

Samuel Gompers

Karl Kautsky

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Gompers, the president of the great American working-class organisation, the American Federation of Labor, has come to Europe in order, he said, to study the labour conditions of Europe and pave the way for a closer relationship between the American and the European trade unions.

In both endeavours he can count on the full co-operation of all proletarian organisations. Social Democracy has always supported anyone who wanted to study labour conditions, even if he came from the enemy camp. All the more so the president of an organisation such as the American Federation of Labor. And since we attach a great importance to a closer association of such a powerful proletarian organisation, which also includes many thousands of party comrades, with the European organisations of the proletarian class struggle, we must take all the necessary steps for achieving this purpose, and grant to the representative of that organisation such assistance as would help the organisation itself, without criticising his personality.

We do not know if and when Gompers has been active in fulfilling the two tasks that he set himself in his visit to Europe. But it is sure that in addition he has been active in yet another way. He toured Europe in order to let himself be fêted in public assemblies and carry out propaganda for the special type of trade-union activity that he

champions. But, as soon as he trod into that field, he placed himself in a position where he must submit to public criticism. The duties of international solidarity do not in any way force us to agree uncritically with any foreign propagandist because he comes from abroad. Precisely because it is often the case of people and circumstances with which one is not closely acquainted, it is necessary to regard them especially closely before supporting them. And applauding means supporting.

At the meeting that Gompers held in Berlin on 31 July 1909, in order to speak about the trade-union movement, he strangely enough prevented the comrades that attended it from learning in more detail with whom they were dealing, and refused to answer the question regarding his position towards Social Democracy as 'improper' and 'personal'! Mr. Gompers must therefore allow other people to answer that question for him. I regret that my momentary absence from Berlin prevented me from doing that even earlier.

It was already pointed out at the meeting in the trade-union local that Gompers is an enemy of American Social Democracy. Of course, Legien objected that Gompers is a true revolutionary, who wants to unite the proletarian masses, and that if he seeks to do it in a way different from ours, we have no right to judge him, because that concerns

only the American workers. If comrade Legien received that information from Gompers, he was badly misled, because nothing can be more mistaken than that assertion.

Gompers is not only an opponent of the special form that the socialist movement has assumed in America, but *an enemy of the proletarian class struggle in general*. In order to learn what his views are, one must not only know what he told to his *European* friends, but also what he said to his *American* audience.

It is enough to listen, for instance, to his declarations at the farewell party that was held the day before his departure to Europe. That party itself was characteristic. Next to representatives of the labour organisations there were large numbers of representatives of capitalism and its henchmen, among them the public prosecutor of New York. Before these people Gompers declared that he travelled to Europe in order to study and to see ‘if the methods so much praised over there are really the correct ones’.¹

But, he added, he already knew that those methods are false.

‘I must already now say’, he continued raising his voice, ‘that the way in which labor politics is practised in Europe is *completely unsatisfactory*. I would like to give you an example. Shortly after the congress of our Federation, I got in touch with the different labor organizations *and governments* of the European countries, and asked them to give me the opportunity to orient myself about their conditions by arranging a meeting of representatives of all the tendencies of the labor movement

and the government. Shortly after that I received from Budapest, the capital of Hungary, two letters from representatives of the workers and of the government, who both declared, almost in the same words, that the relations of the workers’ organizations with the government were not such as would make possible a common deliberation or joint work. *And this seems to me to be the essential reason why the living standards here are so much better than in Europe.*

We in America could always deliberate together (representatives of the workers and of the government) and even this evening we have seen a living example of that. Nobody here is more sincerely welcome by the organized workers than the public prosecutor of New York.

And so it must be. We often disagree, but even without having agreed we always know each other better and afterwards we understand each other better. Why shouldn’t we do that? Don’t we all share the same fatherland? *Don’t we all have the same interests*, the same common wish to make our people happier, freer and more prosperous?

I don’t know what I’ll see over there. But this much I can say: I know that *nothing will persuade me* that the fighting disposition of the workers against the government and conversely of the government against the workers can do any good to either side.

1. [Unfortunately Kautsky did not give the source of the farewell party speeches, so the quotations have been retranslated from the German.]

