

The American Federation of Labor Convention

By William Z. Foster

IN its 43 years of history, the American Federation of Labor has held many reactionary conventions. But the one in session in El Paso, Texas, Nov. 17-25, was the worst ever. Absolutely nothing of a constructive nature was done. On the contrary, a strong drift to the right, to more intensified class collaboration, was evidenced in all its deliberations. There were 375 delegates in attendance, representing a padded membership of 2,865,979, a decrease of 100,000 for the year. Even the building trades organizations, in spite of the greatest building boom in American history, claimed an increase in membership of only 20,000. The convention was opened by the delegates singing the "Star Spangled Banner," and by a Catholic priest asking a blessing. Patriotism and religion mix well with the usual proceedings of A. F. of L. conventions.

Following out the imperialistic lead of the American capitalist class, the trade union bureaucracy also arranged for conventions of the Mexican Federation of Labor and Pan-American Federation of Labor to be held in connection with that of the A. F. of L. The Mexican Federation convention was held in Juarez, just across the Rio Grande. The two bodies held joint sessions on two days. The Pan-American Federation held its meeting in Mexico City a few days later. The poisonous influence of Gompersism was spread through all these conventions.

The Question of Political Action

One of the most pressing problems before the convention related to the political attitude of the Federation. Before the convention Lewis, Hutcheson, Berry, and many other prominent leaders affiliated to the republican and democratic parties, made strong protest against Gompers' endorsement of LaFollette. A split threatened, but the sly old fox Gompers, averted it. He mollified these ultra-reactionaries by refraining from all criticism of the old parties and demanding "a strict adherence to the policy of non-partisan activity." He declared, "The American labor movement must be as free from political party domination as at any time in the history of our movement. Our non-partisan policy does not imply that we shall ignore the existence or attitudes of political parties. It does intend that labor proposes to use all parties and to be used by none."

Gompers declared that labor has always failed in independent political action and he denied emphatically that the A. F. of L., in the past campaign, had favored the formation of such a movement. He said, "It will be noted that the A. F. of L. did not endorse a third party movement. It expressed preferment for the election of senators LaFollette and Wheeler, the independent candidates, and their platform, as more nearly representing the hopes and demands of labor." He talked prosperity. He minimized the election defeat. He declared, "Labor has no complaint to make against the 68th congress," and "labor fared almost phenomenally well in the elections." He made the ridiculous claim that 125 democratic, 40 republican, 3 farmer-labor party, and 1 independent congressman, "friends" of labor, had been elected.

Sentiment for a labor party, was conspicuous by its absence. Due to the activities of the T. U. E. L. militants in the 1923 conventions of the Molders and of the Potters, resolutions for a labor party were adopted. These were shamefacedly introduced by the respective delegates and then allowed to die an unlamented death under the withering scorn of the reactionaries. The resolution of the left-wing stated that, "The necessary mobilization of the real power of the labor movement for its own protection and the effective defense of the workers' interests can only be accomplished under the leadership of a revolutionary party, the Workers Party, aiming at the destruction of the capitalist system and the establishment of a Workers and Farmers Government." It was, of course, overwhelmingly beaten.

