

## **Gompers and Capitalism** **(January 23, 1909)**

Whichever way he turns President Gompers of the American Federation of Labor finds himself face to face with difficulties which are the outgrowth of his own reactionary policy. In the recent campaign he used such influence as he had with his followers in support of the capitalist system and within a few weeks after the election he and his colleagues were sentenced to jail by one of the capitalist courts to which he had given his support at the polls. His conviction, outrageous though it be, is entirely consistent with his political attitude and the fact is self-evident that he got what he worked and voted for.

It is significant that his friend, William J. Bryan, was discreetly silent when he was sentenced, making the politician's excuse that it was not his custom to criticize the courts. It remained for the Socialists, whom Gompers had repeatedly charged with being the enemies of organized labor, to denounce the courts and pledge him their loyal support in defeating the outrageous decision which sent him to jail.

In his annual report to the recent Denver convention Mr. Gompers said, in discussing the courts:

I can see no remedy for these outrageous proceedings, unless there shall be a quickening of the conscience of our judges or the relief which the Congress of our country can and should afford.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Gompers appears very naive here, childlike and bland. He hopes there will be a "quickenning of the conscience of our judges or the relief which the Congress of our country can and should afford." He hopes in vain. Judges are placed where they are not because they have consciences to move them but because they are known to be trustworthy servants of the ruling class. If Mr. Gompers does not know this he has learned but little in his many years of service in organized labor, and if nothing short of a jail sentence will teach him this simple lesson even this will prove to be a blessing.

The leading Democratic politicians with whom Mr. Gompers consorted during the campaign are all silent. The Socialists he traduced by

charging that their "Red Special" had been financed by the Republican Party are all active in his behalf. They realize that a principle is involved of fundamental interest to organized labor and under this test his Democratic political associates turn their backs upon him while the despised Socialists rally as one to his support.

It seems strange that Mr. Gompers has not yet learned that we live under a capitalist government; that we are engaged in a class struggle and that the interests of labor and capital are not identical. For many years Mr. Gompers has been meekly begging Congress for an anti-injunction law and an eight-hour law which, if enacted, would be of questionable value to labor. But even this handout has been denied him and he has been turned away with contempt session after session until one would conclude that even he must be satisfied that labor will get nothing from a capitalist Congress until it develops and asserts its own political power as proposed by the Socialists alone. But the papers announce that Mr. Gompers is to go before Congress again to renew his plea, which suggests that up to this time his jail sentence has had no appreciable effect in opening his eyes to what he is actually up against.

The increasing vexations and contradictions in which Mr. Gompers finds himself enmeshed are the fruit of his own economic unwisdom and inconsistency. He believes in the brotherhood of capital and labor and this is the starting point of his troubles. He has dined with Carnegie, Belmont, and other labor exploiters and union wreckers so often that he feels a sense of kinship with them, but labor and capital are deadly enemies just the same, and the class struggle is a fact which will assert itself in spite of all the Civic Federation banquets and other machinations and sophistications designed to conceal it.

The lesson to be learned by the rank and file is that the working class must develop its economic and political power along uncompromising class lines. They must unite within one great industrial organization of class-conscious workers and the same workers must act together in the Socialist Party on the political field and then they will secure material relief, and in time industrial emancipation.

Had the trade unionists under the lead of Gompers and his colleagues, instead of being divided between the Republican and Democratic parties, joined with the Socialists and polled two million clearcut working class votes, the decision of Judge Wright would never have been rendered, Gompers would not have been sentenced, and Congress would have

responded with alacrity to the demand for anti-injunction and eight-hour laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Gompers made this statement to the Denver convention of the American Federation of Labor his opening address on November 9, 1908. The words here are out of context. In his speech Gompers advocated a novel strategy, that rather than bankrupting itself on legal fees, the organized labor movement should provoke a legislative denouement by having its indicted leaders make personal appeal to the mercy of the court. Gompers declared: "If it is the intention of those who are hostile to the interests of the toilers of our country to take advantage of the trend of court decisions for the usurpation of the toiler's rights by the injunctions, let them proceed as they will without our assuming to do the impossible; that is, to be represented by competent legal counsel. If the situation is to become so acute, let us personally, as best we can, defend our rights before the courts, taking whatever consequences may ensue. For one, I can see no remedy for these outrageous proceedings, unless there shall be a quickening of the conscience of our judges or the relief which the Congress of our country can and should afford." (See: "President Gompers's Report," *Report of Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor, Held at Denver, Colorado, November 9 to 21 Inclusive, 1908*. [Washington, DC: National Tribune Co., 1908], pg. 27.) Whether this radical and risky idea of Gompers, expressed to the delegates as a personal view rather than formal policy recommendation, was serious or rhetorical remains questionable.