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# Should a Political Labor Party Be Formed?



AN ADDRESS BY

**SAMUEL GOMPERS**

President of the American Federation of Labor

**TO A LABOR CONFERENCE**

Held at New York City, December 9, 1918

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Secretary

**SAMUEL GOMPERS**  
President





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# Should a Political Labor Party Be Formed?



## AN ADDRESS

By SAMUEL GOMPERS, President A. F. of L.



The following address by President Gompers was fully considered by the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor and unanimously endorsed. The address expresses the judgment of the Executive Council to protect and to promote the best interests of the workers and of the labor movement of America. It conforms to the letter and spirit of the provisions of the constitution of the American Federation of Labor, Article III, Section 8:

**“Party politics, whether they be Democratic, Republican, Socialistic, Populistic, Prohibition, or any other, shall have no place in the Conventions of the American Federation of Labor.”**

While local and central bodies and state federations may enter into the political field, either independently or otherwise, it is not within their province to form or become part of a national political party.—*Adopted by the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. at its meeting held in New York City on December 28, 1918.*

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*The St. Paul Convention of the American Federation of Labor authorized the creation of two committees—one upon Reconstruction, the other upon Social Insurance. These two committees were called together to organize and to proceed with their work of investigation.*

*A number of labor men of New York and elsewhere had written to President Gompers asking for an expression of opinion upon the proposed formation of a new political labor party at this time. Desirous of complying with that request in the most comprehensive manner, he invited the above committees to meet in New York. He also invited a number of labor men and women in and around New York to meet him in joint session at the Continental Hotel, New York City, Monday, December 9, 1918. As the list of names printed on the last pages of this pamphlet will show, there was quite a representative gathering.*

*In his address President Gompers briefly referred to some features of and made some suggestions in connection with the principles of reconstruction and also of social insurance. These were printed in the January, 1919, issue of the American Federationist but are omitted here so that the one subject, that of the creation of a new National Political Labor Party may be considered by itself. The address of President Gompers follows.*

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## PRESIDENT GOMPERS' ADDRESS.

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And now, a consideration of the subject I have in mind and for which I have asked the gentlemen of the committees and the ladies and gentlemen of labor to participate in this conference.

In the last few weeks there have been published certain situations which exist and certain movements which were about to be inaugurated. In a few of the cities that situation and that movement have become accentuated. In Chicago, New York City, and two or three other places the labor movement has expressed itself through the central bodies in favor of the formation of a political labor party.

No man has the right to look upon such a move lightly, or without deep consideration or deep concern. Either the proposed movement about to be inaugurated for the establishment of a political labor party is good, or it is bad. Either it is advantageous or it is injurious, and the purpose of my asking that we meet this afternoon is to present to you some facts upon that subject.

You who were in the movement of long ago will remember that to which I refer. We had in the United States a fairly growing labor movement of some trade unionists in some form of a federation called the National Labor Union. That organization went along, inspired good spirit and activity among the workers, and then called a national convention for the purpose of nominating a president of the United States. That convention met and nominated Justice David Davis, a judge of the Supreme Court of the United States, as its candidate for president, and after nominating Mr. Davis adjourned and never met again. The trade unions then in existence fell off in membership until the organizations became very weak and ineffective. Some organizations fell by the wayside. Labor was in a most deplorable condition, without opportunity for defense and robbed entirely of any power to press forward its rightful claims.

In 1885-1886, after a few years of precarious early ex-

istence, the American Federation of Labor tried to build up and extend its influence and organize the workers into their unions.

In 1884 the American Federation of Labor declared for the introduction of the eight-hour workday, May 1, 1886. It proposed negotiations with the employers to the accomplishment of that high purpose. The movement gained great impetus and large advantages followed, but on May 2 or 3, 1886, a bomb was thrown at a meeting which was being held at Haymarket Square, Chicago, which killed and maimed more than twenty policemen. The meeting was supposed to have been held in the interest of the eight-hour movement. The wrath of the people which was aroused against those in charge of the Haymarket meeting gave the eight-hour day a severe blow and set-back. However, the eight-hour day was secured for the workers in several industries and a reduction in the hours of labor from 16 to 12 or from 12 to 10 became almost universal in the United States. But the eight-hour movement as such was destroyed for the time being.

Due in part to that incident and to the resentment of the workers because they had lost so much that they could have obtained and due to certain local conditions, political rather than economic, in various cities the local movement undertook political campaigns and organized a political party in Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Boston and New York. This resulted in the organized labor movement of New York City launching into a campaign which nominated Henry George as Mayor of the city. It was my privilege to enter into that campaign with the men (there are a few of them in this room now) who were active at the time. I aided to the very best of my ability. Henry George received 68,000 votes and came very near election. Some claim that he was really elected, but that in the last hours many of the supporters of Theodore Roosevelt who was the mayoralty candidate of the Republican party abandoned him and cast their votes for Abraham S. Hewitt who was the democratic candidate for Mayor.