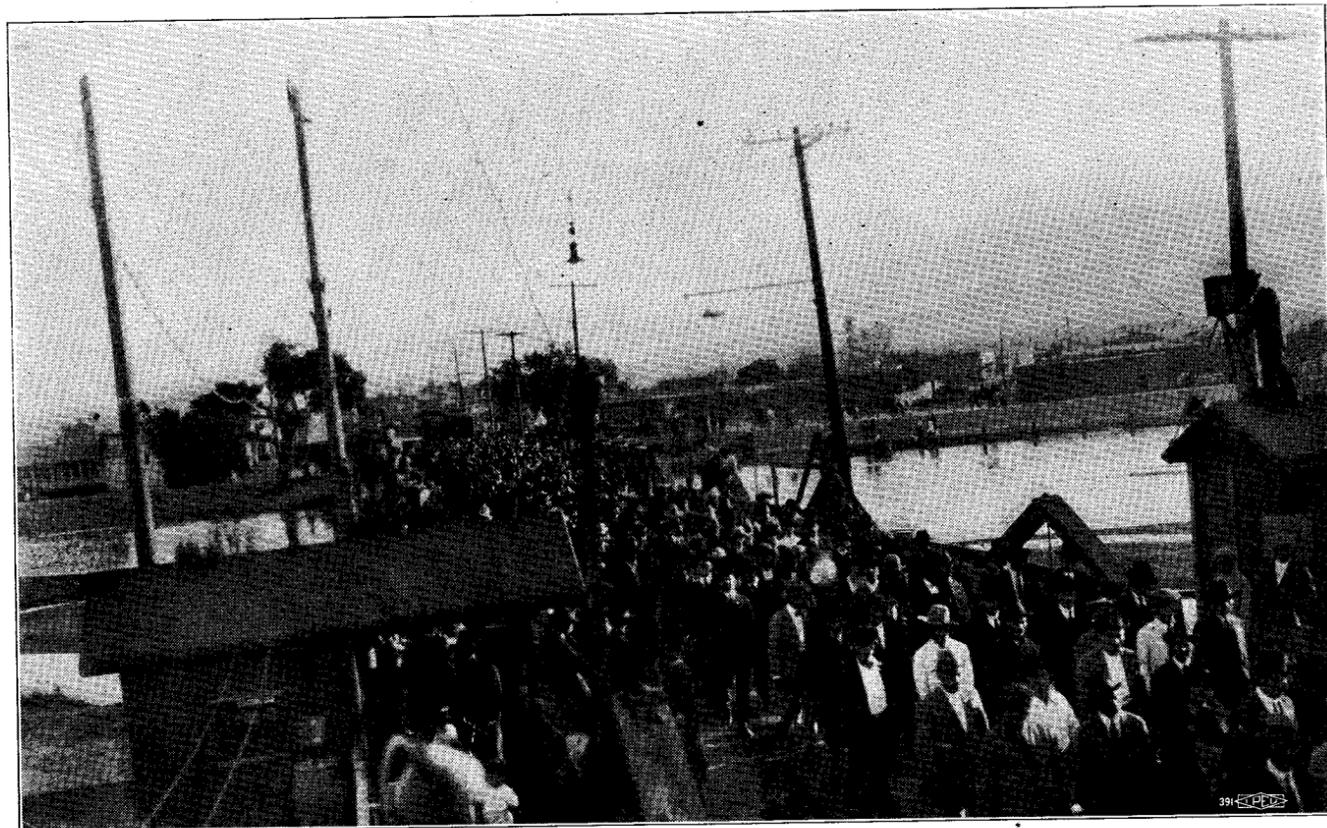
The A. F. of L. Executive Council came forward with a proposition cementing the alliance with the LaFollette petty bourgeois movement and opening the door for cooperation and participation in the eventual third party. Salient sections of this read:

"Changes in laws shall be advocated where necessary, to make the functioning of independent political movements more readily effective. . . All non-partisan political campaign committees shall be maintained on a permanent basis. . . There are other progressively-minded groups composed of persons who cannot by their occupation or station in life be affiliated directly to the trade union movement, but who are sympathetic and responsive to the needs of the American wage earners and to our non-partisan campaign policy. To embrace these helpful influences in labor's political campaign committee with the cooperation and approval of the Executive Council, be directed to devise a plan and procedure that will accomplish this end."

The Left-Wing and its Program

The left-wing was practically unrepresented at the convention. A. F. of L. conventions are made up almost entirely of the upper layers of the trade union bureaucracy. Each of the 120 affiliated unions send their highest officials. These make up the convention delegation. The rank and file have no representation. Hence, the left-wing has little opportunity to be heard effectively. What few rank and filers might come from the central labor councils, which are entitled to one delegate a piece, are usually deterred by the fact that A. F. of L. Conventions are commonly held in such out-of-the-way places as El Paso. This offers no handicap to the officials. They look upon the conventions as so many joy rides. The El Paso affair, with its bull fights and drinking orgies, was in harmony with this spirit. Typically, the next year's convention will be held in Atlantic City, "the playground of the world."

