

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

The Policy of the Gompers Trade Unions.

By John Pepper

The American Federation of Labour has decided that, under certain conditions, it is prepared to affiliate to the Amsterdam International. The "Vorwärts" and the German Trade Union bureaucracy, which today are part of the right wing of the II. and of the Amsterdam International, have joyfully welcomed this unexpected change of tactics. This decision of the American trade unions, precisely at the present moment, is nothing else than a manoeuvre against the struggle of the Communist International and the R.I.L.U. for the international unity of the trade unions. In this struggle the 6 million organised workers of the Russian trade unions are acting as shock troops. The Anglo-Russian Committee which has been set up in Moscow is the first step towards the realisation of the international unity of the trade unions. The German social democratic trade union bureaucracy, which today in every respect plays the role of rear-guard, now wishes to throw into the front against the Russian advance-guard, the 3 million workers organised in the American Federation of Labour.

The American Federation of Labour was already at one time affiliated to the Amsterdam International. But its dictator, Gompers, at that time declared Amsterdam to be too revolutionary and socialistic, and therefore the American trade unions left the Amsterdam International. This, of course, was not a mere chance but is due to the social structure of the Gompers trade unions. The Communist International and the Profintern are the represen-

tatives of the interests of the **proletariat as a class**. The II. International and Amsterdam (although they have many millions good proletarians in their ranks) are, in the last resort, the representatives of the interests of the **European labour aristocracy**. The American Federation of Labour (although a good half of members are unskilled workers) represents, in its structure leadership and policy, the interests of the **American labour aristocracy, that is, of the aristocracy of the labour aristocracies in the world**. The European labour aristocracy obtains its privilege at the cost of the European proletariat and of the exploited peasant population of the colonies. The American labour aristocracy, however, owes its celebrated "American standard of living", not only to its participation in the intensified exploitation of the American unskilled workers and poor farmers, but also to its participation in the exploitation of the whole European working class by American finance capital.

The American Federation of Labour is the most cunning agency of the capitalists for dominating the organised working class of America. The whole organisation is based upon the principle of depriving the membership of all influence and handing over the same to a small clique of capitalist agents. The congresses of the American Federation of Labour are only congresses of the highest trade union officials, of the "fat guys" as the American workers call them. One cannot imagine a more bourgeois assembly than a congress of the "15 000 dollars a year labour leaders". At least 80% of the 30,000 votes of the congress are cast, at the most, by two dozen officials. The 5000 votes of the miners' union (that is a sixth of the congress) are represented at the highest by 8 officials of the union. **In no labour organisation in the world does there exist such an unlimited dictatorship of the leading section as in the American Federation of Labor**. And for 40 years the absolute tsar of this trade union apparatus was Samuel Gompers.

Gompers was a strange figure. He was an immigrant Jew but was nevertheless the most ardent representative of 100% American patriotism. Originally he was a cigar worker, but finally belonged to the mighty ones of American society. For years ago he was even a "socialist" and pacifist, but for the last decades he was the truest servant of American capital and of jingo-imperialism. He was a capable organiser and a cunning bargainer, but he was entirely devoid of any ideological training and during the whole forty years produced only five ideas, which he again and again repeated in every one of his articles and speeches and which were the main pillars of his whole policy during his forty years rule.

What were, in fact the ideas of Gompers, which ruled the American trade unions?

The first Gompersian idea is that of the **craft unions** **the labour aristocracy**. The skilled workers must be organised in order to obtain higher wages and shorter hours, but they must not be organised in industrial unions. The unskilled workers can of course also be organised, so far as this is absolutely necessary in order to preserve the position of the skilled workers but the labour aristocracy must in all circumstances retain the leadership in the trade unions.

The second Gompersian idea is **the workers shall not bother much about the government**, and the government and the legislature shall interfere as little as possible with industry and the workers.

The third Gompersian idea is: **The working class does not require any political Party independent of the capitalist Parties**. Politics kill trade unionism. The workers shall gain their influence by "non-party" methods. They shall make use of the democratic right to vote in order "to punish their enemies and reward their friends"—within the two old capitalist Parties.

No international connections for the American working class—this is the fourth Gompersian idea. The American workers have their special "American standard of living" (houses in each family, Ford motor cars, meat twice a day, coffee and cream and gramaphones) and every attempt at international solidarity would only endanger this American standard of living.

And the **fifth**, the most fundamental of the Gompersian ideas, demands the closest **co-operation with the capitalists**. One must of course fight against "bad" capitalists, but capitalism itself is of benefit to the workers, as it maintains the workers. If individual workers are no longer able to become capitalists, it is nevertheless possible for them to realise industrial democracy collectively, by their trade unions, by their labour banks, by wholesale purchases of shares of the great trusts.

It would of course be naive to believe that Gompers could have preached these ideas for forty years if the fundamental material conditions had not rendered it possible. The five Gompersian ideas were for forty years a true reflection of the actual

of affairs in America. Today they stand in sharp contradiction to the actual state of affairs in America and are therefore condemned to death.

The **isolated craft unions** were sufficiently strong weapons in the hands of the workers during the time of small industry, of the preponderance of skilled workers and of single capitalists in the epoch of the machine, of the finest division of labour and of the Taylor system, they must be united in industrial unions. The small undertakings have become great factories, the great factories have become huge industrial concerns, in place of the individual capitalist, there has for long been the Trust. But Gompers only took the small step from isolated craft unions to the federation, and was unable to take the big step from the federation to the industrial union.

The slogan, "**stand clear of the government and of the legislature**", was adapted to a period when the United States of America had no real **centralised government**, no state bureaucracy in the European sense of the word, when the state administration **refrained**, on principle, from interfering in economic affairs. In the last decades, however, the central government in the United States has acquired enormous powers. It regulates the whole economic life and interferes in every conflict between labour and Capital. (The number of civil service employees amounted in the year 1884 to only 13,780, while in the year 1918 they numbered no less than 917,760.)

The tactics of the "**non-Party**" policy could only be maintained in a period when class antagonisms were as yet undeveloped. The two old capitalist Parties of America, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, were created at a time when class conflicts, and even **class distinctions, were in an embryonic state**. The capitalists, farmers and workers could therefore be united in one Party. The enormous accumulation and concentration of capital in the last decades in America, the ever-growing power of big industry, of the banks and the railways, has annihilated the petty-bourgeoisie, ruined the farmers and has more and more crystallised the industrial workers into a special class. Against the non-Party policy of Gompers the idea of an independent class Party of the working class is coming more boldly to the front.

The world war has irrevocably bound up the United States with European affairs. Gompers' idea, which was directed against any international connection of the American working class, was ruthlessly annihilated by the new development. The lowering of the standard of living of the European working class has had its counter-effects in America. The present crisis is bringing with a tremendous worsening of the conditions of labour and depression of wages for millions of American workers.

Gompers' idea of a fraternisation of the workers with the capitalists arose at a time when every American worker still carried a field marshall's baton in his knapsack. Today this idea is shattered by the offensive of the capitalists against the trade unions themselves.