After the campaign closed and the election was held, the movement took on another phase. It was called the

Progressive Labor Party. They admitted to membership not only the men of organized labor but what had popularly been called by a great many the "brain with brawn" or "brain with labor." The campaign was carried on with such scandalous results, that nearly all the men of labor who had some self-respect had to hold themselves in the background for fear that they might be besmirched with the incidents which occurred in the campaign.

A man, an extremely rich man, in business in the city of New York at the time, was induced to become the candidate for Mayor as the representative of labor. I think it was Mr. Coogan, a man engaged in the furniture business. Mr. Coogan had, I was informed, wonderful experience in financial transactions of which he was not entirely and fully aware until it was all over. By the way, there was a popular phrase which came into effect right at that time, "Wass ist loos mit Coogan." (What is the matter with Coogan.)

I mention these things of our own country, and now I want to mention a few things of other countries of which I have been a personal, intimate, and close observer.

In Germany, the trade union movement having been dissolved by Bismark and the organizations of labor not having the right to exist, went to its death for the time. Then when there was a slight moderation of that order, the trade union movement of that country was organized from the top down. There were executive officers who imposed their will upon the rank and file. There was no democracy of administration, of construction, or of the right of the membership to determine policies. Benefits were paid by the officers of the general organization. These officers had the power to determine whether the workers were entitled to the insurance and other benefits. It was a matter of power vested in the executives. You can imagine how necessary it was for the rank and file to endeavor to curry favor with the executives in order that they might not be discriminated against unfairly.

In 1905 I was in Hamburg and Bremen, in consultation with the officers of the general labor movement of Germany. Among whom were Legien and Von Elm. They were not

permitted to hold public meetings dealing with any subject affecting labor or the government. Before I reached there Mr. Von Elm, with whom I had been in correspondence because he belonged to the Cigarmakers' International Union here, of which I am a member, invited me to deliver an address in German in a public meeting before five or ten thousand persons, but it was necessary for me to address them in German because an address in any other language but German would not be permitted. I could speak and read German but I did not feel competent to deliver an address in the German language before a gathering of five or ten thousand people. I was afraid of my own weakness and that possibly by reason of grammatical errors some might say: "Well, if he can not speak he ought not to try to speak to us," and thereby discount anything I might say. Therefore, I declined it. They agreed, however, to call a social gathering. Invitations were sent out to 132 people to attend. The full number responded. I spoke to them in the German language, but the meeting was secret. The unions were struggling for the right to meet as unions and to have the guarantee of the law for their legal right to maintain their organizations and to hold such meetings; in other words, the right of free association. I had the assurance of Von Elm, Legien and others that the Socialist political party of Germany denied the demand made by the trade unions to work to secure from the government a law guaranteeing the workers the right to organize as a free association of workers. The Socialist political party of Germany, which is the only political party claiming to be the workmen's party, denied the union labor movement of Germany the right to take political action in order to secure the lawful right for its existence.

The French organized labor movement is not extensive. Some of the most completely organized unions are wholly out of touch with the Confederation Générale du Travail, that is, the French Federation of Labor, because they want to exercise their individual right of trade unionism and trade union action. To the Inter-Allied Labor Conference in London in September, there came a delegation from France of three or four men representing the French Federation of



Labor and then a delegation of about seven, eight or ten representing the majority Socialist party of France and about that same number representing the minority Socialist party. The vote of the delegation was divided between the majority and minority Socialist party and the French Federation of Labor. The political party dominates the trade union movement of France.

In England there is the British Trade Union Congress, the British Federation of Trade Unions, and the Labor Party. For the discussion of business when the conventions of either party are not in session, they meet jointly in conference through the Parliamentary Committee of the British Trade Union Congress and the Executive Committee of the Labor Party. Quite a number of the members of the Parliamentary Committee of the British Trade Union Congress are members of the Labor Party, and quite a number of them who hold their seats in Parliament are members of the Labor Party. As a matter of fact, the Executive Committee of the Labor Party dominates the entire movement of England.

At a conference held at Derby, England, in September, 1918, the executive officers of the Labor Party presided and dominated the proceedings. And all the time that I was in England I never heard of a phrase like this: "The British Trade Union movement and the Labor Party." I never heard it said: "The Parliamentary Committee of the British Trade Union Congress and the Executive Committee of the Labor Party." It was always the Labor Party and the Trade Union Congress. The Labor Party of England dominates the labor movement of England.

