Our Bourgeoisie

A “CAPTAIN OF INDUSTRY”

W. Gropper

“TOOTIE, IF YOU DON’T COME HERE THIS MINUTE, MAMA SPANK.”

Adolph Dahm

Our Bourgeoisie

Dissecting the Vices of the Working Class and Planning to Cure Them by Increasing the Hours of Labor.

A “CAPTAIN OF INDUSTRY.”

The American Federation of Labor Convention

By William Z. Foster

In its 45 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 2,566,970, 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. Protestantism 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 was the political attitude of the Federation. Before the convention Lews, Hutchinson, Barry, and many other prominent leaders affiliated to the republican and democratic parties, made a 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 preference for the election of senator 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 faced almost phonemically well in the elections.” He made the ridiculous claim that 125 democratic, 40 republican, 3 farmer-labor, 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 Pattern makers resolutions for a labor party were adopted. These were shamelessly introduced by the respective delegates and then allowed to die an unfulfilled death under the withering scorn of the reactionary units. 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 proposal 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 committees with the cooperation and approval of the Executive Council, will be to devise a plan and procedure that will accomplish this aim.”

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 from the central labor councils, which are entitled to one delegate a piece, are usually deterred by the fact that A. F. of L. rank and file are not 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 committees with the cooperation and approval of the Executive Council, will be to devise a plan and procedure that will accomplish this aim.”

The Trade Union Educational League militants introduced a series of resolutions dealing with leading points...
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 1923, the Plumb Plan, calling for "government ownership and decommodification" of the railroads, was adopted. It has since been repudiated. At the New York convention last year government ownership of super-power plants was enshrined. This year it was repudiated and a single policy of government regulation demanded. The one time militant denunciation of the inquisition evil has also been dropped. On all sides class collaboration is the policy of the A. F. of L. and it specifically denies any revolutionary intent on the part of the unions.

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 causes of the working class dependent upon private and cooperative initiative and personal and group adventure.

Matthew Wolf, Mr. Gompers' understudy, in an address at San Francisco, said:

"We have demonstrated that the interests of capital and labor are not antagonistic to each other, but that they are interdependent. The interest of one is the interest of the other. The interests of the two are identical. The only way to bring about this result is by class collaboration."

Evidently, Mr. Gompers' doctrine is far different from that of the Marxian theory of class warfare. In fact, it is the opposite of that theory. The Marxian theory of class warfare is based on the premise that the working class is in a state of permanent conflict with the capitalist class. The goal of the working class, according to this theory, is to overthrow the capitalist class and establish a socialist society. On the other hand, Mr. Gompers' doctrine is based on the premise that the working class and the capitalist class are interdependent. The goal of the working class, according to this doctrine, is to improve the economic and social conditions of the working class through class collaboration with the capitalist class.

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The growth of the class collaboration movement is the bureau-
discipline and reaction. The trade union movement is in re-
treat before victorious capitalism. The craft unions have proved
able to withstand the ferocious attacks of the well organized
employers, and the political attacks of the U.S. Congress. The
socialists entered whole heartedly. Whatever revolutionary
ideas they might have held in years past, the new direction
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 ef-
corts for the extension and establishment of the Trade
Union Educational League in every phase and stage of the
trade union movement.

The bureaucrat 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
at the union to company unions, into mere adjuncts of the
capitalist organizations—all they are interested in is
to maintain some sort of organization which will fur-
nish 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
R. & 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 im-
perative. The revolutionaries in the Trade Union Educa-
tional League must renew the fight for the adoption of militant
policies and leadership by the unions. The Gompers 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
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