

RANK-AND-FILE REBELLIONS AND AFL INTERFERENCE IN THE AFFAIRS OF NATIONAL UNIONS: The Gompers Era

by

Elizabeth Fones-Wolf and Ken Fones-Wolf

In January 1916 Ellen Gates Starr wrote a stinging letter to Samuel Gompers taking him to task for his "heavy handed" refusal to aid a recently defeated strike of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. "And why?" Starr asked rhetorically; "Because a spirited people unable to rid themselves, otherwise, of corrupt officials, had dared to secede in overwhelming majority and form a new and clean organization under honest and able leadership."¹ Gompers replied haughtily that the AFL as a voluntary association subject to all the shortcomings of democracy had "no authority or force" to compel seceders to remain within the AFL, but that choosing to secede they incurred all the consequences of their acts, whether they represented a majority or not. For the AFL "to endorse and approve a secession movement," Gompers continued, "would be to establish a standard that would endanger the existence of a united labor movement."²

Starr's criticism of Gompers fits very neatly with most of the recent historical literature on the AFL and its leaders: as the premier business unionist, Gompers would brook no challenge to the AFL, its affiliated national unions, or their officers. Especially anathema to AFL officials was the crime of dual unionism; Gompers equated the formation of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers with the secession of the

* The authors would like to thank the following for reading earlier drafts of this article: Patricia Cooper, Bruce Laurie, Dolores Janiewski, Stuart Kaufman, Alan Dawley, Julia Greene, David Myers, and especially Grace Palladino.

¹Ellen Gates Starr to Samuel Gompers, Jan. 8, 1916, in "Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America Records, 1914-1920," reel 2, *The American Federation of Labor and the Unions*, microfilm (Sanford, NC, 1983), hereafter cited as *AFL Unions*.

²Gompers to Starr, Jan. 28, 1916, reel 2, *AFL Unions*. See also, Gompers to Starr, Feb. 10, 1916, and Starr to Gompers, Feb. 12, 1916, in *Ibid*.

South leading to the Civil War.³ Gompers' legendary antipathy to disruption within national unions, according to most historians, shaped the internal administrative workings of the AFL in ways that rigidly stifled rank-and-file dissent.

The most important articulation of this argument was made by Michael Rogin who asserted that the voluntaristic internal structure of the AFL was merely a means to allow the most powerful forces to dominate. The AFL would not interfere in inter-union disputes where stronger unions stole members and trade jurisdictions away from weaker unions. The AFL *could not* intervene in the internal affairs of affiliates even when powerful, entrenched leaders squashed dissent and democracy.⁴ By this argument, Gompers and the AFL Executive Council were only too happy to use the structure of the AFL as a rationale for overlooking the undemocratic practices taking place in national unions. By sanctioning powerful vested interests, the AFL shunned potentially more militant, vigorous segments of the American working class.

As Gompers' response to Starr indicates, there is much truth to this argument. At the same time, however, a close inspection of the AFL Executive Council's response to a range of rank-and-file rebellions in the Gompers years suggests that the critics of the Federation's internal structure have been guilty of oversimplification. During the AFL's first 25 years, in fact, the Executive Council regularly gave fair hearings to dissident movements. In several cases, AFL officers even revoked the charters of affiliates to put secessionists on an equal footing with their former unions.

Then, around 1910, the Federation went through a rather rapid transformation, one which turned the AFL into the type of organization criticized by Ellen Gates Starr.⁵ The episode which triggered the change was a long, bitter struggle involving a secession from the Inter-

³Gompers to Starr, Jan. 28, 1916, reel 2, *AFL Unions*. For examples of this perspective in the recent historical literature, see Warren R. Van Tine, *The Making of the Labor Bureaucrat: Union Leadership in the United States, 1870-1920* (Amherst, 1973), 155-59; James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (NY, 1980), 251-2; William Dick, *Labor and Socialism in America* (Port Washington, 1973), chapt. 5; Nick Salvatore, "Introduction," to Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (Ithaca, NY, 1984), xxii-xxiii; and John H. M. Laslett, "Samuel Gompers and the Rise of American Business Unionism," in Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, eds., *Labor Leaders in America* (Urbana, IL, 1987), 78-80, among others.