When the Inter-Allied Labor Conference opened in London, September 17, early in the morning there were sent over to my room at the hotel cards which were intended to be the credential cards for our delegation to sign and hand in as our credentials. The card read something like this: "The undersigned is a duly accredited delegate to the Inter-Allied Socialist Conference to be held at London," etc., and giving the dates.

I refused to sign my name, or permit my name to be put upon any card of that character. My associates were

as indignant as I was and refused to sign any such credential. We went to the hall where the conference was to be held. There was a young lady at the door. When we made an effort to enter she asked for our cards. We said we had no cards to present. "Well," the answer came, "you can not be admitted." We replied: "That may be true, we can not be admitted, but we will not sign any such card. We have our credentials written out, signed, and sealed, and will present them to any committee of the conference for scrutiny and recommendation, but we are not going to sign such a card."

Mr. Charles Bowerman, Secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the British Trade Union Congress, at that moment emerged from the door. He asked why we had not entered. I told him the situation and he persuaded the young lady to permit us to pass in. We entered the hall and presented our credentials. Mr. James Sexton, officer and representative of the Dockers' Union of Liverpool, arose and called the attention of the conference to this situation, and declared that the American Federation of Labor delegates refused to sign any such document. He said that it was not an Inter-Allied **Socialist** conference but an Inter-Allied Socialist and Labor Conference.

Mr. Arthur Henderson, of the Labor Party, made an explanation something to this effect, if my memory serves me:

"It is really regrettable that such an error should have been made, but it has been made. It was due to the fact that the old card of credentials which had been used in former conferences was sent to the printer, no one paying any attention to it, and thinking it was all right."

I want to call your attention to the significance of that explanation. That is, that the trade union movement of Great Britain was represented at these former conferences, but at this conference the importance of Labor was regarded as so insignificant that everybody took it for granted that it was perfectly all right to have the credential card read, "Inter-Allied Socialist Conference," and with the omission of this more important term "Labor"

The fact is that an independent political labor party becomes either radical, so-called, or else reactionary, but.

it is primarily devoted to one thing and that is vote-getting. Every sail is trimmed to the getting of votes. The question of the conditions of Labor, the question of the standards of Labor, the question of the struggles and the sacrifices of Labor, to bring light into the lives and the work of the toilers—all that is subordinated to the one consideration of votes for the party.

I have read the fourteen points which have been formulated for the proposed Labor Party here. Is there one of them of an essential character to the interests and welfare of the working people of the United States which is not contained in the curriculum, the work and the principles of the bona fide labor movement of our country?

Which movement, economic or political, in any country on the face of the globe has brought more hope and encouragement, more real advantage, to the working people than the trade union movement of America has brought to the wage earning masses of our country?

The organization of a political labor party would simply mean the dividing of the activities and allegiance of the men and women of labor between two bodies, such as would often come in conflict.

In the British Trade Union Congress at Derby there were divergent views. There were four different points of view upon one subject before the Congress. In order to try to unite the thought a committee of four was appointed for the purpose of trying to bring in some agreed proposition and recommendation for adoption by the Congress. In the course of a few days the committee reported a resolution. For the purpose of conserving time the four members of the committee representing the divergent views were called upon in turn to express their views. Each in turn expressed his own view and placed his own construction upon the resolution recommended. Then each declared that he was going out to fight for his own view.

In our movement we have done some things. We have brought together more than three million workers, organized into our trade unions and belonging to the American Federation of Labor. In addition there are between four and five

hundred thousand workmen in the Railroad Brotherhoods not affiliated with us but yet in accord with our work and our policies. In other words, there are nearly four million of organized trade unionists in the United States. There is not always harmony; there is disagreement; there is opposition, all of it important, all of it tending to crystallize the sentiment of unity and devotion to the cause of Labor. The American labor movement occupies the field of activity without yielding one inch to any other body.

Mr. Longuet, representing the majority Socialists of France, at the Inter-Allied Labor Conference in London, expressed his regret that what he called the American Socialist party was not represented in the conference. He proposed that the votes of the American Federation of Labor delegates should be reduced because the American Socialist party was not represented.

Who are we going to have as the leaders of this new political labor party here? I understand that there is impatience among our fellows. It is creditable to them that they are impatient. There is not any man in all America, or in all the world, more impatient than I with the progress that has been made, with the position we occupy. I want more, more, more for Labor. I think I have tried and am trying to do my share. My associates of the Executive Council have tried to do their share, but there is such a thing as attempting to overrun, and by over-running to defeat the object we would gain for the wage-earners and to throw them into the hands of those who do not know the honest aspirations of Labor or who would direct them for personal aggrandizement.