The Trade Union Educational League militants introduced a series of resolutions dealing with leading points



MEXICAN DELEGATES, CROSSING RIO GRANDE TO A. F. OF L. CONVENTION AT EL PASO, BEING INSPECTED BY U. S. IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS WHO STOPPED ALL WHO WERE NOT "SUFFICIENTLY WELL DRESSED."

in the left-wing program. These included resolutions calling for a General Labor Congress, to consist of representatives of trade unions, workers' political parties, shop committees, the unemployed, etc., for the purpose of consolidating the ranks of labor politically and industrially and to launch a militant attack on the capitalist system; the recognition of Soviet Russia, abolition of racial discrimination against the Negroes; nationalization of the mines and railroads; amalgamation of the trade unions; organization of and relief for the unemployed; demand that all the forces in the Pan-American Federation of Labor be mobilized for a struggle against American imperialism; condemnation of imperialist schemes against China; demand that the R. I. L. U. plan for international unity be endorsed and the solidarity of labor be achieved; protest against criminal syndicalism laws, against the deportation of Oates, Mahler, Moran, and Nigra; the organization of the youth; release of Mooney, Billings, Ford, Suhr, Rangel, Kline, Sacco, Vanzetti and other political prisoners; condemnation of the Ku Klux Klan and American Legion.

Almost all of these propositions were either ignored or voted down overwhelmingly. A flurry developed over the amalgamation question. Swales, the British delegate, stated in his talk that in England amalgamation movements were on foot affecting 3,000,000 workers. The A. F. of L. convention, however, showed its contempt for progress by voting down almost unanimously the amalgamation proposition. The resolution on Russia was treated with the usual avalanche of "red" baiting and misrepresentation. In the matter of the

release of political prisoners, the convention, following its usual course, tipped its hat to the subject by adopting mild resolutions protesting against the imprisonment of Mooney, Rangel, Kline, Sacco, and Vanzetti. Nothing was done about organizing the unorganized or to relieve the starving unemployed in the mining districts. No steps were taken to check the "open shop" drive, beyond a few empty threats by Gompers and Woll against wage cuts on the part of the employers.

In the face of this bankrupt condition Gompers had the brass to say that "The American labor movement is the strongest and best organized in all the world," that "labor has never occupied so favorable a spot in the nation's proceedings," and that "It is with immense satisfaction that we note the growth of constructive and progressive thought on every hand."

Class Collaboration

The American Federation of Labor and its affiliated organizations are fast dropping the last traces of militant struggle and are developing an elaborate and settled policy of class collaboration in every sphere of their activity. In the Montreal A. F. of L. Convention, in 1919, the Plumb Plan, calling for "government ownership and democratic management" of the railroads was adopted. It has since been repudiated. At the Portland convention last year government ownership of super-power plants was endorsed. This year it was repudiated and a simple policy of government regulation demanded. The one time militant denunciation of the in-

junction evil has also been dropped. On all sides class collaboration is the order of the day. Mr. Gompers specifically denied any revolutionary intent on the part of the unions. He said:

"The trade unions are not inclined towards the Marxian theory of government. To the contrary, they are manifesting a constantly growing interest and participation in the institutions dependent upon private and cooperative initiative and personal and group adventure."

Matthew Woll, Mr. Gompers' understudy, informed a waiting world, that "Industrial democracy cannot come through the workers alone, we need help of the employers." Mr. Morrison the Secretary of the A. F. of L., outlined the slave ideals of the trade unions as follows:

"Wouldn't it be ideal if every man who wanted to work could be assured of a job, of pay enough to take care of himself and family, and an opportunity to educate himself and children, and to have somethings to live on in his old age."