⁴Michael Rogin, "Voluntarism: The Political Functions of an Anti-Political Doctrine," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 15 (1962), 527-9. For supporting, but less critical perspectives, see Philip Taft, *The A. F. of L. in the Time of Gompers* (NY, 1957), chaps. 11 and 12; Walter Galenson, *Rival Unionism in the United States* (NY, 1940), chapt. 2; James O. Morris, *Conflict Within the AFL: A Study of Craft Versus Industrial Unionism, 1901-1938* (Ithaca, NY, 1958), chapt. 1.

⁵Indeed, the cases cited by Taft in which Gompers and the AFL rigidly refused to interfere in the affairs of affiliates all occurred after 1910; Taft, however, makes no mention of that fact. Taft, 176-181.

national Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). But the transformation had less to do with that particular conflict than it did with a change in the attitudes of AFL leaders, resulting from challenges from within and outside the labor movement. In that context, the struggle in the IBEW came to symbolize for many national union officers a serious threat to the stability of their unions and they took an increasingly rigid stance against AFL interference. Gompers never again wielded the same authority or flexibility when dealing with rank-and-file movements. An investigation of the changing AFL responses to secession movements not only reveals a more complex picture of the Federation's internal politics than historians have typically presented, but also suggests a great deal about the outlook of AFL leaders during the Gompers era.

* * *

To understand the importance of secessions, it is necessary to begin with some background on the conditions which gave rise to dissident factions. Prior to the emergence of stable national unions, the labor movement was merely a loose confederation of largely autonomous local organizations. Secession had virtually no meaning. The advent of business unionism and national unions by the 1880s, however, provided greater incentives for a local's attachment to a larger organization. Two of business unionism's leading proponents, Samuel Gompers and Adolph Strasser, framed the arguments for the adoption of business methods in 1879 during a debate which raged in the Cigarmakers International Union (CMIU). They argued that the CMIU should adopt a system of high dues and high initiation fees both to control the labor market in the trade and to build up a treasury to pay for a range of benefits—unemployment pay, disability and death insurance, travel expenses to move to a new job, and, most importantly, strike pay. Recalling the devastation caused the labor movement during the depression of the 1870s, Gompers argued that unions without these features fell into disarray; members deserted, “throwing themselves on the tender mercies of the employer.”⁶

While business unionism offered tangible incentives for some workers, it also changed the character of the labor movement. First, unions became more exclusive, representing the most skilled workers for whom control of the labor market was possible. The high dues and initiation fees, work rules, and apprentice regulations of craft unions

⁶*Cigar Makers' Official Journal*, Sept. 15, 1879, Apr. 10, 1879; U.S. Congress, Committee on Education and Labor, *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital*, 48th Cong., 4 vols. (Washington, DC, 1885), 1, 370-1.

aimed to restrict access to the trade. To the extent that craft unions organized less skilled workers, it was principally to protect the jurisdiction of the craft elite. Of course, this change in labor movement policy did not go unchallenged. This was one of the issues over which the Knights of Labor and the national trade unions fought so bitterly in the 1880s before the craft unions established their preeminence.⁷

A second impact of business unionism involved the growing centralization of power. Large treasuries and the ability to offer benefits encouraged locals to look to their national offices rather than city or state federations for support in times of trouble. Administering union funds and benefit programs, meanwhile, required the creation of a cadre of professional, career-oriented union officers who placed the interests of their trade and the national organization above broader but more localized expressions of labor solidarity. Craft union leaders, then, sanctioned local strikes reluctantly when success seemed unlikely, and routinely discouraged sympathy strikes with workers in different trades. For such leaders as Adolph Strasser, preserving the institution became the primary goal even when it conflicted with the desires of the rank and file. He maintained that the duty of national leaders during labor conflicts was

to represent the interests of the International Union regardless of the local instructions of the strike committee. It is also their duty to bring about an amicable and honorable adjustment of the trouble as speedily as possible, thus saving the funds of the International Union, which would be otherwise wasted.⁸

