

Samuel Gompers in Politics (January 18, 1908)

The press reports advise us that Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, and other leaders, local, state, and national, are going to take a hand in politics. With a flourish of trumpets the announcement is made that their opposition is to be concentrated upon William H. Taft, Republican candidate for the presidency of the United States.

After the results attending the political crusade of the same leaders in the recent re-election of Joseph Cannon as a member of Congress, and later as speaker of the House of Representatives,¹ saying nothing of the similar fiasco attending a similar campaign against Congressman Littlefield, of Maine,² it would seem in order to suggest that any further political announcement from that source would be treated as a huge joke.

Whenever and wherever Gompers and his lieutenants concentrate their attack upon a capitalist politician it is for the sole purpose of electing some other capitalist politician and if this kind of politics has any effect at all it is to strengthen rather than weaken the candidate's chances and make his election, if at all doubtful, a foregone conclusion. In the case of "Uncle Joe" Cannon the declaration of Gompers that he proposed to fight him had but little effect and that little was to rally Cannon's supporters and make his election unanimous.

Now we have always been in favor of labor going into politics, and not only this, but we have always been and are now in favor of labor running the government. But our position differs very decidedly from that of Mr. Gompers, and since we are now approaching a national election of the greatest importance we take this occasion to address a few words to the workingmen of the United States, especially those who are organized in trade unions and affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.

We are going to speak as we feel, in perfect kindness and frankness. Our lot has long been cast with labor and all our hopes center in its triumph. We therefore have the right to invite the attention of workingmen and to have a heart-to-heart talk with them.

First, President Gompers believes that the interests of labor and capital are identical or mutual. We do not. He believes these interests can be harmonized and justice done to both. We do not. We believe labor is entitled

to all it produces and that labor must organize politically as well as economically to abolish the existing order, put itself in possession of the means of production, employ itself, and take all it produces.

Second, Mr. Gompers does not believe in independent political action. We do. Mr. Gompers and his lieutenants have been trying for many years to procure legislation in favor of labor. They have failed miserably, utterly, and we may say, contemptibly, and they always will. Mr. Gompers and his staff are divided between the Republican and the Democratic parties, both capitalist parties, the one more corrupt than the other, and between these two parties they have shifted back and forth, back and forth, alternating the amusement by being used as a football by both until they have become objects of contempt among politicians and the laughingstock of the people.

Third, we are agreed with Mr. Gompers upon just one point. We do not want the unions as such to become political bodies or to be used to promote political ends. We believe in the thorough organization of the working class upon the economic field and we also believe in the thorough organization of the working class upon the political field. Each of these has its own functions and if wisely directed these will harmonize perfectly in the waging of the class struggle for industrial emancipation.

Fourth, we have said and wish to repeat that Mr. Gompers and his sub-leaders have secured practically nothing through legislation and never will. The reason is self-evident. Republican and Democratic congressmen are representatives of capitalism. Their respective platforms prove it. It is scarcely less than idiocy for labor leaders to expect these tools of capitalism to legislate in the interest of labor. It would be quite as reasonable to expect a cow to bray or a mule to bark. A capitalist congress can no more change its nature than a leopard can change its spots. Mr. Gompers and his cronies use their influence to elect a capitalist congress; what right have they to object to capitalist legislation? If they want labor legislation let them turn their efforts to the election of a labor congress, as socialists have long since done, and then they will get it and not before.

Mr. Gompers' eight-hour and injunction bills have been shoved into the wastebasket for so many years that it might be supposed that even Mr. Gompers himself would at last take a tumble. The legislatures of the several states have made monkeys of labor committees, while courts, high, low, jack and the game, have handed down one decision after another landing between the eyes of organized labor, and yet Mr. Gompers and his

followers still persist in attempting to stop the thundering political engine of the capitalist class by laying pins on the tracks of capitalism.

