
An Open Letter to John Fitzpatrick

by William Z. Foster

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In view of the many statements you have made recently attempting to blame the Workers Party group for the split that occurred in Chicago on July 3 [1923], I feel called upon to write you this open letter to set matters aright. Let me say at the outset that the split was of your own making. It was altogether due to your weakness and complete lack of real leadership in that historic situation. But in order that this may be made clear let me go back a bit, tracing a little my own activities and yours in enterprises in which we were jointly interested.

Our Working Together.

As for myself, for many years my goal in the labor movement has been clear and definite: to reorganize the trade unions from their present status as narrow craft organizations containing only a fraction of the workers to broad industrial unions embracing the great masses — a program whose realization will inevitably involve smashing the control of the Gompers bureaucracy. My efforts at all times for the past dozen years have been directed to this end. The form of the activities may have differed from time to time, but the goal was always the same, the defeat of Gompers and the reorganization of the unions. Reactionaries like Oscar Nelson and Victor Olander are now trying to make it appear that during the great packing house and steel mills organization drives I quit this war against Gompersism and became a reconciled member of the official family. But

this is sheer nonsense, and nobody knows it better than Gompers himself. For me these gigantic campaigns were but a different aspect of the general attack on Gompersism. I believed for a long time even that they would be the means of beating the old machine and revolutionizing the labor movement.

As for yourself, I considered you a powerful factor in the struggle to remodel the labor movement and I dealt with you accordingly. I did my utmost to strengthen your hands and to increase your influence upon a national scale, and not without some success, I believe. I even believed at one time that you were the logical man, the practical trade union leader, to head a big rank and file movement which, through its progressive measures, would crack the Gompers machine. It was distinctly with this aim in mind that I maneuvered, successfully, to get you at the head of the steel organizing committee, rather than other AF of L organizers who were itching for the job. This will make an interesting story some day. You will recall the main outlines of the situation. I introduced the organization resolution into the Chicago Federation of Labor on April 7th [1918], (not upon your instructions as Olander ridiculously asserts, but entirely upon my own volition), and then went alone with it to the AF of L Convention in St. Paul [June 1918], had it passed there, and made arrangements for the first meeting to take place in Chicago on August 1st, 1918. At the latter gathering was where you first took a hand in the matter.

But we lost the big steel fight. This was a tremendous disaster; not only because it wrecked the steel unions, but, what was infinitely more important, it destroyed a much greater plan. It was my aim to propose, if the steel strike had been a success, the formation of a great organization committee with branches in each of the big industries, to sweep the masses into the unions. We were in a position to insist that such a committee be formed. Inevitably it must have been under our direction in the usual combination, with you as Chairman and I as Secretary. With the prestige that had been gained through the unionizing of the steel industry and the general raising of the morale of the workers everywhere thereby this great organizing campaign must have been a tremendous success. It would have surely resulted in the organization of the broad masses of the working class. They would have stormed into the unions in millions, even as they did in Germany after the war.

The West Letter.

The outcome of such a great campaign would have been to so enormously increase your prestige that you would have overshadowed Gompers and would have been in a position to deliver him his long-needed political *coup de grace*, which we would have known how to administer at the opportune time. Gompers, who is nobody's fool, suspected what was cooking up and was very much on his guard. Even outsiders could see it. George P. West, for example, in *The Nation* for April 9th, 1919, came near to hitting the nail on the head. He pointed out the real significance of the rising Fitzpatrick-Foster combination. As you will remember, his article created consternation in our ranks. Gompers immediately demanded a refutation of it. We agreed that for the sake of the steel workers this had to be done. Otherwise Gompers would have a legitimate excuse to cut the steel campaign to pieces. We decided to sacrifice West for the sake of giving the steel workers a

fighting chance to win. You wrote the answer to West, and sent me a copy of it after it had been forwarded to Gompers. I was astounded at it. I had expected some sort of a mild pooh-poohing of West's assertions, but your letter was a complete and absolutely needless surrender to Gompers. No wonder he was so thoroughly pleased at it. You say, for example, the following:

I don't know where Mr. West got his information in regard to the campaign to organize the packing industry. I wish he had looked into the methods employed in this undertaking. He would find that the net result of this wonderful achievement was because President Gompers got in his licks and blows just at the most critical and opportune moments. It is true that President Gompers did not do the detail work — that was our part — but he directed and advised and eventually outgeneralled the opposition. There is not a man or woman who took an active part in this campaign who will gainsay that when we had a lost cause upon our hands President Gompers took over the situation and within 6 hours had the 6 big packers on the defensive.