The third major change resulting from business unionism was, in many respects, the flip side of the second. Large treasuries and the establishment of benefits encouraged locals to rely more on the national office but also gave national leaders a disciplinary club to enforce their will against contentious locals. The ability to withhold strike funds or to suspend dissenting locals (thereby also suspending member benefits) unquestionably checked the autonomy and independence of locals. For example, the International Typographical Union enforced a rule requiring national officers to become involved in local negotiations with

⁷Lloyd Ulman, *The Rise of the National Trade Union: The Development and Significance of Its Structure, Governing Institutions, and Economic Policies* (Cambridge, MA, 1955), esp. Part 5; Robert Max Jackson, *The Formation of Craft Labor Markets* (Orlando, FL, 1984); Christopher L. Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective," *Journal of American History*, 65 (1979), 1026-33; Morris, chapt. 1.

⁸David Brody, "Career Leadership and American Trade Unionism," in Frederic Jaher, ed., *The Age of Industrialism in America: Essays in Social Structure and Cultural Values* (NY, 1968), 288-300; Van Tine, 70-71.

employers when there was a possibility of a strike.⁹ Similarly, in the fall of 1899, the New York City iron molders' local crossed the picket line of other metal trades workers rather than defy its national officers and violate the collective bargaining agreement negotiated by their *national* union.¹⁰ To these centralizing tendencies, the business unionists added other mechanisms to enhance the power and prestige of national officers, including a staff of paid organizers and business agents, a union journal, and national trade agreements. All these factors, Warren Van Tine and others have noted, encouraged careerism and conservatism.¹¹

The formation of the AFL in 1886 in most instances abetted the growing power of national union offices. The federation's constitutional provisions for representation assured the domination of national unions over the city labor assemblies. Further, the AFL prohibited city labor bodies from sheltering locals that had been suspended from national unions. The Federation completed its assault on city central bodies in 1898 when it ruled that they could not order local unions to participate in sympathy strikes. The AFL's support for the authority of national unions as opposed to city or state federations of trades carried additional weight because it was coupled with the policy of exclusive jurisdiction which meant that only one national union had the right to represent workers in a particular trade. If a local was unhappy with the policies of its national office, it could not seek affiliation elsewhere. Taken together, all these AFL policies sent a clear message to rank-and-file activists that there was no place within the house of labor for an independent local to go.¹²

Bureaucratic conservatism seemed to follow business unionism. Some union activists were able to resist the temptations of national union power, which led to careerism, complacency, and autocracy. During the 20 years P. J. McGuire led the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, his advocacy of business unionism did not narrow his broad social and political goals. McGuire adhered to a vision of internal union democracy and an informed membership working toward a "cooperative commonwealth." A strong centralized organization did not have to "mean erecting impossible barriers between the leadership and the rank-and-file." Yet other carpenters leaders did not

⁹George A. Tracy, *History of the Typographical Union* (Indianapolis, 1913), 382-3. Also see, Jackson, 253-4; David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (NY, 1979), 22-27.

¹⁰Ulman, 344-5.

¹¹Van Tine, 115-55.

¹²American Federation of Labor, *Proceedings*, 1881, 4; 1887, 5; 1898, 6. See also, Ulman, 404-422; David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20th Century Struggle* (NY, 1980), 23-29.

share his vision; William Huber and Frank Duffy used the mechanisms of McGuire's creation to unseat him and build one of the most autocratic of unions.¹³

None of this is surprising to those familiar with the IWW's or the Socialist Party's criticism of the AFL. Left-wing labor sympathizers viewed business unionism and the cautious, autocratic practices it fostered as the principal impediments to a vibrant labor movement. To them, Gompers was an early, staunch proponent of business unionism; the AFL's failure to expand beyond a narrow craft elite and to tap potential sources of working-class aggressiveness appeared to be the logical outcome of Gompers' policy with respect to the supremacy of the national unions and the absolute power of the entrenched leadership.¹⁴

