the unions. The Bureau was more actively sought as an avenue to enlightenment on a variety of issues and as an administrative agent to the enforcement of the Government's 8-hour law.

The presentation of Labor's Bill of Grievances to President Roosevelt in March 1906 produced prompt presidential concern for the negligence of the executive departments in enforcing the 8-hour law on Government contracts which had been on the statute books for a long time. Neill was immediately requested to investigate the charges. He found that there were violations of work laws, but enforcing them was difficult. Neill made recommendations which were followed by the President in an executive order. The next year, Gompers reported that there were fewer violations with the Bureau serving as a clearinghouse for complaints which were investigated and rectified.⁴⁹

The immigration issue

The subject of immigration figured prominently among labor's grievances, and Neill was called upon by President Roosevelt to play a role. The Immigration Act of 1903, while making it unlawful to pay for the transportation or to encourage the importation of aliens or to advertise for them in foreign countries, did not apply to State agencies. Subsequently, South Carolina's establishment of a Department of Agriculture, Commerce, and Immigration to encourage immigration, with agents maintained abroad, was upheld by the attorney general.⁵⁰ Roosevelt called on Secretary of Commerce Oscar Straus to review the matter thoroughly, because "a

great deal of feeling has arisen over the decision and many of the people most affected sincerely believe that it is the end of any effort to stop the importation of laborers under contract in the Southern States, and that this means further damage to laborers in the Northern States." Roosevelt also consulted with Neill because he had "exceptional advantages in the way of keeping in touch with the labor people and of knowing their feelings as well as their interests."⁵¹

The Immigration Act of 1907 subsequently closed the loophole. A provision in the new act setting up a Bureau of Information was originally viewed by the AFL as permitting "workmen lawfully coming to the United States . . . a more intelligent choice in which to seek employment and if administered fairly is calculated to be of least injury to labor."⁵² Within a year, widespread domestic unemployment and the promotional activities of the Bureau of Information, headed by Terence Powderly, precipitated criticism of the Bureau. Secretary Straus called a conference of labor union officials attended by Gompers and Commissioner Neill. Straus and Powderly proposed extending the Bureau's activities to aid the domestic unemployed. The AFL position was that strengthening the Bureau would only make for more immigration, and that the Department of Commerce and Labor should devote its energies solely to meeting the problem of the domestic unemployed.

Neill also spoke out on aid to the domestic unemployed. He cited the deplorable wages and hours of work in the steel industry as largely caused by the constant stream of immigrants, who replaced other workers at lower wages. Further dissemination of information abroad would only increase the flow of immigrants, and there would be opposition to any information by the division to discourage immigration into any part of the country.⁵³

Industrial education

Special reports were also prepared at the initiation of the AFL, with participation from other public interest groups. The Bureau had covered U.S. industrial education in 1892 and 1902 reports; but there was growing and intensified interest from the AFL, which corresponded with educators, academicians, and social work groups on the subject in 1908. In that year a committee was formed, which included Neill, union officials, and public interest representatives. Industrial education, along with the raising of the age limit of child employees and compulsory school attendance were basic principles of labor, and as Gompers expressed it, "working methods of manufacturing with their division and subdivision and specialization have, to a large extent, rendered nearly superfluous and therefore largely eliminated the all-around skilled worker. Some so-called

modern apprenticeship systems are narrow, producing a line of trained specialists."⁵⁴ At the committee's request, the Bureau of Labor conducted a study of industrial education in 1910.⁵⁵ The AFL termed the resultant report the "most comprehensive inquiry ever made on the subject in the United States." The study provided support for legislative proposals by the AFL for Federal aid to the States for industrial education on the basis that, as Gompers expressed it, "the fact that industrial education, like academic education [has] become a public function and . . . that it should be paid for by public funds, is fast gaining supporters."⁵⁶ Success on the legislative front was finally achieved in 1917.