I have been the President of the American Federation of Labor for many, many years. I regard that position as the most exalted that I could occupy. I have no aspiration to hold this or that position. It is not that I ask you to follow me. I ask that the trade union movement be given its fullest opportunity for growth and development so that it may be the instrumentality to secure better and better and better and constantly better conditions for the workers of our country.

Here we are in this transition period from war into peace,

with all that it may mean. A week ago last evening, that is, on Sunday evening, December 1, at the Century Theater, I delivered an address. I am proud of the address I delivered there on that night. I do not think that any one realizes all the dangers which I felt and tried to express as to the situation now and which may arise in the near future. I ask you whether the creation of a political labor party, and particularly at this time, would help to solve these problems and meet these dangerous conditions? If ever unity was needed for the toilers, it is now.

It is not true, as some carping critics allege, that the American Federation of Labor is a non-political organization. As a matter of fact, the workers of the United States and the organized labor movement act voluntarily in the exercise of their political right and power. We have changed the control of our government from the old-time interests of corporate power and judicial usurpation. We have secured from the government of the United States the labor provision of the Clayton Anti-trust Law, the declaration in the law that the labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce. In that law we have secured the right of our men to exercise functions for which, under the old regime our men were brought before the bar of justice and fined or imprisoned. We have secured the eight-hour work-day not only as a basic principle but as a fact. We have secured the Seamen's law giving to the seamen the freedom to leave their vessels when in safe harbor. The seamen of America are now free men and own themselves. We have secured a child labor law, and although it has been declared unconstitutional, we are again at work to secure a law for the protection of our children. Better than all, we have established the concept in law and in administration that the interest and welfare of the workers are paramount, and this not only in the laws of our republic but in the laws of our states and municipalities.

There are other laws in the interest of labor which we have secured, more than I can mention off-hand, but far above all these are the improvements brought into the lives and work of the toilers by their own actions as organized workers. We

have established unity of spirit; we have brought about the extension of organization among the formerly unorganized, and our organized free existence to function and to express ourselves is now practically unquestioned.

Suppose in 1912 we had had a labor party in existence; do you think for a moment that we could have gone as the American labor movement to the other political parties and said: "We want you to inaugurate in your platform this and this declaration." If one of the parties had refused and the other party consented and took its chance, would the American Federation of Labor have been permitted to exercise that independent political and economic course if the labor party had been in existence? How long would we have had to wait for the passage of a law by Congress declaring law, in practice and in principle that the labor of a human being is not a commodity or an article of commerce—the most far-reaching declaration ever made by any government in the history of the world.

I say this to you. I am sixty-eight years of age. I have been tried and seared as few men have. I have almost had my very soul burned in the trials of life. With my two associates Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Morrison I have suffered the indignity of being brought before the courts of our country and adjudged guilty and sentenced to imprisonment. Our eyes were wide open. I do not think that it is improper for me to say that I led in the thought and activity of that work, of that willingness to suffer, but it was not a very nice thing to have the endeavor made to besmirch our honor by a sentence of imprisonment—Mr. Morrison six months, Mr. Mitchell, nine months, and I twelve months. We fought that sentence, fought it and fought it, supported by the activity of the organized labor movement in all the states and towns of our country, until the principle for which we were contending through that action brought about the incorporation of those provisions in the Clayton Anti-trust Law which confirmed and legalized the very things for which we were sentenced to imprisonment. They were legalized, not for us alone but for Labor.

I repeat, we have secured the enactment of the Seamen's law, the right of a seaman to quit his vessel when-

ever his vessel is in safe harbor in any part of the world, a law which does not exist in any other country—secured it by our political activity and by our economic powers. Has anything like that been accomplished in any country of the world? Our delegates proposed it at the Inter-Allied Labor Conference in September, and there was not a hearty agreement to stand for it as an international demand.

I think you know that I have been most cruelly hurt in the recent past. Somehow or other I believe that there are yet considerable years of fight in me for Labor. I have said that I hold the position of President of the American Federation of Labor in the most exalted estimation, but it is not that for which I am contending; it is not that which I would want to keep one moment beyond the time when I can no longer be of service to my fellows. The only thing that I can leave to my fellow men is that I have helped in trying to bring about a labor movement in our country that is better, more comprehensive and more united than in any other country on the face of the globe.

