

# THE LABOR MOVEMENT

## Proletarian Forces in the United States

By Israel Amter.

In our analysis of the political forces in the United States, we did not lay any stress on the political power of the working class. This is due to the fact that the working-class of America is not an organized power, either economically or politically. This does not mean that the workers do not exert any influence what ever. On the contrary, in many sections they are a factor to be reckoned with. But the American worker is possessed of little class consciousness, and is swayed by emotion of a light nature. *The Labor Movement, both politically and economically, in America is still in the making.*

The backwardness of the American working-class is most evident in the frivolity with which an American worker casts his vote on election day, looks at the paper the next day for the results, rejoices if "his" party has won and swears if it has lost. And whether it has won or lost, he forgets the whole procedure till a new election day comes round and warns him that he must vote again.

In 1916, the American workers voted overwhelmingly for Wilson, being assured that the good man would "keep us out of war". He spoke so sincerely and so frankly, man to man, that the American worker believed him. And within two or three months, the same president was talking of war. A revolutionist understands what caused the change. He understands that *capital could best use an "anti-imperialist" to lead the way into the imperialist crusade!* But the workers did not see—and easily succumbed to the subtle propaganda that filled the press at the expense of the Allies and of the pro-Ally confederates in the United States.

So after voting against war, the American worker went into war. He was ready to make the "most supreme" sacrifice. He was ready to shoot down any one who still retained a spark of reason. When the war was over, he was ready to work harder than ever to aid in the reconstruction of the world. When in 1919, the steel workers went on strike against the inhuman

conditions that they had to work under and when the railroad workers threatened strike, President Wilson, whom the American workers had voted for, did not hesitate to send his favorite General Leonhard Wood with United States troops to shoot respect for capitalism into their bodies.

And when the workers, for this reason, but more particularly because after getting us into war,—about which we were wildly enthusiastic, once we were in—Wilson insisted upon keeping us in Europe, in the League of Nations—when for these various reasons, the workers turned out Wilson and put in Harding, they were confronted with the same problem. Harding, who promised to keep us out of Europe, allowed more than 8,000,000 jobless men and women to take care of themselves, declaring that he would not “look with pleasure upon any unemployment scheme that would touch the public treasury”—at a time when he was recommending a subsidy of \$500,000,000 for the railroad magnates. He sent his troops against the miners in Mingo County, West Virginia. In 1922, he sent them against the miners and textile workers and shopmen. But most of all he allowed a prohibition amendment to be ratified—and the American worker rebelled. So in 1922, the American workers aided the American farmer, who had his own reasons in turning down the candidates of the Republican Party, of which Harding is the leader. And the day after election, the American worker went back to his work, convinced that he had performed a public duty, and satisfied that he had helped to “save” the country.

These are but manifestations of the backwardness of the American working-class.

This backwardness is due to the influence of two elements: the reactionary leaders of the American Federation of Labor and the yellow leaders of the Socialist Party.

The American Labor movement should be one of the most militant and revolutionary in the world. The objective conditions—the development of capitalism, the concentration of wealth, the terroristic methods applied by the employing classes—all of these factors should have produced a revolutionary working-class standing side by side with European workers in their struggle against capitalism. But on the contrary, the American workers are isolated from the international movement. The political concept of Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, is that the American working man and woman is the equal of any other citizen. The American worker must not degrade himself by forming a party of workers. In politics, he is not a worker—he is a citizen, with rights “equal to Rockefeller’s” as it is so aptly expressed. Gompers’ method is to select the party, and the candidate that offers or promises to do most for labor, and to promote his election with the aid of the whole A.F. of L. machinery. In 1906, Gompers succeeded in having the A.F. of L. accept his “Non-partisan policy” as he called the above-mentioned method. This policy has been confirmed from year to year. And yet Gompers has no victories to score. All he can report at sessions of the Executive Council of the A.F. of L., is that *congress is paying little respect to the wishes of the working-class*. 1920, 1921, the same report and the same complaint—and yet in 1922 Gompers advocated the same policy.