Women and children at work

A historic study of the conditions of working women and children, conducted by the Bureau over a 5-year period beginning in 1907, came after much encouragement by the AFL and welfare reform organizations to do so. The complementary interests of the Bureau and the AFL were reflected in a 1903 symposium in the *American Federationist* on employment of women and children. An article by Ethelbert Stewart called attention to results of the 1900 census, which showed the 10-year rates of growth of industrial employment were largest among children under age 16 and greater for women than for men more than 16 years old.⁵⁷ When Roosevelt asked for a sociological investigation with Commissioner Neill's support, Gompers and other union officials encouraged Congressional approval of the study, urging that it was necessary, and was not covered by the statistical records and work of the Census Bureau.⁵⁸ Assignment of the study to the Commissioner met with approval. The AFL and representatives of welfare organizations agreed at a conference to "cooperate with the Commissioner of Labor in the investigation, if necessary, to ascertain all the facts obtainable with a view to such cooperative action as shall at an early date free our country and our people from the stigma of exploiting young people for profit."⁵⁹ As the investigation proceeded, AFL representatives met with Neill to set up a division in the Bureau of Labor to deal with the conditions of working women and children.⁶⁰

The 19 volumes of the study appeared over a 3-year period. Personal inspections and interviews, along with the analysis of published and establishment data, were used by Bureau staff and outside experts from universities, welfare organizations, and medical facilities in the conduct of the study. Among the subjects covered were the working and living conditions of workers in such industries as cotton textiles, men's clothing, glass, silk, retail trade, metal trades, and laundries; State legislation on child labor; causes of school leaving; the effect of employment on juvenile delinquency, on infant mortality,

ty and on criminality of women; family budgets of cotton mill workers; causes of death among female and child cotton mill operatives; and women in trade unions.⁶¹

Gompers claimed that the results of the study had "fully justified the action of the AFL in behalf of such an inquiry being made." Calling specific attention to the findings on accidents in metal trades, which showed hazards for women equal to those of men, hazards for children rare and decreasing, and that the most frequent accidents were largely preventable, Gompers went on to say: "what more can be said other than to extend a creditable recognition to the public officials who will make such a faithful, honest report."⁶²

The scope and probing character of such a sensitive type of study made some adverse reaction inevitable. Compounded by public accusations by two disaffected Bureau employees, controversy arose in the Senate. Several southern members charged that the report overstepped the bounds of governmental investigations.⁶³ Although the study received resounding support from many sources, Neill was confronted with opposition which delayed his reappointment by President Taft. Appointed by Woodrow Wilson and confirmed shortly after the establishment of the new Department of Labor,

in which the Bureau was to be lodged as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Neill resigned soon afterward for financial reasons.⁶⁴

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the AFL and the Bureau during the pre-Department of Labor period was one of mutual awareness and generally high regard. The AFL, and notably Gompers, followed the work of the Bureau, and used it in organizational, political, and educational activities. The Bureau's broad-gauge projects were self-determined, with substantial support from Presidents and Congress. These shed light on socioeconomic developments, national and international labor news, and industrial characteristics, reflecting the needs of the time for growing comprehension of the status of labor. While Gompers differed with Wright and Neill over the role of Government in handling strikes with a national impact, the commissioners' fair and balanced analyses of major disputes was accepted as a tempering influence on possibly more stringent approaches. With its growing political influence, the AFL pressed for and achieved a Cabinet-level Department of Labor. Although the Bureau then became one of several bureaus in the new Department of Labor, that did not obscure its unique role in furnishing a major foundation for the new agency. □

— FOOTNOTES —

¹ Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1925), vol. 1, p. 224; and *Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, Proceedings, 1881*, p. 4. For a contemporary account of the 1881 convention see Stuart Bruce Kaufman, "Birth of a federation: Gompers strives 'not to build a bubble'," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 1981, pp. 23-26.

² Terence V. Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor* (Philadelphia, Excelsior Press, 1890), pp. 158-63.

³ *Senate Committee on Labor and Education, Hearing on Capital and Labor, 1883*, vol. 1, pp. 271, 382.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 278-80.

⁵ *Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, Proceedings, 1883*, pp. 10-11.

⁶ Arthur had received assurances from President-elect Cleveland that Wright would continue in office after March 4. See John Lombardi, *Labor's Voice in the Cabinet: A History of the Department of Labor from Its Origins to 1921* (New York, Columbia, 1942), pp. 31-35.