My message to the European brothers will be *a message of love, harmony and mutual trust* between us and our compatriots.

Here we have the politician Gompers. He overflows with trust for the capitalist compatriots, with the conviction that they want the best for the people because they have the same interests as the proletarians. Political antagonisms are not a product of class contradictions, but of foolishness. If the German workers and bourgeois were as smart as Mr. Gompers, there would be no class struggles in Germany.

Yet one cannot say that this blind confidence follows from the fact that in America the government and the capitalists are especially friendly towards the workers. There is hardly a more unscrupulous and vulgar capitalist class than the American one, and there is hardly a country in which the capitalist class has a more absolute control of the instrument of powers, in which the laws are more shamelessly manipulated (and, when profitable, violated) for the benefit of the capitalists and to the detriment of the workers, than the United States. Nevertheless Gompers is full of trust.

But his harmony mawkishness is not merely an occasional figure of speech to win the approval of the bourgeoisie; it has become the content of his political work. Thanks to it he has been able to become *first vice-president* of the [National] Civic Federation, a capitalist foundation of the last years, which was called forth by the appearance of American socialism, and that

set itself the task of bringing about collaboration between workers and bourgeois. In actual fact it is an organisation of struggle against socialism and the proletarian class struggle, which, thanks to the ample financial means at its disposal, is able to conduct an energetic propaganda. The Civic Federation is in reality more and more the equivalent for the United States of the German Reichsverband [Imperial League against the Social Democracy]. And it is the vice president of this American Reichsverband that was brought forward to the workers of Berlin on 31 July 1909, as a true revolutionary deserving their warmest sympathy.

How he won that sympathy is characteristic of Mr. Gompers. In his farewell address he had promised, as we have seen, that he would preach to the workers of Europe the same gospel of harmony and trust between capitalists and workers that he peddles in America.

His friends expressed themselves even more forcefully. One of them, J. Cantor, anticipated in the farewell party that 'it will be *easy* for Gompers, because he comes to Europe almost as ambassador of the American workers, *to revolutionize the labor movement of the old world according to his rational principles* and show them over there how far a more sensible leadership could bring them'.

But Gompers has already learned that in Europe he would make a fool of himself with his gospel of harmony and trust, and so he keeps it carefully to himself. When comrade Dittmer's² question gave him the

2. [Emil Dittmer (1873–1960), a printer by trade, was a correspondent to the *Vorwärts* and the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. In 1904 he became a member of the *Berliner Gewerkschaftskommission* and in 1906 the editor of the periodical *Gewerkschaft* (Trade Union). He also contributed to *Die Neue Zeit* and *Der Kampf*, the theoretical organs of the German and Austrian Social-Democratic parties respectively, and taught at the central party school in Berlin. From 1914 to 1933 Dittmer served in the press commission of the *Vorwärts*, where during the First World War he represented the social-patriotic view of the majority of the *Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften*.]

opportunity of developing his 'rational principles' according to which he was 'easily' able 'to revolutionise the labour movement of the old world', he by no means seized it eagerly to make propaganda for his convictions, but felt insulted by this intromission in his private affairs. Gompers plays his double role as president of the American Federation of Labor and vice-president of the Civic Federation only in America. In Europe he appears exclusively in the role of president of the union federation. He forgot his role as vice-president of the Reichsverband during the crossing.

Mr. Gompers works as socialist-eater only in stages where his clique is a sure one. Caution is the better part of valour.

But why did the vice-president of the American Reichsverband take the trouble of going to the camp of Social Democracy in order to win its approval?

He would not have done that if he had not needed it.

Mr. Gompers is well on the way of ruining himself in America. His failures have been of late too great. But he did not tell that to his audience in Berlin. Those failures are also purely 'private affairs'.

He praises his 'labor policy' as if it were to be thanked for the fact that the standard of living in America is higher than in Europe. That is ridiculous humbug. The higher standard of living of the American workers has not been *won* during the last decades but *inherited* from their forefathers. It was above all a consequence of the availability of unappropriated lands, from which everyone who wanted to become independent received as much as he needed. They are primarily to be thanked for the fact that in America living standards in general, and those of the wage workers in particular, were far higher than in Europe.