What is surprising is how often workers within AFL unions rebelled against what they viewed as autocratic power grabs by national union leaders. As early as 1882, Washington, DC, carpenters withdrew from the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJ) when P. J. McGuire attempted to implement business reforms so that the union could offer benefits. At about the same time, New York City socialist cigarmakers formed a rival union to the Cigarmakers International Union because Adolph Strasser's centralizing power was undermining the community-based ethnic locals and their political culture.¹⁵ Later, rebellions occurred because of the unequal treatment of union members, corrupt practices, political perspectives, union tactics, local distrust of national trade agreements, and dissatisfaction with paid union staffers who sacrificed crucial local issues. Especially contentious were unions which claimed jurisdiction over craft and industrial workers in the same industry, such as the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers or the International Brotherhood of Papermakers.¹⁶ Not all of these

¹³P. J. McGuire to Gabriel Edmonston, May 8, 14, 16, 19, 1883, reel 1, *American Federation of Labor Records: The Samuel Gompers Era*, microfilm (Sanford, NC, 1979), hereafter cited as *AFL Records*; *Craftsman* (Washington, DC), Jan. 28, 1888; *The Carpenter*, Aug. 1884, 4, Mar. 1886, 4; Robert A. Christie, *Empire in Wood: A History of the Carpenters' Union* (Ithaca, NY, 1956), 38-40, 50-1; Mark Erlich, "Peter J. McGuire's Trade Unionism: Socialism of a Trades Union Kind?" *Labor History*, 24 (1983), 173-95.

¹⁴See, for examples, William English Walling, *Socialism as it Is* (NY, 1912), 336-47; William Z. Foster, *Misleaders of Labor* (NY, 1927), 17-42, *passim*. For more extensive treatments of the Socialist Party's and the IWW's relations with the AFL, see Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, IL, 1982), esp. chapt. 7; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago, 1969), esp. chapt. 4.

¹⁵Erlich, "Peter J. McGuire's Trade Unionism," 174; Elizabeth and Kenneth Fones-Wolf, "Knights Versus the Trade Unionists: The Case of the Washington, D.C., Carpenters, 1881-1896," *Labor History*, 22 (1981), 194-203; Stuart B. Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848-1896* (Westport, CT, 1973), 131-7; *Cigar Makers' Official Journal*, Feb. 15, April 15, June 15, 1882, Supplement, Sept. 1883.

¹⁶Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930s," 1027-1033; Morris, chapt. 1.

rebellions stemmed directly from business union practices, but the construction of bureaucratic machinery which complemented business unionism made it more difficult for union dissidents to obtain a fair hearing.

What is even more surprising than the existence of conflict within craft unions is how Gompers and the AFL actually responded to rank-and-file insurgencies. Despite the principles of exclusive jurisdiction and trade autonomy, Gompers could — and did — intervene in the affairs of affiliates. More importantly, a chronology of the way the AFL responded, we believe, illuminates the psychology and internal politics of the Federation during its first four decades. Indeed, as is suggested by Julia Greene in another context,¹⁷ there was a turning point in AFL policy between 1908 and 1912 which made it extremely difficult for Gompers to respond flexibly to internal dissent. To demonstrate that change, it is necessary to review the cases of open rebellion both before and after that moment.