The so-called "Baltimore and Ohio Plan," the system of class collaboration developed by the Machinist union after the loss of the great railroad shopmen's strike in 1922, was given Mr. Gompers' blessing in these words:

"An outstanding example of the development that follows from cooperation (A. F. of L. term for class collaboration) is the relationship existing between the Railway Employees' Department of the A. F. of L. and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Under the agreement between the unions and the company, wages and conditions of work were negotiated and it was agreed that the unions would cooperate with the management to reduce the cost of repairs and to improve the methods of work. A program of workers' education is in progress of development, to be coordinated with shop work. This cooperation development is commanding the attention of the railroads everywhere as it demonstrates efficiency and economy."

That other form of "cooperation," or class collaboration, labor banking, received fulsome praise at the convention. Labor banking takes the representatives of the unions directly into the organizations of the capitalists. It infuses them with the spirit of social peace and class collaboration. It destroys the last remnants of militancy. Naturally, therefore, it is in high favor with the A. F. of L.

The report shows that in the last few years 30 labor banks with resources of \$150,000,000, have been organized. About 60 more are contemplated. One enthusiast for labor in finance declared; "If railway workers saved 20 per cent of their wages, in 5 years' time they would own 51 per cent of all the stock of all railroads in the United States." Thus "labor banking offers a peaceful way to the revolution. All talk of struggle and organization is superfluous." A strong point in the financial system of the labor banks, so it was urged, is that they do not finance strikes, as these are bad business propositions. They will not fight capital. "They have demonstrated that the interests of capital and labor are identical."

A recently-launched scheme of class collaboration is the formation of insurance companies. According

to the report of the special committee charged with investigating this subject, the total amount of money invested in insurance in the United States is 60 million dollars, and the annual income therefrom is 10 million dollars yearly. Profits in life insurance average 20 per cent, and in fire insurance from 141 per cent to 1157 per cent. With these rich fleshpots in sight, the bureaucrats are hot-foot for the insurance scheme. They depend upon the labor banking system to help them launch it. The report of the committee says:

"It is fully conceded that the insurance business is the safest, surest, and most simple of control and management of all present commercial enterprises. We heartily endorse the principle involved and recommend that the national and international trade union offices study carefully the report of the special committee on this subject. It is further recommended that the President of the American Federation of Labor be authorized and directed to call a voluntary conference of all national and international officers within the coming year, for such action on this important proposal as shall appeal to the best judgment of those attending."

American Imperialism

The El Paso convention breathed the spirit of imperialism. One of the most popular speakers was Colonel Drain, commander of the American Legion. A notorious "open shopper," he lauded Gompers as "the friend of kings and presidents." In its report, the Executive Council declared squarely for militarism. It said, "Pacifism in any form is obnoxious to your committee, which is in agreement with the purpose of amply safeguarding our nation and its people and democratic institutions against any and all invasions." In accordance with this principle, the 14 metal trades unions called upon the United States government to strengthen the navy. The congress also endorsed the proposition of Citizen's Military Training Camps. It voted against Japanese and Mexican immigration, and for the restriction for immigration generally.

In the conventions of the Mexican Federation of Labor and the Pan-American Federation of Labor, Gompers carried on a militant defense of American imperialism. He cooperated openly with Calles, the tool of American big capital. The whole delegation of the A. F. of L. convention were invited to Mexico City to attend the inauguration of Calles. Carrying on just enough of a fake denunciation of American imperialism to win the confidence of the unthinking, Gompers industriously did the work of his American masters. In the Pan-American Federation of Labor, which was made up of delegates from the United States, Canada, Panama, Guatemala, Santo Domingo, Porto Rico, Nicaragua and Mexico, with the important countries of Argentine, Chili, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Haiti, and Cuba not attending, he waged a war against all manifestations of revolutionary spirit. Matthew Woll exposed the sinister imperialistic designs of Gompers inadvertently, saying:

"The outstanding feature of the convention was the close cooperation developed between the labor movement of the United States, Mexico and Canada. Closer relations of the three governments and peoples is bound to follow. I feel sure that our rapprochement is going to

knit more closely the wage workers of the western hemisphere. Indeed, I foresee a Monroe Doctrine of labor. By that I mean united resistance against attempts by foreign labor to get a foothold either in concessions, property, or economic principles or aspirations."