The same must be said in regard to the steel campaign but in this instance President Gompers threw the entire power and influence of the American Federation of Labor into this situation by accepting the Chairmanship of the Committee in charge. It would be ridiculous to expect that President Gompers could give his personal attention to the work. Again, that was our part, and if we were impelled by any influence to make a big drive it was because President Gompers was able to bring 24 cooperating international unions into complete harmony and united effort which made the results already achieved possible.

In view of the real facts such statements are ridiculous. The truth is that Gompers sabotaged both the packing house and steel campaigns, and everyone connected with either of them knew this very well. In the packing house affair he would up by telling the Chicago Federation of Labor, which had organized the industry, to keep its hands out of the situation and to leave everything to the International unions, which then promptly wrecked the whole organization. In the steel campaign we had to lasso him to get him to do anything. He never spoke at even one meeting of steel workers, nor did he attend a single meeting of the National

Committee unless we held it under his nose — but meanwhile he could waste several months' time in Europe helping frame up the infamous Versailles treaty, with its League of Nations. At a dozen critical points in the campaign he betrayed the interests of the steel workers, as you well know. But this is all history now; the important thing here is how you, under pressure, went completely back to Gompers. That has special significance in view of recent developments, as we shall see.

A New Attack.

The loss of the steel strike killed the plan to revolutionize the AF of L through the medium of a great organizing campaign. It was necessary to take a new tack to arrive at the goal of the reorganization and modernization of the trade union movement. Our great organization campaigns were an indirect move to this end; now it was essential to proceed directly towards it. Consequently, I, who had hitherto been acting pretty much as a free lance in the general trade union movement, associated myself with the Left Wing elements (then just recovering from their dual union notions and turning their attention towards the trade unions), and joined them in a direct fight for the adoption of the revolutionary measures by the workers' organization. We formed the Trade Union Educational League and began our militant campaign for amalgamation, the labor party, recognition of Soviet Russia, organization of the unorganized, and the rest of its slogans. We created a profound impression throughout the labor movement.

The Chicago Federation of Labor (which in this case means you) endorsed several of the planks in the radical platform. But it was quite evident that you would not make a militant fight for them. You gave them your sanction, that's about all. The idea of moving aggressively all over the country in behalf of them, and thus coming to a head-on collision with the Gompers machine, was foreign to your nature, unsustainable as you are by any

revolutionary conception. Through the working out of such a great organization campaign as I have described above you might have been developed in spite of yourself into a figure powerful enough to wreck the reactionary bureaucracy and then forced into a movement inevitably culminating in the reorganization of the trade unions. But you will never carry through such a movement by direct advocacy of a program of your own. This is because you are a regular of the regulars. You will not break completely with the official family and become an outcast, a disrespected in the movement, a fate which every real progressive leader must undergo at our present stage of development. You are determined to maintain your official standing in the labor movement, and especially to retain the presidency of the Chicago Federation of Labor. For you every tactical consideration depends upon that. This localist weakness it is that prevents you from becoming an effective leader on a national scale of even the mildly progressive forces in the trade union movement. And this it was that brought you to grief in the famous July 3-5 [1923] convention, where the Farmer-Labor Party split away from the other labor party forces there assembled.

What Caused the Split.

Now as for the causes of the July 3rd [1923] split: Your attempt to blame the break upon the Workers Party group is as absurd as your assertion that it has thrown back the labor party movement for 20 years. The real truth is that you personally were responsible for the break, the Farmer-Labor Party following your lead unquestioningly. The situation was quite simple. The Farmer-Labor Party under your guidance had proved an almost complete failure. This was not because the labor party issue was not a good one, but because you were unwilling to make a real fight for it. You failed as a leader. As the chief exponent of the labor party idea your cue was to have organized

a big and militant movement for it all over the country. This would have brought you the bitterest opposition of Gompers and might have cost you your position as head of the Chicago Federation of Labor. But what of it? The game was worth the candle. A militant leader would have made the fight. But not you. Reluctant to break squarely with Gompers, you let the movement simmer along. Consequently the Farmer-Labor Party practically died in your hands despite its golden opportunity. It failed in its mission as champion of the labor party idea and soon degenerated into little more than a name.

