

Birth of a federation: Mr. Gompers endeavors ‘not to build a bubble’

Contemporary account notes the role of the longtime AFL president in the founding 100 years ago of an earlier federation of unions, to which the AFL-CIO traces its origin

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The centennial celebration this year by the AFL-CIO, marking the founding in 1881 of the AFL's immediate predecessor, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, comes in the seventh year of a scholarly research project known as the Samuel Gompers Papers. The project's staff is gathering the papers of Samuel Gompers (1850–1924), the cigarmaker who became the AFL's first president in 1886 and continued in office, with the exception of one year, until his death 38 years later. This collection now includes almost a million pages of Gompers' correspondence, writings, and speeches, and other important documents drawn from unions, repositories, and private individuals, and is located at the University of Maryland and Pace University. The project's editors plan to produce a comprehensive microfilm for scholars, students, and researchers, and to publish 12 volumes of the most important papers for general readers. The first series of microfilm appeared in 1979.¹

A hundred years ago a reporter from the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette* witnessed the 4-day founding convention, in that city, of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada. Although the reporter's interpretation of events on the first day did not please Samuel Gompers, by the end of the convention the *Gazette* must have felt satis-

faction as Gompers himself led the assembly in thanking the paper for its fair reporting of the proceedings. The excerpts from the *Gazette's* coverage that follow give a good sense of the range of federation concerns in 1881, and of the reaction of one representative of the daily press to the convention and what it portended. They are adapted from the first volume of the Gompers Papers, which the University of Illinois Press will publish in 1983. For the most part, the text is rendered as it appeared in the original.

Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 1881

At two o'clock yesterday afternoon the delegates to the National Labor Congress assembled . . . from Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Missouri, California, Maryland, West Virginia, Indiana and Wisconsin. . . . short speeches advancing ideas to be discussed at some future time, were made by a number of gentlemen. All were conservative in tone, and, while the difference between labor and capital was referred to as a conflict that was irrepressible, none of the speeches were in the slightest degree communistic. On the contrary, the intelligence and moderation displayed was remarkable. All the speakers expressed themselves as being in favor of the greatest moderation. Mr. Gompers, the representative of the International Cigar Makers' Union, said he had come to Pittsburgh, not to air his opinions, but to work, not to build a bub-

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ble, but to lay the foundation for a superstructure that would be solid, and that would be a true federation of trade unions. He was in favor of progressing slowly, and wanted the organization to be emphatically a workingmen's organization; one that is not defiled by money, but which will in itself contain the elements of strength

Among the delegates mentioned for permanent Chairman . . . [is] Mr. Gompers, of the International Cigar Makers' Union. The latter is the leader of the Socialistic element, which is pretty well represented in the Congress, and one of the smartest men present. It is thought that an attempt will be made to capture the organization for Mr. Gompers, as the representative of the Socialists, and if such an attempt is made, whether it succeeds or not, there will likely be some lively work, as the delegates opposed to Socialism are determined not to be controlled by it. If the Socialists do not have their own way, they may bolt, as they have always done in the past. If they do bolt, the power of the proposed organization will be so seriously crippled as to almost destroy its usefulness.

The majority of the delegates realize the importance of effecting an organization that will harmonize all differences likely to arise, and last evening seemed hopeful that this could be accomplished. They think that the Committee on Organization will present the name of Mr. Rankin² of this city, or some western man, for permanent Chairman, and that the Socialistic element will be prevented not only from capturing the organization, but from introducing any of their peculiar ideas into the declaration of principles to be prepared.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 1881

Mr. Gompers took occasion to deny the statement that he was a leader of the Socialistic element, and that the committee had been captured for him, saying that he had attended the Congress only for the purpose of assisting in the federation of labor organizations. A number of delegates differed with him, however

. . . For a time it looked as if the chairmanship would be hotly contested, but Mr. Gompers poured oil on the troubled waters by stating that he was thoroughly devoted to trade unionism, and in order to facilitate the work of completing the organization, would withdraw his name. Mr. Powers³ gracefully followed suit, and Mr. Jarrett⁴ was unanimously chosen Permanent Chairman. Messrs. Powers and Gompers were chosen vice presidents

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 1881

. . . it was four o'clock, and the whole day had been consumed in the discussion of four or five subjects.⁵ President Jarrett took the chair, however, and by a little

ruse succeeded in expediting business wonderfully. At a previous meeting a rule had been adopted making it imperative for a vote to be taken on any questions whenever seven members called for the "question." This rule had not been enforced by Mr. Gompers, but when President Jarrett took the chair he enforced it in a manner that made it resemble a self-inflicted gag law. As soon as a motion had been stated, he would ask, "Are you ready for the question?" Immediately the "question" would be called for by a number of delegates, who thought that by so doing they would place the motion in proper shape for debate. But Mr. Jarrett was not of the same mind, and the last three sections of the "plan" were railroaded through with a speed that was highly creditable to Mr. Jarrett's conception of the rule, but not entirely satisfactory to those delegates who thought they should be permitted to air their opinions on every question that came before the house

The chairman of the committee appointed to prepare a declaration of principles, then read their report, which, as adopted, is as follows: . . .