In Mexico City the revolutionary left wing carried on an active campaign against the Gompers-Morones combination. The Mexican Committee of the Red International, combined with the Trade Union Educational League of the United States, and the Pan-American Anti-Imperialist League, issued a manifesto denouncing Gompers as an instrument of Yankee Imperialism, saying:

"He sabotaged the protest of the Third Congress against the occupation of Santo Domingo. He sanctioned the occupation of Haiti. He proposed that the United States government pay 25 to 35 per cent less wages to Latin-Americans in the Panama Canal zone than to workers from the United States. He opposes any fight whatsoever against Yankee imperialism, and he says so frankly. He opposes the yearly protest on the first of May, because it is revolutionary. He breaks strikes declared in solidarity, and in general he breaks them because they endanger capitalism. He opposes the entrance of the workers of North America into politics as a class, not because he is an anarchist, but because he wants them to remain within the capitalist parties. Always Gompers follows in Mexico the policy of the United States government. Gompers must not be re-elected president of the Pan-American Federation. The Pan-American Federation must convert itself into an instrument of struggle against Yankee imperialism."

Busy as Gompers was seeking to lash the workers of Central and South America to the chariot of American capitalism, he was not too busy also to attend to the imperialistic necessities of the American capitalist class in Europe. When it was the policy of the American government to support the League of Nations, Gompers also supported wholeheartedly and participated actively in the Amsterdam International. When the League of Nations was repudiated by American capitalism, Gompers grew cold toward it also, and withdrew from the Amsterdam International. Now that the capitalists, thru the Dawes Plan, are entering into an active struggle to dominate Europe and find the world court a convenient instrument for them, naturally their lickspittle, Gompers, follows along in their train. The convention endorsed the World Court. And Gompers begins to maneuver to get back into the American International again. He said:

"We are eager to join an international labor movement based upon the same principles of voluntarism. We are willing to cooperate if we can be assured a basis that will enable us to maintain our integrity—a condition necessary for our own virility and continued progress."

But Gompers will not join the Amsterdam International, except upon his own terms, which are those of American imperialism. He will demand the exclusion of the Russian trade unions, the prevention of unity between the Amsterdam International and the Red International of Labor Unions, an intense struggle against Soviet Russia and every manifestation of Communism. Grassman, of the German trade unions, who was a delegate at the convention, fell in with Gompers' proposals. He indicated that the right wing

of the Amsterdam International will be receptive and he invited the A. F. of L. to send a delegate to the next convention of the German unions. The two English delegates, Cramp and Swales, will in all likelihood also advocate the Gompers plan in the British trade unions.

Jurisdictional Fights—Socialist Traitors

The convention was marked with the usual string of ridiculous jurisdictional fights, most of which could be easily remedied by amalgamation. There were fights between the hatters and capmakers, the teamsters and railway clerks, the electrical workers and railway signalmen, the carpenters and coopers, the granite cutters and stone cutters, the upholsterers and sign hangers, the teamsters and the street car men. But the most serious struggle was between the carpenters and sheet metal workers, over the question of metal trim. This dispute has been going on for a number of years. The building trades department has voted against the carpenters, but the latter have refused to obey its decision. Consequently, the carpenters were expelled from the building trades department. At the building trades convention just prior to the A. F. of L. convention, a resolution was adopted demanding that the A. F. of L. revoke the charter of the carpenters. But it was lost somewhere in transit. The carpenters have 350,000 members. This enables them to violate many decisions and to get away with it.

One of the fine fruits of labor's recent plunge into business is the dispute between the United Mine Workers and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. The B. of L. E. owns several coal mines in West Virginia, which it operates upon an "open shop" basis. All attempts of the U. M. W. of A. to unionize the mines failed, with the result that a strike has been in force since April 1st. The Executive Council was instructed to make another effort to settle the dispute, and in case of failure to so advise the whole labor movement.