This was the situation until about a year or so ago, when the Left Wing groups in the Workers Party and the Trade Union Educational League began to take a hand in the labor party movement. They did immediately what you should have done long before: started a real labor party campaign throughout the trade unions. The time being opportune, this campaign was very successful and a large body of favorable sentiment developed. Then, to exploit this situation, you called the big convention of July 3-5 [1923], sending invitations broadcast to all workers' organizations. You, yourself, made the motion to invite the Workers Party. A political leader of consequence would have known that such a convention, especially with the Workers Party in it, would be a rank and file affair and, as such, would involve an open war on the Gompers machine. But apparently you did not. It was only when the convention was at hand that you seemed to realize what you had done. Then, overcome with timidity, you tried to get from underneath it regardless of consequences. Upon your shoulders rests the responsibility for the split.

The Workers Party group took the convention seriously. They thought you were prepared to go ahead with a real effort to establish that labor party. They helped liberally to finance the convention, and without their assistance it could not have been held. They worked everywhere

to have the unions send delegates, when often prominent Farmer-Labor Party members were openly sabotaging the affair. They accepted as a matter of course the necessity for an alliance between the Farmer-Labor Party and the Workers Party (with such other organizations as might go along) to carry on the battle for the labor party. They were perfectly willing to make every legitimate concession so that such a working alliance could be maintained. But you were not. At first you were eager to enlist the militant help of the Workers Party and willing to pay for it by accepting affiliation with that organization. But when you saw, as the convention approached, that the price you would have to pay for it would be an open war with Gompers and the probable loss of your official standing, you would have none of it. Then you precipitated the break and thus betrayed the thousands of workers following your lead. It was treason to the labor party movement.

I say "you precipitated the break" and I mean exactly that. You wanted to cut loose from the revolutionary elements and you did it. You had become convinced, in the weeks preceding the convention, that the Farmer-Labor Party and yourself would lose caste with the official family if you had any truck, either near or remote, with the Workers Party, so you decided that all cooperation must end. Had you so desired, a favorable and workable understanding between the two organizations, not involving actual affiliation, could easily have been arrived at. But you wanted no such agreement. You refused even to confer with the representatives of the Workers Party either before or during the convention. You invited a split. The story that you broke with us because we acted as unruly guests in your convention is dribble. You forced the split before the convention took place. The latter merely registered the break that had already occurred. The last word that the Workers Party could get from you before the gathering convened (received through high officials of the Farmer-Labor Party) was that you

were determined not to go along with the Workers Party under any circumstances. You made the convention into a catch-as-catch-can affair, with the Workers Party, like the other groups, doing the best they could with it. Your policy amounted to this: first, you invited the Workers Party to participate, and then you told them to get out. What kind of leadership was that? Much similar has been shown in the handling of the Farmer-Labor Party since its inception. I can understand now why you are so bitter at our group. Anyone who shows weakness in a crisis or makes so many mistakes as you did about the convention is naturally anxious to blame somebody else for it. But you might have found a better excuse than to say you opposed the participation of the Workers Party because they are a "red" organization affiliated to the Third International. Why, then, did you invite them to the convention? It would be ridiculous to say that you did not know, at the time you sent out the invitations, know of their affiliations, which had been shouted from the housetops.

The July 3-5 [1923] convention held tremendous potentialities for the labor party. It should have marked the unification of the labor party forces and the beginning of a widespread campaign to enlist the workers into a party of their own. This, if prosecuted aggressively, certainly would have been a great success, in spite of anything that might be done by Gompers. It was such an opportunity as to delight the heart of a bold leader. But not you. You failed utterly to perceive its possibilities and to act up to your responsibility as the key man in the labor party movement. You saw nothing of the real significance of the occasion. The same spirit of regularity which came so sharply to the surface in connection with West's article, and which had so long paralyzed you from making a militant struggle to establish the Farmer-Labor Party, rose up to smite you at this critical moment. All you knew was your determination to sever connections with the Workers Party, which was threatening to involve you in

irregularity and a militant war on Gompersism. So you split the convention and threw disunion into the labor party forces. You have jeopardized the whole movement. No wonder capitalist papers applauded you. In other words, just when a real stroke of generalship was demanded from you, you failed completely by weakly retreating back to Gompers. For this you have lost altogether your leadership in the labor party movement, as you will discover before long.