* * *

Although there were earlier instances of dissension within craft unions, the first rebellion which involved AFL interference occurred (1894) in the Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators of America (BPDA). The point of contention was the imperious rule of national secretary John T. Elliott, a founder of the BPDA in 1887. Elliott modeled the union after his friend P. J. McGuire's Carpenters, and wished, through business union methods, to build a treasury which would enable the union to offer benefits. Within five years, however, western locals accused Elliott of acting like a "designing autocrat," complained that the Executive Board (based in Baltimore) refused to dispense strike funds to western locals, and charged that he had squelched protest through control of the union journal. Delegates to the 1894 convention ousted him as secretary and voted to move BPDA headquarters to Lafayette, Indiana. Elliott ruled the convention illegal on a technicality, withheld national funds and books from the newly elected officers, and organized a second convention which reelected him and expelled his rival, J. W. McKinney, for conspiring "to create dissension within this Brotherhood."¹⁸ McKinney set up a separate Brotherhood of dis-

¹⁷Julia Greene, "Voluntarism and the Politics of the American Federation of Labor, 1886-1916," (Unpub. paper presented at the conference, "Perspectives on Labor History," Madison, WI, Mar. 9, 1990). Also see her article in *Labor History*.

¹⁸For an account of the painters' struggle, see Elizabeth and Kenneth Fones-Wolf, "Voluntarism and Factional Disputes in the AFL — The Painters' Split in 1894-1900," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 35 (Oct. 1981), 58-69; *Painters' Journal*, Feb. 20, 2, Mar. 20, 2, June 20, 2, July 20, 1892, 5, Oct. 1894, 4, Jan. 1895, 1-4.

sident locals, but the majority stayed with Elliott since he held the funds and books. Both groups then asked for AFL recognition. The AFL Executive Council upheld Elliott, essentially propping up an old union crony. Many city federations backed the dissidents. One city body asserted "that although they were chartered under the A. F. of L. they knew how to take care of local affairs without a dictator."¹⁹

Elliott found it difficult to silence his critics. In 1896, with Gompers returned as AFL President, Elliott turned to his old friend for assistance, calling on the AFL to expel all city centrals harboring locals friendly to McKinney. Gompers, however, refused to help, aware that Elliott was losing support of many rank-and-file painters through such unprincipled actions as encouraging scabbing on his opponents. For three years Gompers resisted Elliott's and McGuire's pleas to crush the "McKinneyites." By 1899, McGuire acknowledged that the AFL's inaction had "strengthened the . . . seceding faction, and weakened the one affiliated with the AFL." In December of that year, Gompers lost patience with Elliott's opposition to unity, promoted an AFL move to revoke the charter of his union and sponsored a unity conference, minus Elliott, in which the dissident faction assumed control and became the duly-recognized AFL affiliate.²⁰

Even as Gompers broke with the AFL's guiding principle of autonomy, he maintained his vocal opposition to secessions. Beginning in 1897, locals of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HRE) began complaining about the corrupt and autocratic practices of union leader William C. Pomeroy, charging him with everything from employing scab labor to build his house to padding his pockets with union funds. In 1897, Pomeroy engineered a total capture of the HRE and moved its headquarters to his home base. When challenged later in the year, he cancelled the upcoming union convention and expelled many of his opponents.²¹ Despite widespread evidence of the truth of the charges against Pomeroy, Gompers offered little comfort to HRE dissidents. As complaints poured in, Gompers counseled them to "endeavor to have their grievances rectified within the organization." To the leader of the dissidents Gompers wrote that "neither as an individual or [sic] as a union man, or [sic] President of the American Federation of Labor, will I give any encouragement to divide, secession or rivalry in the labor

¹⁹Gompers to R. H. Hall, Dec. 2, 1898, Samuel Gompers Letterbooks, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as SGLB); *Painters' Journal* (Lafayette: rival faction), Dec. 1898, 2.

²⁰*Painters and Paperhangers' Journal* (Baltimore: Elliott faction), Jan. 1899, 1-3, 7-8; John Barrett to Gompers, July 25, 1898, Gompers to John Barrett, July 27, 1898, Reel 142, *AFL Records*.