⁷ *Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, Proceedings, 1885*; and Gompers, *Seventy Years*, vol. 1, p. 229.

⁸ *American Federation of Labor, Proceedings, 1887*, p. 9; *Ibid., Proceedings, 1888*, p. 9.

⁹ *Commissioner of Labor, First Annual Report, Causes of Depression, 1886*, p. 76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 290-93.

¹¹ Lombardi, *Labor's Voice*, p. 43.

¹² *AFL, Proceedings, 10th Convention, 1890*, pp. 16, 18.

¹³ *Ibid., 9th Convention, 1889*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid., Proceedings, 11th Convention, 1891*, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid., Proceedings, 13th Convention, 1893*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Carroll D. Wright, to the National Association of Officials of Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Proceedings, 1895*; Carroll D. Wright, *The*

Working of the United States Bureau of Labor, Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor, No. 54, September 1904, pp. 975-76.

¹⁷ James Leiby, *Carroll Wright and Labor Reform* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard, 1960), pp. 103-04.

¹⁸ In Department of Labor Bulletin 6, *Recent Governmental Contracts*, September 1896, pp. 690-91; *Ibid.*, Bulletin 9, *The Padrone System and Padrone Banks*, March 1897, pp. 113-29.

¹⁹ *AFL, Proceedings, 15th Convention, 1895*, p. 38; *Ibid., 16th Convention, 1896*, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid., 1896*, p. 20.

²¹ *American Federationist*, vol. IV, no. 4, June 1897, p. 76.

²² *U.S. Strike Commission of 1894, Report, 1895*, pp. 194-201.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁴ *American Federationist*, vol. 1, no. 10, 1894, pp. 231-33.

²⁵ The AFL opposed the legislation, and, as Gompers later stated, when the unaffiliated railway brotherhoods continued to support the legislation, the AFL considered itself successful in eliminating any possible application but to the railway unions. *American Federationist*, vol. V, no. 3, May 1898, pp. 70-1; *Ibid.*, vol. IX, no. 6, June 1902; *Industrial Commission, 1901*, vol. XVII, pp. cv-cvi; *AFL, Proceedings 16th Convention, 1906*, pp. 28-29; Gompers, *Seventy Years*, vol. 2, p. 137.

²⁶ Gompers, *Seventy Years*, vol. 2, p. 120; *AFL, Proceedings of 22nd Annual Convention, 1902*, pp. 12-13; *House Committee on Labor, Hearings National Arbitration Bill, 1904*, p. 63.

²⁷ Geo. L. McMurphy, *American Federationist*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 95-96.

²⁸ *AFL, Proceedings, 17th Convention, 1897*, p. 22; *AFL, Proceedings, 21st Convention, 1901*.

²⁹ *Organization of the Department of Commerce and Labor, 1904*, pp. 478-79, 520-22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