The three conventions, in El Paso, Juarez, and Mexico City slopped over with praise of Gompers. This arch-faker was belauded endlessly. In this contemptible work, none exceeded the ex-socialists, who made up about a third of the A. F. of L. delegation. They went to extremes. President Sigman, of the International Ladies Garment Workers, called Gompers the greatest labor leader in the world and presented him with a costly bust done in Italian marble. Oscar Ameringer, another socialist renegade, slobbered all over Gompers and whitewashed him of his crimes against the working class. Into this orgy of imperialism, class collaboration, senseless jurisdictional fighting, and general betrayal of the interests of the working class, these renegade socialists entered whole heartedly. Whatever revolutionary or near-revolutionary ideas they might have held in years gone by, they displayed none of them in this convention. They demonstrated the complete bankruptcy of the Socialist Party in the United States.

Of course the old guard was re-elected. Gompers, tottering on the brink of the grave, was again given the job of heading the organized workers of this country in their struggle against the capitalist class. With the movement clamoring for militant leadership and aggressive policies, this old fossil, agent of the capitalist class, was foisted again upon the back of American labor. As delegates to the British Trade Union Congress, there was selected one Adamski, in addition to Evans of the Electrical Workers. Adamski

is a Gompers messenger boy. Although a convention delegate for ten years, he has never been known to take the floor. He is an official of the United Garment Workers and is used by that organization when it has particularly contemptible strike-breaking to do, as in the case of Michael Stern in Rochester.

A striking end to these three conventions was the death of Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor. He died of a complication of diseases, which were brought to a crisis by the high altitude of Mexico City. He was hurried at the point of death from Mexico to the United States, dying shortly after crossing the American border. The capitalist press mourns his death. Gompers was 74 years of age and connected with the labor movement for almost 60 years. He was a Jew, and born in London, England. He participated in the formation of the A. F. of L. in Pittsburgh in 1881, and has been an officer of that organization ever since. He was elected president in 1886 and has served continuously in that office, except in 1894 when he was defeated by John McBride. He was a member of the Cigarmakers' union.

The outstanding feature of the El Paso Convention was the powerful movement developed for the still further extension of the already complicated network of schemes of class collaboration. The meaning of this is clear. The policies of the reactionaries have failed utterly to maintain the trade unions in any semblance of militancy. The weak craft unions have proved unable to withstand the ferocious attacks of the well organized employers, and the political policy of the Gompers machine has been equally futile. The labor movement is in retreat before victorious capitalism. The growth of the class collaboration movement is the bureaucracy's recognition of that fact.

The bureaucrats see quite clearly that the old policy of the unions is obsolete. But they refuse to adopt the left-wing remedy for the situation, amalgamation, independent class political action, and a general policy of class struggle. In the crisis they adopt a policy of surrender. They aim to turn the unions into company unions, into mere adjuncts of the capitalist organizations—all they are interested in is to maintain some sort of an organization which will furnish them revenue enough to pay their fat salaries. Hence, the widespread development of class collaboration, as noted above in this article. The extension of the labor banks, the B. & O. Plan, and now the inauguration of the insurance scheme, as well as the long term agreement of the Miners, and many other similar developments all point in the same direction. The bureaucrats in the unions are unwilling to fight the employers, they want to subordinate the unions to them altogether.

In this crisis the duty of the left wing is clear and imperative. The revolutionaries in the Trade Union Educational League must renew the fight for the adoption of militant policies and leadership by the unions. The Gompersian leaders are hopelessly reactionary, nothing constructive can come from them. They are allowing the unions to be torn to pieces, and are helping the employers to do the job. The Socialists and the so-called Progressives are in the same boat. They have no ideals, no program, no militancy. The only quarter from which leadership can come is from the left-wing. The fate of the labor movement depends upon the growth and development of the revolutionary forces in the unions. We must realize this fact and redouble our efforts for the extension and establishment of the Trade Union Educational League in every phase and stage of the trade union movement.



EL PASO

Fred Ellis