In 1922, when the workers were embittered against the administration because it deprived them of their beer, because of no help in unemployment, and particularly by the issuing of the Daugherty injunction—in 1922, Gompers, who is a Democrat, selected *anti-administration* men, whose election was sure because of this very fact. And when election was over, he demonstrated the merit of the A.F. of L. “non-partisan political” policy, by the election of a large number of candidates approved by the A.F. of L. He did not state that the 3,000,000 organized in the A.F. of L. had no influence among the unorganized workers. He did not state that the farmers were indifferent to the attitude of the A.F. of L. He did not state that, as a whole, where the farmers had their own political organization, Gompers refused to cooperate with them.

Nor did he narrate the amusing case of the election of the Senator from Ohio. The A.F. of L. supported Senator Pomerence; the Railroad Brotherhood, which is an independent labor organization, supported Simon Fess. The A.F. of L. praised Pomerence as the friend of labor; the Railroad Brotherhood called on the workers to vote for Fess, assailing Pomerence. Fess was elected—which proved the greater influence and greater eloquence of the Brotherhood speakers and press. But what was the difference? Neither one can represent the workers. Neither one will be responsible to the workers. The workers have elected a capitalist to represent working-class interests. This is the policy of the A.F. of L. and the Railroad Brotherhoods, which are among the aristocrats of American labor and therefore very conservative.

The Socialist Party has pursued an analogous policy for about the same length of time. When the S.P. split away from the Socialist Labor Party on the question of unionism, and when in 1905 the I.W.W. was organized, slowly and surely, the revolutionists of the American movement began to isolate themselves from the masses. The I.W.W. as a politico-industrial movement, at least preserved a proper concept of the revolutionary movement—regarding it not as a matter of securing votes on election day, but as a daily struggle of the masses against exploitation and for the securing of power. (But we will not enter here into a discussion of the incorrectness of their idea of the nature of the State as later developed.) In 1912, the S.P. passed a resolution against sabotage in industry. This was a repudiation of the I.W.W. and a confession of cowardice. The S.P. leadership was greatly in the hands of professionals, journalists, lawyers, dentists etc., who had no understanding of the labor movement, except in theory. This rejection of the I.W.W. meant the loss of a powerful revolutionary body of men and led to the further degeneration and disintegration of the S.P., which more and more lost contact with the labor movement.

In 1919, as a result of the enthusiasm aroused by the Russian Revolution, the time appeared to demand action. The proletarians within the S.P., called for a new orientation. They demanded on the basis of the experiences of the Russian Revolution, that the S.P. conduct its propaganda not merely for securing votes on election day, but for a mass movement that, one day, would have to use other means, in order to free the working-class and place it in power.

In 1919, the steel workers and railroad workers were on strike. The American Government, the most powerful at the time in the world, was fully armed, and showed no mercy in crushing strikes. A struggle against that government did not quite appeal to the leaders of the S.P., Hillquit, Berger, Gerber and their satellites. They expelled the big mass of the trouble-makers, and peace reigned in the S.P.

Thus the S.P., too, is responsible for the fact that the American worker has not been organized as a body to exercise an influence 365 days of the year, to bring pressure to bear by means of his organizations and thus count as a factor in the daily struggles of the working class, from which result the political struggles, which culminate in a final combat for the control of the State.

Since 1919, the S.P. has degenerated still more. It modified its constitution to satisfy the scruples of the capitalist class. It took everything out of its program that smacked of revolution. It became “respectable”. It no longer combatted the A.F. of L. leaders—on the contrary, it has catered to them. Hillquit speaks at the A.F. of L. convention—he has no terrors for conservative workmen. Schlesinger, former president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, who was supposed to be a Socialist, was sent as delegate to the British Labor Congress, as a reward for his malicious, violent attack on Soviet Russia! The brothers are united in an effort to keep the American workers from a clear understanding of the necessity of having a political party of their own, and of making this party a party of every-day action! Just as the capitalists are organized for activity in every phase of economic and political life.

All of the American labor movement does not live under the spell of Gompers, Hillquit and Co. In the A.F. of L. and especially owing to the influence of the Communists, there has developed a strong progressive left wing, and in the independent unions there are radical and progressive forces that recognize the necessity of the workers acting in political life independently. This has led to the idea of an Independent Labor Party, to be composed of the workers and working farmers.

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