- ³¹ *AFL, Proceedings, 23rd Convention, 1903*, p. 24, 173.
- ³² Theodore Roosevelt, *Autobiography, Works*, vol. XX, 1925, p. 460.
- ³³ Gompers, *Seventy Years*, vol. 1, pp. 530–32, vol. 2, pp. 129–30.
- ³⁴ *American Federationist*, vol. XIII, no. 1, January 1905.
- ³⁵ Message to the Congress, 59th Cong., 2nd sess., Dec. 3, 1906 in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. V, pp. 924–26; Message to the Congress, 60th Cong., 1st sess., Dec. 3, 1907 in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. VI, pp. 152–55.
- ³⁶ Neill expressed the view that: “the employers’ side generally has the advantage in getting a hearing before the public,” and compulsory investigation and a public report would force “both sides to show up the actual things that were being done, and the actual merits of their claims.” House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Hearing, *Investigation of Controversies Affecting Interstate Commerce, 1906*, pp. 6, 11.
- ³⁷ Senate Document 122, 58th Cong., 3d sess., *Labor Disturbances in the State of Colorado, 1880 to 1904; 1905*; pp. 31–34; 278–80.
- ³⁸ *The New York Times*, June 17, 1907, p. 1; July 13, 1907; p. 2; Aug. 12, 1907, p. 2; *National Civic Federation Review*, September 1907, p. 17; Senate Document No. 725, 60th Cong., 2nd sess.; *Investigation of Western Union and Postal Telegraph Cable Cos.*, 1909, pp. 39–42.
- ³⁹ Edward Berman, *Labor Disputes and the President of the United States* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1924), pp. 64–65.
- ⁴⁰ *The New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1909; Sept. 11, 1909; *AFL, Proceedings of 29th Convention, 1909*, p. 30.
- ⁴¹ *AFL, Report of Proceedings of 30th Convention, 1910*, pp. 20–21; *American Federationist*, vol. XVII, no. 2, February 1910, pp. 113–15.
- ⁴² Senate Document No. 521, 61st Cong., 2nd sess., *Report on Strike at Bethlehem Steel Works, 1910*, pp. 70, 128.
- ⁴³ *The New York Times*, May 12, 1910, p. 9.
- ⁴⁴ *American Federationist*, vol. XVII, no. 6, June 1910.
- ⁴⁵ Senate Document No. 110, 62nd Cong., 1st sess., *Report on the Iron and Steel Industry, 1911*, vol. 1, pp. XIV–XVI; vol. 3, 1913, pp. 13–15.
- ⁴⁶ *American Federationist*, vol. XIX, no. 2, February 1912, pp. 101–14.
- ⁴⁷ Senate Document No. 870, 62nd Cong., 2nd sess., *Report of the Strike of Textile Workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1913*, p. 17.
- ⁴⁸ Ewan Clague, *The Bureau of Labor Statistics* (New York, Frederick Praeger, 1968), p. 13.
- ⁴⁹ *AFL, Proceedings, 27th Convention, 1907*, pp. 38–39.
- ⁵⁰ Richard G. Balfe, “Charles P. Neill and the United States Bureau of Labor,” Ph. D. diss. (University of Notre Dame, 1956), p. 112.
- ⁵¹ Oscar S. Straus Papers; Correspondence from Roosevelt to Straus, Jan. 18, 1907.
- ⁵² *AFL, Proceedings, 27th Convention, 1907*, p. 40.
- ⁵³ Department of Labor and Commerce, Labor Conference, 1909, pp. 11, 29, 31, 46, 80–81; *AFL, Proceedings, 29th Convention, 1909*, pp. 34–35.
- ⁵⁴ *AFL, Proceedings, 29th Convention, 1909*, p. 35.
- ⁵⁵ Commissioner of Labor, *25th Annual Report, Industrial Education in the United States, 1910, 1911*.
- ⁵⁶ *AFL, Proceedings, 30th Convention, 1910*, pp. 41–43; *AFL, Proceedings, 32nd Convention, 1912*, pp. 137–39; 269–76.
- ⁵⁷ *American Federationist*, vol. X, no. 5, May 1903, p. 354.
- ⁵⁸ *AFL, Proceedings, 26th Convention, 1906*, p. 30–31.
- ⁵⁹ *AFL, Proceedings, 27th Convention, 1907*, p. 28.
- ⁶⁰ Legislation was also pending calling for the establishment of a Children’s Bureau in the Department of Commerce and Labor. *AFL, Proceedings, 30th Convention, 1910*, pp. 124, 224–25.
- ⁶¹ Senate Document No. 645, 61st Cong., 2nd sess., *Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage-Earners in the United States*, vols. 1–19, issued between 1910 and 1913.
- ⁶² *AFL, Proceedings, 31st Convention, 1911*, p. 35.
- ⁶³ Daniel J. B. Mitchell, “A furor over working children and the Bureau of Labor,” *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1975, pp. 34–36; and Judson McLaury, “A senator’s reaction to report on working women and children,” pp. 36–38.
- ⁶⁴ Balfe, “Neill and the Bureau of Labor,” pp. 139–40. See also Jonathan Grossman, “The origin of the U.S. Department of Labor,” *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1973, pp. 3–7.