²¹Gompers to P. J. McGuire, May 24, 1897; Gompers to Frank Eggers, May 23, 1898, SGLB; Matthew Josephson, *Union House, Union Bar: The History of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, AFL-CIO* (NY, 1956), 22-4.

movement."²² Meanwhile, he cautioned Pomeroy's allies to end the corruption.²³

Within a year, waiters locals in Denver, Milwaukee, and Detroit seceded from the HRE; others threatened to follow. Gompers openly condemned the formation of a dissident organization of waiters, but the large number of letters expressing support for the secession convinced Gompers of the bankruptcy of the Pomeroy group. In response, the AFL Executive Council set up a December 1898 hearing for the dissidents in Kansas City. Following the hearing, the AFL demanded a new convention and election, promising to revoke HRE's charter if Pomeroy refused. Finally, in August 1899 the dissidents took control of the HRE with Gompers' blessing.²⁴ While certainly not encouraging rebellion, the AFL's officers had at least opened the door for dissident groups hoping to find shelter in the house of labor.

The successful interventions of AFL officers in the Painters' and Waiters' unions disputes coincided with a period of dramatic expansion for organized labor. Between 1899 and 1903, the AFL grew from 300,000 to over 2,000,000 members. Areas of expansion included not only the traditional skilled crafts; indeed, the fastest growing union was the industrially-organized United Mine Workers (UMW). Success among industrial workers triggered much debate and many jurisdictional battles in the AFL over the form and membership of trade unions. Several industrial unions — the Brewery Workers and the UMW — tried to carve out a niche in the AFL, while craft unions in the metal trades experimented with department federation. Some craft unions went even further, claiming industrial workers in related trades but relegating them to inferior status. In general, the AFL's growth did not send a clear message to any position. Some labor leaders argued that industrial unionism was responsible for labor's expansion, but craft unionists countered that current growth proved that labor benefitted most from the existing trade form of organization.²⁵

Although AFL leaders were undecided about their proper role in interunion disputes, the possibilities for trade-union growth made Gompers and the Executive Council even more aggressive in *intra*-union conflict. Two years after the settlement of the Painters' dispute, rank-and-file teamsters rebelled against the Team Drivers International Union (TDIU). The TDIU included not just hired drivers but men who owned from two to five teams. The team owners (who were also employers)

²²Gompers to F. C. Lewis, May 20, 1898, Gompers to Jere L. Sullivan, Sept. 24, 1897, in SGLB.

²³Gompers to Frank Eggers, May 23, 1898, in SGLB.

²⁴Gompers to Eggers, Nov. 21, 1898, Gompers to Jere L. Sullivan, Nov. 21, 1898, Gompers to Sullivan, Nov. 26, 1898, Aug. 25, 1899, in SGLB; Josephson, 25.

²⁵Morris, 15-36.

dominated the national union which consistently failed to support the interests of hired drivers and frequently ran roughshod over locals. In 1902, the TDIU imposed a raise in the per capita tax, further strengthening the power of the team owners and angering the hired teamsters. The dues hike, coupled with continuing resentment over employer control, led rebellious teamsters, centered in Chicago, to secede and form the Teamsters' National Union of America. The Chicago teamsters barred employer team owners from membership and rapidly enlisted widespread support. Within a year, the new union had 18,000 members, rivalling the TDIU.²⁶

As in the Painters' controversy, both groups looked to the AFL for support. TDIU Secretary George Innis asked Gompers to enforce the laws of the AFL and instruct the Chicago and East St. Louis central labor unions to squelch dissent by expelling the secessionist unions. Gompers, however, sided with the seceders in the belief that

there is deep seated conviction among a large number of the team drivers that employers of labor have no right to become members of any local union and that conviction is fully shared by the members of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor.

In locals where employers were admitted, Gompers continued, wage earners "have their courage crushed out of them, with no power to correct grievances because of their fear of discharge."²⁷ The AFL Executive Council again used the threat of revoking the affiliated union's charter and recognizing the seceding union to force the TDIU to negotiate with the rebels. Finally, in 1903, under the guidance of an AFL commission, the two unions merged to form the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which limited membership to those owning no more than a single team.