Whereas, a Struggle is going on in the nations of the civilized world, between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between capital and labor which must grow in intensity from year to year and work disastrous results to the toiling millions of all nations, if not combined for mutual protection and benefits. The history of the wage workers of all countries is but the history of constant struggle and misery, engendered by ignorance and disunion, whereas the history of the non-producers of all countries proves that a minority thoroughly organized may work wonders for good or evil. It behooves the representatives of the workers of North America in congress assembled, to adopt such measures and disseminate such principles among the people of our country as will unite them for all time to come, to secure the recognition of the rights to which they are justly entitled. Conforming to the old adage, "In union there is strength," a formation embracing every trade and labor organization in North America, a union founded upon the basis as broad as the land we live in, is our only hope. The past history of trade unions proves that small organizations, well conducted, have accomplished great good, but their efforts have not been of that lasting character which a thorough unification of all the different branches of industrial workers is bound to secure.

Conforming to the spirit of the times, and the necessities of the industrial classes, we declare the following:

Resolved, That all organizations of workingmen into what is known as a Trade or Labor Union should have the right to the protection of their property in like manner as the property of all other persons and societies is protected, and to accomplish this purpose we insist upon the passage of laws in the State Legislatures and

in Congress for the incorporation of trade unions and similar labor organizations.

Resolved, That we are in favor of the passage of such legislative enactments as will enforce by compulsion the education of children; that if the State has the right to exact certain compliance [with] its⁶ demands, then it is also the right of the [State to e]ducate its people to the proper under[standing of such] demands.

[*Resolved*, That we] are in favor of the passage of [laws in the several States] forbidding the employ[ment of children under the age] of fourteen in any capacity under the penalty of fine and imprisonment.

Resolved, That necessity demands the enactment of uniform apprentice laws throughout the country; that the apprentice to a mechanical trade may be made to serve a sufficient term of apprenticeship, from three to five years, and that he be provided by his employer in his progress to maturity with proper and sufficient facilities to finish him as a competent workman.

Resolved, That the "national eight-hour law" is one intended to benefit labor and to relieve it partly of its heavy burdens; that the evasion of its true spirit and intent is contrary to the best interests of the nation. We therefore demand the enforcement of said law in the spirit of its design.

Resolved, That it is hereby declared the sense of this congress that convict or prison labor as applied to the contract system in several of the States is a species of slavery in its worst form; that it pauperizes labor, demoralizes the honest manufacturer and degrades the very criminal whom it employs; that as many articles of use and consumption made in our prisons under the contract system come directly and detrimentally in competition with the products of honest labor, we demand that the laws providing for labor under the contract system herein complained [of], be repealed, so as to discontinue the manufacture of all articles which will compete with those of the honest workingman or mechanic.

Resolved, That what is known as the "truck" system of payment, instead of lawful currency as a value for labor performed, is not only a gross imposition, but a downright swindle to the honest laborer and mechanic, and calls for entire abolition; and we recommend that active measures shall be enforced to eradicate the evil by the passage of laws imposing fine and imprisonment upon all individual firms or corporations who continue to practice the same.

Resolved, That we favor the passage of such laws as will secure to the mechanic and workingman the first lien, upon property, the product of his labor, sufficient in all cases to justify his legal and just claims, and that proper provision be made for legally recording the same.

Resolved, That we demand the repeal and erasure from the statute books of all acts known as conspiracy

laws, as applied to organizations of labor in the regulation of wages which shall constitute a day's work.

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

Resolved, That railroad land grants forfeited by reason of non-fulfillment of contract should be immediately reclaimed by the government, and henceforth the public domain reserved exclusively as homes for actual settlers.

Resolved, That we recommend to the Congress of the United States the adoption of such laws as shall give to every American industry full protection from the cheap labor of foreign countries.

Resolved, That we demand the passage of a law by the United States Congress to prevent the importation of foreign laborers under contract.

Resolved, That we recommend to all trades and labor organizations to secure proper representation in all law-making bodies by means of the ballot, and to use all honorable measures by which this result can be accomplished.

The preamble and first and second resolutions were adopted without dispute, but the third, which related to the employment of children under fourteen years of age, excited a protracted discussion . . . if these stories, coming from men who knew what they were talking about, and which were pathetic enough to bring tears to most eyes, could be published in full, they would form a powerful argument in favor of keeping the little ones out of the work shops and sending them to school where they belong. The resolution as it appears above was adopted unanimously.