But this superiority, on which Mr. Gompers prides himself so much, is *rapidly disappearing*.

That is clearly testified to by the complete drying up of the German emigration to America. A few decades ago, a German worker still improved his situation considerably by emigrating to the United States; for that reason many went there to try their luck. Today the superiority of American living standards has become so minimal, that emigration does not pay anymore.

The German worker has, in general, *raised* his standard of living during the last decades, while that of the American worker has *declined*. According to the often-mentioned 1896 statistics, the buying power of the American wages stood 4.2 per cent above the average for the decade 1890–99. In 1905 it was only 1.5 per cent above that average, and even that percentage must surely have been lost as a consequence of the crisis.

Precisely during the decade in which the American labour movement was dominated by Mr. Gompers, the upward movement of the American working class reached a standstill.

We know very well that that depended on factors for which Gompers is not accountable. The exhaustion of the reserve of free lands, the influx of masses of workers with lower living standards, the appearance of large-scale industrial enterprises in the South, and, last but not least, the strengthening of the capitalist associations have brought about this result.

But, at all events, it proves that Gompers has no real reason to boast about the superiority of American over European working conditions and to present them before the European workers as the fruits of his policy of harmony and trust.

Mr. Gompers has not created the degrading tendencies of capitalism nowadays so strongly at work in America, but he has done everything possible to pave their way, because his policy of class collaboration condemned the proletariat to complete political impotence.

The proletariat can only acquire political power by uniting in a special political class organisation. Gompers and his men have exerted all their influence to make such organisation impossible. The proletarians must not build a special labour party, but sell their votes to the highest bidder among the bourgeois candidates. Only they should not do that in the vulgar sense of selling their votes for *money*. They should give them to those bourgeois candidates who make them more *promises*.

A more ridiculous as well as corrupting and politically demoralising policy for the proletariat is hardly imaginable. Thanks to it there is no democratic industrial land in which the worker is treated with more contempt by the government, and especially by the courts, than America. From year to year, the liberty of action of the American proletariat, which was originally so significant, grows more confined. Never before was that liberty of action as small as it is today. The *boycott* has been stamped as a crime. When the capitalists wish it, the *strike* can also be made judicially illusory by a decision of the federal courts. In practice, it was already so even before, because of the injunctions.

The *legislation for the protection of the workers* is backward and does not make the slightest progress. When some regulation for the benefit of the workers is passed by a legislative assembly on demagogic grounds, the capitalists do not have to fear that it will hurt them, because the courts declare any interference with property rights anti-constitutional, and are therefore able to wreck any labour law – a task to which they apply themselves most diligently. Recently, the Ohio court nullified a law that forbade *nocturnal child labor* in the factories. A decision of the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a federal law which made the railroad companies liable for the accidents suffered by their employees at work. In the South of the

United States there is still full freedom of exploitation of women and children, and its factories to this day repeat en masse all the infamous and horrible practices of the factory hells of Lancashire in the 1830s and 1840s, that were then stigmatised even by conservative politicians, but which, in the twentieth century, deploy unhindered their murderous drives in the great republic, which is so proud of its working conditions.

A *bourgeois* philanthropic organ, *Charities* of New York, published at the beginning of this year an investigation of the working conditions in Pittsburg, the ‘most flourishing’ community in the world, and summed up its results in the following points:

1. An incredible *overwork* of all the workers, which reached its peak in the *twelve-hour shift, seven days a week* of the steelworks and the rails factories.
2. *Low wages* for the vast majority of the workers in the factories, not lower than in other cities, but low in relation to the prices; so low that they are not sufficient for the maintenance of the normal American living standards; wages calculated for unmarried individuals, not for family heads.
3. *Even lower wages for women*, which for instance in the metal industry, where the percentage of female workers is menacing enough, received only *half* as much as the unorganised workers in the same enterprises and only *a third* of the wages of the organised workers.

Finally, the report mentions among the beauties of Pittsburgh the *typhus* and an enormous number of *accidents* that cost thousands of lives every year.

And, in addition to all that, the most vicious judicial assassinations as soon as it is a question of putting troublesome proletarians out of the way, such as

Moyer and Haywood,³ that have sure enough committed the crime of placing less trust in the government than Mr. Samuel Gompers.