The Aftermath of the Split.

That you really have retreated back to Gompers is amply proved by your course since the convention. You seem to have cast aside all your progressive ideas. For example, consider the "red baiting" you are indulging in. I thought you were above that. But it seems not. Hardly the blackest reactionaries in the AF of L have ever made worse accusations against the Communists than you have in recent weeks. I have in mind your ridiculous charge that we framed up the Bridgman convention so that we could become martyrs by being arrested. I wonder who you think believes that fairy tale? Or the other one about our falsely collecting money, presumably for defense purposes but in reality for propaganda. Such silly rot smacks more of Ellis Searles than of John Fitzpatrick. It is about on a par with the false statement of Ed Nockels that I staged the shooting at Carmen's Hall and that the shots fired were blanks. And he maintained this notwithstanding that I offered to show him the bullet holes if he would be fair enough (which he was not) to go to Carmen's Hall with me.

In going back to Gompers another progressive policy that you have cast aside is amalgamation. You boast that you did a lot to give impetus to this great movement in its early stages. Let us not argue that point, although much might be said about it. One thing we can be sure of, however, is that since the July [1923] convention you have

done plenty to block amalgamation. Your statement discrediting the amalgamation movement, issued just in time to be used at the reactionary Decatur convention, gave joy to the heart of every reactionary labor man in the United States. It is being used everywhere to beat down amalgamation sentiment. Pitiful to all realistic observers are your efforts to justify this repudiation of amalgamation by denouncing the Communists for having “betrayed” the July 3-5 [1923] convention. That is certainly a weak excuse; the real reason is your determination to get “right” again.

I have watched with interest and grief the rapid swing of the Chicago Federation of Labor to the right in the past few months. I saw the old “red baiting,” absent from its sessions for many years, being reintroduced; I saw the amalgamation movement being thrown overboard; I saw the delegate’s report adopted endorsing the work of the Decatur convention of the Illinois Federation of Labor, which repudiated every progressive policy that the Chicago Federation of Labor in its better days stood for, and I wondered how long it would be before even formal support of the labor party policy would be given up also. I have seen organizations and individuals swing to the right before, and they usually make a complete job of it. But the ditching of the labor party came quicker than even I expected. The last local judicial elections did the job. I wondered how you felt and thought as you saw such reactionaries as Nelson and Olander leading a successful fight to have the Chicago Federation of Labor abandon its labor party policy and readopt the suicidal Gompers program of rewarding friends and punishing enemies. And you lent your active aid to the reintroduction of this reactionary policy which you have condemned so bitterly in the past. You aided in bringing the workers of Chicago, who were just beginning to

learn the principles of independent working class political action, back into the shambles of the Republican and Democratic Parties. Gompers must have been overjoyed. Of course, the clever reactionaries asserted that the non-partisan policy was being followed for this time only, merely so that Sullivan and Holdom could be defeated (which they were not). But such arguments are about as valid as those of the cashier who steals just once, intending to pay the money back later on. The fact is, you have gone back to Gompers politically and dragged the Chicago Federation of Labor with you.

Your retreat from your former progressive position has not only injured the labor movement as a whole, but it has completely wrecked your individual prestige and made you impossible as a progressive leader. Your weakness at the July 3-5 [1923] convention, coupled with your readoption of the Gompers non-partisan method, has killed you as the national champion of the labor party idea. You have now become a stumbling block in the road of the labor party. Likewise your general shift to the right is destroying you even in your cherished position as head of the Chicago Federation of Labor. You cannot see this, but others can. The real leader of the Chicago Federation of Labor today is Oscar Nelson. It is his policies, not yours, that are going into effect. For years he fought the “reds” and denounced amalgamation, the labor party, and the rest of the program as so much bunk. And now you have come to believe him and to agree with him. You are following his lead, although you may not yet realize the fact. You are due before long for a rude awakening on this matter. I wonder how long the reactionaries will let you retain even your formal leadership of the Federation now that you have lost the real leadership of it?

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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