The other resolutions were adopted with very little debate, until one was read which declared in favor of all the railroads and telegraph lines being purchased and controlled by the government. This was [dis?] approved by a number of delegates, on the ground that if the government obtained the control favored, it would make the power of the ascendant political party perpetual, by reason of the vast numbers of employees which would be placed at its mercy. President Jarrett ruled the resolution out of order, as having no relation to the objects of the congress. An appeal was taken from his decision, but the Chair was sustained and the resolution left out.

The next discussion was on that plank declaring in favor of the protection of American industries. It was a fight of Pittsburgh pride against Western principles, and the debate was warm . . . Mr. Crawford,⁷ of Chicago, thought it was a mistake to force the resolution through, as it would only cause dissension. As long as

the east and west were situated as they are at present they would not agree on the subject. Therefore he was in favor of not making any reference to the tariff, promising at the same time that if the East offered no tariff resolutions, none advocating free trade would come from the West An attempt was then made to lay the resolution on the table, but it was voted down, and after another strong argument by Mr. Jarrett in favor of the resolution it was adopted

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 1881

. . . Mr. Brant,⁸ of Detroit, offered a series of resolutions declaring that the bill introduced in Congress in 1880, as part of the report of the Public Land Commission would have the effect, if passed, to place the bulk of the public lands at the disposal of Western cattle kings and other capitalists at a nominal figure; that those lands in a few years would be found very valuable for farming purposes, and that persons wishing to cultivate them would have to do so in the capacity of tenant farmers or hirelings in competition with Chinese labor. In view of these facts the resolutions urged that all labor assemblies pass resolutions, giving their Congressional representatives to understand that if they voted for the measure, they would be punished by the political opposition of the workingmen. After a short discussion the resolutions were adopted, as were also the following, which were presented by Mr. Rodgers⁹ [sic] of Pennsylvania:

Resolved, That we demand strict laws for the inspection and ventilation of mines, factories and workshops, and sanitary supervision of all food and dwellings.

Resolved, That strict laws be enacted making employers liable for all accidents resulting from their negligence or incompetence to the injury of their employees

The Legislative Committee will meet for organization to-day. It is hard to predict who will be chairman, as all are good men and equally popular. The Secretary,

Mr. Foster,¹⁰ is employed as a compositor on the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, and although a young man, is President of the Trades Assembly of Cincinnati. Mr. Gompers is organizer of the International Cigar Makers Union, of New York. Mr. Powers is General President of the Lake Seamen's Union, and is considered one of the best organizers in the West. Mr. Bergman¹¹ [sic] is Treasurer of the Trades Assembly of San Francisco and President of the Tailors' Union of that city. Mr. A. W. Rankin is a member of the Iron Moulders' Union of this city, and is well known. All the officers are men of more than ordinary intelligence, conservative in their disposition, and their choice gives general satisfaction to the delegates.

While the reporter for the *Gazette* speculated about the chairmanship, the new organization's predominant official was in fact the secretary, William H. Foster. Out of the five officers of the Legislative Committee, the executive body of the Federation, only the secretary was designated by the convention. The committee itself elected the remaining officers—the chairman (Richard Powers in 1881), first and second vice chairmen, and treasurer. Even in 1883, when the Federation changed the title "chairman" to "president," enlarged the Legislative Committee to nine, and provided for the designation of all officers by the convention, the constitution still specified that the election of the secretary was to take precedence. So although Samuel Gompers was a member of the committee in four of the five years that the early Federation existed (first vice chairman in 1881–82, chairman in 1882–83, first vice president in 1883–84, and president in 1885–86), he was never the leading official of this organization, as he became of its successor. Gompers played an active role throughout these years, but prior to the founding of the American Federation of Labor in 1886, the Federation was guided by its secretaries: the printers' William H. Foster (1881–83, 1885–86) and Frank K. Foster (1883–84), the carpenters' Gabriel Edmonston (1884–85), and the cigar-makers' John S. Kirchner (1886). □

— FOOTNOTES —

¹ *American Federation of Labor Records: The Samuel Gompers Era* (Microfilming Corporation of America, 1979).

² Alexander C. Rankin (b. 1849?) represented Iron Molders' local 14 of Pittsburgh at this convention.

³ Richard Powers (1850–1929), president of the Chicago Lake Seamen's Union from 1878 to 1887.

⁴ John Jarrett (1843–1918), president of the National Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers.

⁵ These included discussions on the name of the organization and the basis of representation.

⁶ Bracketed material supplied by the Samuel Gompers Papers edi-

tors where text of original was obliterated.

⁷ Mark L. Crawford (1848–1932), a Chicago printer and president in 1883–84 of the International Typographical Union.

⁸ Lyman A. Brant (1848–95), a printer and president of the Detroit Trade and Labor Council.

⁹ Daniel Rogers represented the Amalgamated Association of Pittsburgh Miners and Drivers.

¹⁰ William Henry Foster (1848?–86).

¹¹ Charles F. Burgman, a tailor and treasurer of the Representative Assembly of Trades and Labor Unions of San Francisco.