The German trade unionists are not unaware of all this. The irony of fate wanted that only recently a German trade-union organ hold these facts precisely against me. In my book *The Road to Power*, I referred to the decline of American wages and remarked:

No working class enjoys greater liberties than the American. None is so 'practical' in its politics, freer

from all revolutionary theories that might distract its attention from the detail work of improving its condition.⁴

The *Grundstein* remarked on this:

What kind of liberties do the American trade unions have then? They have free suffrage, the right of assembly and association, the freedom to hold demonstrations, and moreover the 'freedom' of injunctions. The practice of the courts, corrupted by trust money,

3. [Charles Moyer (1866–1929) was the president of Western Federation of Miners (WFM) from 1902 to 1926. William Dudley 'Big Bill' Haywood (1869–1928) was a leader of the Western Federation of Miners and later a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). A long-time leader of the Socialist Party of America, in January 1913 Haywood was recalled from its National Executive Committee for purportedly advocating violence. Convicted of violating the Espionage and Sedition Acts during the First World War, Haywood escaped to the Soviet Union where he became an outspoken advocate of communism until his death in 1928.

In 1905, Haywood and Moyer were charged with taking part in the murder of Frank R. Steunenberg, the former governor of Idaho. Steunenberg was much hated by the trade-union movement for having used federal troops to help break strikes during his period of office. Over a thousand trade unionists and their supporters were rounded up and kept in stockades without trial. James McParland, from the Pinkerton Detective Agency, was hired to investigate the murder. McParland arrested Harry Orchard, a stranger who had been staying at a local hotel where dynamite was found. McParland helped Orchard write a confession where he stated that he had been a contract killer for the WFM, assuring him this would help him get a reduced sentence for the crime. In his statement, Orchard named Haywood and Charles Moyer. He also claimed that a union member from Caldwell, George Pettibone, had also been involved in the plot. These three men were kidnapped in Denver by Pinkerton Detective Agency operatives with the connivance of the governors of both Colorado and Idaho, smuggled back to Idaho for trial, and charged with the murder of Steunenberg. On 3 December 1906 the Supreme Court of the United States, with one dissent, ruled that the union leaders' arrest and forcible removal from Colorado violated no constitutional rights of the defendants. Charles Darrow, a lawyer who specialized in defending unionists, was employed to defend Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone. The trial took place in Boise, Idaho's capital. It emerged that Harry Orchard already had a motive for killing Steunenberg, blaming the governor of Idaho for destroying his chances of making a fortune from a business he had started in the mining industry. On 29 July 1907, the jury acquitted Haywood. In January 1908 Moyer was also declared not guilty in and the charges against Pettibone were withdrawn.]

4. [Kautsky, *The Road to Power*, Chapter VIII, available at: <<http://www.marx.org/archive/kautsky/1909/power/ch08.htm>>]

to put down the union activities with injunctions is surely known all over the world. – So much for the ‘realistic’ policy [*Realpolitik*] of the American workers. They insist in renouncing to their own political representation. Since when has that been called a realistic policy? That is certainly not a revolutionary, but a *servile ideology*.⁵

The realistic policy of Mr. Gompers is also an ideology; indeed not a revolutionary one, but a *servile ideology*. Thus writes, not the evil *Vorwärts*, but a quite ‘rational’ trade-union organ. It meant by that to play its trump card against me, but I agree with its argument completely. However, what became now of Legien’s ‘true revolutionary’?

The American workers themselves, despite their bad political schooling, begin to open their eyes to Gompers’s *servile ideology*, and are beginning to become ripe for socialism. Gompers, whom Legien praises so much because he united the workers, did not recoil, in order to retain his power, from *splitting* the American

labour movement. So, for instance, in 1907 he let the 40,000-strong Western Federation of Miners be expelled from the American Federation of Labor, because it was too ‘soaked’ with socialist elements.

But such things alone were not enough to master the growing rebellion. Gompers had to achieve a great political success, and so he decided to use all the political power of the American Federation of Labor to strike a big blow at the presidential elections of 1908.