We are not with Mr. Gompers in his fight on William H. Taft, or any other particular capitalist politician. We are against the whole bunch, whether labeled Republicans or Democrats, for they stand essentially for the same system and that system is the private ownership of the means of life and the slavery of the working class. And that is precisely what President Gompers stands for and we challenge him to disprove it.

Why, let us ask Mr. Gompers, does he propose a political crusade against Taft? Is it to beat Taft? Or is it to lead the labor vote on a wild goose chase to keep it divided and prevent it from organizing independent political action of its own to defeat not only Taft but to wipe out the whole brood of political tricksters who for years have trafficked in the ignorance and stupidity of labor, largely through the instrumentality of just such blind leaders of the blind of which Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, is the undisputed leader.

Again, if Mr. Gompers opposes Taft for president, whom does he favor for that office? The only candidate who will truly represent labor will be the Socialist and Mr. Gompers will oppose him as he always has done. Then whom will he support? Why, some other capitalist candidate, of course; that is, some candidate who has not yet made his record on eight-hour laws and injunction decisions.

The only earthly difference between Taft and the other fellow whom Gompers will favor is that Taft has a record, a consistent capitalist record, while the other fellow has his still to make.

Gompers has learned nothing in his 25 years of labor leadership. He is still hanging on to the old method of supporting good candidates before election to be kicked by them after election and lining up his deluded followers to invite and receive the contempt of wily politicians who have no use for workingmen except as they can be used to further their political ends.

The political program of President Gompers is a farce. It is worse than this, it is a fraud without one redeeming feature.

Think of it a moment! Gompers has been “after Cannon” — a thousand miles or so after him. Now he is “after Taft” — so far after him that he seems very diminutive in the distance. It would be very laughable if it were not at the price of labor. Gompers will not suffer but the wage-slaves must foot the entire bill.

We appeal to such of our readers as belong to labor unions to think this matter over for themselves. We are not attempting to establish any leadership in opposition to that of Mr. Gompers or anyone else. We are wanting workmen and women to open their eyes and see for themselves; to use their brains and think for themselves, and above all, to stop blindly following in the footsteps of some supposed leader who has been leading them by the nose, through ignorance or design, for lo! these many years, straight into the camp of the enemy.

If Mr. Gompers has planned a campaign to elect some capitalist president of the United States who is personally agreeable to him, let him elect that gentleman with the support of capitalist votes. Workmen have no more interest in electing the pet capitalist candidate of Mr. Gompers than they have in defeating William Taft for the same purpose. All capitalist candidates look alike to us. We are for labor. We are opposed to the Tafts and Roots, the Hearsts and the Tillmans, and the whole raft of capitalist representatives who are for labor only when they want its vote and after they are inducted into office, by the help of Mr. Gompers and his followers, issue injunctions and send out soldiers in evidence of their capitalist gratitude for the working class votes which elected them.

We appeal to the working class to quit capitalist parties of whatever name and join the Socialist Party, the only party of the working class in the United States. We appeal to every sturdy son of toil in this presidential year to cast his lot with his class and with his class strike out bravely, resolutely, unflinchingly for freedom.

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¹ Joseph G. Cannon (1836-1926), a Republican from Illinois, served 46 years in the US House of Representatives, including a stint of nearly eight years as speaker. As speaker Cannon exerted a powerful influence, controlling the fate and shape of all bills brought to the floor. In 1906, Cannon was targeted for defeat by the American Federation of Labor, which deeply resented his stymying an eight-hour bill, anti-injunction legislation, and legislation providing for employer liability in industrial accidents.

² Charles E. Littlefield (1851-1915) was a Republican congressional representative from Maine. In the summer of 1906 Samuel Gompers became actively involved in the effort to defeat Littlefield in a September Maine election due to Littlefield's vocal opposition to anti-injunction legislation. Gompers made a dozen speeches in Littlefield's district for his Democratic opponent during the campaign in what was effectively a test of AF of L strength in

breaking Republican stonewalling of pro-labor legislation. Although his plurality was reduced in the 1906 vote, Littlefield was nevertheless re-elected.