I wanted to present these thoughts to you. I did not have in mind any particular theme or course to present to you. I know I feel and understand and apprehend the danger which is involved in the project which is now being so very actively agitated in some quarters of the labor movement of our country. I fear no danger, I am just as good a follower, perhaps a better follower, than I am a leader, and I am perfectly willing to occupy either position. I would be recreant to the great labor movement and all it portends now and for the future if I did not take you into my confidence, men and women of labor, and tell you what I have told you. I am apprehensive, justly so, justified by every event in the whole history of Labor, that a great mistake may be made, a great injury inflicted upon our fellows, not for a day, not for a year, not for a decade, but perhaps for many, many, many years to come. I want to present that view to you so that you may understand the situation clearly.

I have spoken calmly and without ceremony or attempt to touch your feelings, but simply to touch the innermost recesses of your minds and to lay before you the responsibility which rests upon you.

A discussion ensued and a motion presented and unanimously adopted that the sense of the meeting was that the American Federation of Labor should publish President Gompers' remarks.

The following were present and participated in the meeting—some of them in the discussion:

#### RECONSTRUCTION COMMITTEE

John Frey, Editor, Iron Molders' Journal, Commercial Tribune Building, Cincinnati, Ohio.

A. O. Wharton, President, Railroad Employes Department, A. F. of L. Building, Washington, D. C.

John Moore, Delegate from the United Mine Workers, 77 Ruggery Building, Columbus, Ohio.

C. W. Perkins, President, Cigarmakers' International Union, Monon Building, Chicago, Illinois.

Matthew Woll, President, International Photo-Engravers' Union of North America, 6111 Bishop Street, Chicago, Illinois.

#### SOCIAL INSURANCE COMMITTEE

John A. Voll, President, Glass Bottle Blowers, Colonial Trust Building, Philadelphia, Pa.

John A. Manning, Secretary-Treasurer, Union Label Trades Department, A. F. of L. Building, Washington, D. C.

Sara Conboy, Secretary-Treasurer, United Textile Workers of America, Rooms 86-87 Bible House, New York, N. Y.

Hugh Frayne, Organizer, A. F. of L., Bartholdi Building, New York, N. Y.  
Collis Lovely, Boot and Shoe Workers' International Union, 246 Summer Street, Boston, Mass.

#### OTHERS PRESENT

Samuel Gompers, President, A. F. of L., Washington, D. C.

T. A. Rickert, Seventh Vice-President, A. F. of L., Chicago, Ill.

Frank Morrison, Secretary, A. F. of L., Washington, D. C.

J. P. Coughlin, member, Joint Reconstruction Committee, New York Central Federated Union, New York City.

T. J. Curtis, Chairman, Joint Committee, Tunnel and Subway Constructors' International Union, New York City.

M. Swartz, Women's Trade Union League Reconstruction Committee, New York City.

Rose Schneiderman, Joint Reconstruction Committee of the Central Federated Union, Central Labor Union and the Women's Trade Union League, New York City.

Jo. Coffin, member Typographical Union, Brooklyn, New York.

Ann Hogan, representing Central Labor Union and Central Federated Union and Women's Trade Union League, New York City.

Hilda E. Swenson, Joint Reconstruction Committee, Central Federated Union, Women's Trade Union League, Brooklyn, New York.

Thomas Rock, Pavers' Union No. 1, Member Reconstruction Committee Central Federated Union, New York City.

Robert Maisel, Director American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, New York City.

R. S. Sexton, Legislative Committeeman, A. F. of L., Washington, D. C.

Henry Sterling, Legislative Committeeman, A. F. of L., Washington, D. C.

Harry L. Morrison, Secretary Laundry Workers' Union, Troy, New York.

Joseph Dehan, Cigarmakers' International Union, New York City.

J. E. Farrell, Cigarmakers' International Union, New York City.

John Sullivan, International Brewery and Soft Drink Workers of America, New York City.

Edward L. Hannah, Central Federated Union, New York City.

David L. Levy, Cigarmakers' Union No. 13, Bronx, New York.

James P. Holland, President New York State Federation of Labor, New York City.

Leon Worthall, Journeymen Barbers' International Union, New York City.

Jack Zamford, General Organizer, Bakery and Confectionery Workers, Chicago, Illinois.

Daniel S. Jacobs, Cigarmakers' Union No. 13, New York City.

Ephraim Kaufman, General Organizer, United Garment Workers of America, New York City.

B. A. Larger, General Secretary, United Garment Workers, New York City.

Ernest Bohm, Secretary, Central Federated Union, New York City.

J. H. Tapken, International Brotherhood of Blacksmiths, New York City.

J. S. Cottrell, International Brotherhood of Blacksmiths, New York City.