He drew up a programme of four points and turned with it to the two great bourgeois parties, the *Republicans*, the party of the great capitalists, and the *Democrats*, the party of the small capitalists and of all possible social quacks, led by the charlatan Bryan.⁶ Without in any way having been authorised by his organisation to do so, he promised its support to the party that would accept his four points.

Those four demands were the ‘regulation’ of judicial injunctions, that made any strike impossible; a law that would expressly define the trade unions as organisations, in order for them not to fall under the anti-trust law definition of a ‘conspiracy to restrict trade’;⁷ further expansion of the

5. *Grundstein*, 5 June 1909. [Note by Kautsky.]

6. [William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) was three times presidential candidate for the Democratic Party. During these presidential campaigns he sponsored a series of reforms such as ‘free silver’ (bimetallism) as against the gold standard in 1896, anti-imperialism in 1900 (though he supported the Treaty of Paris by which the United States bought from Spain its former colonial possessions of Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines), and anti-trust policies in 1908. After Woodrow Wilson’s victory in 1912 Bryan became Secretary of State. In that role, he supported American military intervention in the civil war in Mexico in 1914. A year later, he resigned to protest against what he regarded as Wilson’s pro-war policies, but in 1916 he campaigned energetically for Wilson’s re-election. A fundamentalist Christian, Bryan was a strong supporter of Prohibition in the 1920s, as well as an outspoken critic of the theory of evolution during the Scopes Trial in 1925.]

7. [The appearance of monopolies led to the passage of the 1890 Sherman Anti-Trust Act – named after Ohio Senator John Sherman – empowering the federal government to institute proceedings against trusts threatening to restrain interstate and foreign trade. In October 1895 the US Supreme Court upheld the use of federal troops and injunctions to maintain the flow of

eight-hour day, which already since 1868 has been compulsory for [federal] public employees, to private enterprises working for the government (by no means the eight-hour day as the normal workday for all the workers); and finally a federal employers' liability act.

One cannot be more moderate; not even a law securing the right to organise boycotts, which are always forbidden by the courts, was demanded. The four demands themselves prove how wretched the situation of the American workers has become, for all the political freedom. The court have even dared in practice to declare trade-union organisation illegal; so for instance in Ohio the glass workers' union was declared a 'trust' and ordered to break it up!

But despite all the moderation, and the enormous power of two million votes which the American Federation of Labor commands, Gompers had no luck. The Republicans dared to reject him with contempt. Bryan was more clever and polite; he expressed his sympathy for Gompers's demands, without expressly committing himself to fulfill them. That was enough for Gompers to set to work for Bryan with ardent zeal, to commit himself and the American Federation of Labor, in complete disregard of any 'neutrality', to

support Bryan's candidacy, and to fight against the socialist candidate Debs⁸ using all kinds of lies and slanders, as befits a vice-president of the Reichsverband.

Election day came, and showed that the 'result' of all this 'positive work' was a crushing defeat. The electoral support of the American Federation of Labor had failed completely; it had been torn asunder politically during the electoral campaign, instead of joining its votes to Bryan's.

It turned out that the benefit of the endorsement of Bryan's candidacy by the leader of the American Federation of Labor was null, that the workers whistled at Gompers's electoral speeches, that the American Federation of Labor does not represent a factor of the slightest importance in the elections, despite its two million members.

The workers can only exert political power in their own party. Only through it their action receives consistency and force. The 'tail-ending' policy [*Schwanzpolitik*], as people call the policy of supporting bourgeois candidates over there, engenders in the ranks of the workers political indolence, dullness and confusion; their votes scatter themselves, cancel each other out, and cease to have any effect.

So great and so evident was the disgrace caused by Gompers's tactic [of 'rewarding

mails and interstate commerce in the Pullman strike of 1894, thus sanctioning the use of the Anti-Trust Act as a strike-breaking device.]

8. [Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926), a fireman by trade, was a founding member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and, in 1893, one of the founders and the first president of the American Railway Union (ARU), one of the first industrial unions in the United States. In 1894, he was jailed for his role in a strike against the Chicago Pullman Palace Car Company. While in jail, future Socialist Congressman Victor Berger introduced him to socialism. After his release from prison Debs helped launch the Social-Democratic Party, which in 1901 became the Socialist Party of America. He ran as presidential candidate on the Socialist ticket in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920, when he received 913,664 votes while serving a prison sentence for his opposition to World War I. Debs was released on 25 December 1921 and died five years later at the age of 70.]

friends and punishing enemies'] in the presidential elections of last year that it seriously affected his position.

That would have come immediately to light if he had not had the luck of becoming a 'martyr' precisely at that time.

He was not just the vice-president of the Civic Federation but also, though progressively less so, the president of the American Federation of Labor, and, as such, he came into conflict with the courts, despite all the harmony.

After the elections, in December 1908, the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia condemned him to a year of prison, because in the periodical *American Federationist*, issued by the American Federation of Labor, had appeared a boycott note! Yet another indication of the practical results of Gompers's 'trust'.⁹

The immediate effect of the sentence was to silence all criticism of Gompers in the ranks of the fighting proletariat. Even the socialists, whom he has just attacked so sharply, declared their support for him in his conflict with the courts.

But this martyr halo could not last long, the more so since the courts opportunely remembered how useful Gompers's 'trust' is for the ruling classes. The Court of Appeals declared in March [1909] that the boycott

is indeed illegal, but not the note. It declared Gompers free. It is improbable that the Supreme Court will overturn that sentence. Gompers will not be locked up and will not become a martyr. What then?

It was high time to bolster up his reputation, and so Gompers recalled his international duties, which up to now had worried him very little.

He speculated about the strong internationalist feeling of the European proletarians and their scarce acquaintance with American matters. If he abandoned his role as vice-president of the Reichsverband in America and came just as president of the powerful union federation, he would be welcomed with general enthusiasm. This enthusiasm, which was intended for the class organisations of the American proletariat, he can counterfeit after his return to America into an exultant support for his own policy. What was meant as moral support for the proletarian class struggle he will be able to exploit as moral support for the crippling of the class struggle through the idea of harmony of interests between capital and labour. What was said to stimulate the emancipation struggle will help to discredit the American Social Democrats, by allowing Gompers to point out that they are isolated in the world, that

9. [On 22 March 1907, the AFL Executive Council voted to place the Bucks Stove and Range Co. on its 'We Don't Patronise' list. The background to this decision was a strike organised by the International Brotherhood of Foundry Employees after the company attempted to increase the working hours of its employees. The president of Bucks Stove and Range Co. was J.W. Van Cleave, who was also the president of the National Association of Manufacturers and a notorious enemy of organised labour. After the boycott note was published in the *American Federationist*, the company secured from Judge Gould of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia an injunction against the boycott, which also prohibited all officers and members of the AFL to make any public reference to it. The AFL removed the Bucks Stove and Range Co. from its 'We Don't Patronise' list, but the effects of the injunction were discussed in the pages of the *American Federationist* and in speeches by AFL officers. On the ground of these publications and statements, shortly after the general elections of 1908 Gompers, John Mitchell, and Frank Morrison, President, Vice-President and Secretary respectively of the AFL, were sentenced by Judge Wright to jail terms ranging from one year to six months.]

the Social Democrats of other countries celebrated him and his policy, without a voice of protest, thus disavowing American Social Democracy.

In short, Gompers duped the European workers in order to keep up the appearances that he needs in order to continue duping the American workers.

Should Gompers experience once again the need to present himself to the German workers, now the comrades know where they stand.

I do not advise, as I said, to treat Gompers impolitely. If he really wants to study, he should be given every opportunity to do so. If he wants to establish organisational relations between the American and European unions, he should be dealt with as representative of an allied power, without worrying about his personality.

But if he wants to carry out propaganda and 'enlightenment' work for his method, the comrades should listen to him quietly, but not keep silent if someone wants to know the details about the American Reichsverband and its vice-president.

If Mr. Gompers really wants 'to revolutionise the labour movement of the old world according to his rational principles', he must do it publicly.

But the comrades must always remember, when dealing with him, that every hand they lift to applaud Gompers will be used as a slap in the face of our American sister party, which has no more dangerous and poisonous enemy than Samuel Gompers.

Translated by Daniel Gaido