Two other AFL interventions demonstrate just how intrusive Gompers was prepared to be in a period of union expansion. In 1896, Gompers expressed dismay at the National League of Musicians' (NLM) style of unionism. He asserted that the organization acted more like a professional association than a union. Unable "after every honorable effort" to convince the NLM to protect the interests of rank-and-file

²⁶Donald Garnel, *The Rise of Teamster Power in the West* (Berkeley, 1972), 33-36; John R. Commons, "The Teamsters of Chicago," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 19 (1905), 400-433; AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Mar. 28-31, 1902, Reel 2, *AFL Records*; George Innis to John Morrison, May 7, 1902, Reel 36, *AFL Records*.

²⁷Innis to Gompers, April 1, 1902, Innis to Morrison, Aug. 6, Aug. 23, 1902, Gompers to Innis, Aug. 28, Sept. 27, 1902, N. W. Evans to Gompers, Oct. 3, 1902, Reel 36, *AFL Records*; AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," April 14-19, 1902, April 20-25, Sept. 21-25, 1903, Reel 2, *AFL Records*; *Proceedings of the Joint Convention of the Team Drivers' International Union and the Teamsters' National Union* (Indianapolis, 1903).

musicians, Gompers actually helped dissidents organize the American Federation of Musicians, which the AFL then chartered.²⁸ The AFL president realized rank-and-file dissent could not be ignored, even when unions were implementing principles that Gompers supported. In 1903, the Boilermakers sought to put their union on a firmer basis by assessing locals to support a national strike fund. Baltimore and Pittsburgh boilermakers objected. Dissident locals not only refused to pay the assessment, but also asked for AFL intervention. Boilermaker secretary W. J. Gilthorpe asserted to Gompers that the dissidents were merely "disorganizers and disruptors" who did understand the principles of business unionism. He insisted that Gompers' willingness to listen to the rank and file only encouraged the disruptors. Undeterred, Gompers "butt[ed] in" on behalf of the rank-and-file dissidents before a full-scale secession could take place.²⁹

Finally, Gompers' response to rank-and-file rebellions was unpredictable even when craft unionists were only maintaining their jurisdiction against less-skilled industrial workers. To safeguard the labor-market position of its relatively skilled members, the International Brotherhood of Papermakers (IBPM) claimed jurisdiction over the semi- and unskilled pulp workers. Accordingly, in 1902 the AFL placed its unattached unions of pulp mill workers in the IBPM. Following the strategy of such unions as the Machinists, Coopers, Boilermakers, and Gompers' own Cigarmakers, the IBPM placed the less skilled pulp workers in separate auxiliary locals, depriving them of equal rights and privileges.³⁰

This treatment created turmoil in the union, culminating with the IBPM's 1905 decision that no representative of the pulp workers could become union president. Pulp workers then formed a new union, the Pulp, Sulphite and Paper Mill Workers' International Union, declaring that they "have been subjected to slurs and insinuations from the Paper

²⁸Gompers to Lee M. Hart, Feb. 17, 1896, Gompers to Henry White, Nov. 20, 1897, SGLB; Gompers to F. J. Weber, Aug. 24, 1893, A. Harmon to Gompers, June 15, 1894, C. H. William Ruhe to the Members of the National League of Musicians of the United States, Oct. 11, 1896, Reel 141, *AFL Records*; Sandy Raymond Mazzola, "When Music is Labor: Chicago Bands and Orchestras and the Origins of the Chicago Federation of Musicians, 1880-1902" (unpublished PhD diss., Northern Illinois Univ., 1984), 287-304, 311-44.

²⁹Donald Crawford to Gompers, Dec. 30, 1903; T. H. Flynn to Gompers, Dec. 26, 1903; William G. Gilthorpe to Gompers, Dec. 9, 1903; John McNeil to Gompers, Dec. 2, 5, 1903; McNeil to James Wilson, Dec. 10, 1903; W. D. Prescott to Gompers, Dec. 16, 1903, all on Reel 34, *AFL Records*; AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Jan. 24, 1904, Reel 2, *AFL Records*.

³⁰Robert Zieger, *Rebuilding the Pulp and Paper Workers' Union, 1933-1941* (Knoxville, TN, 1984), 46-47; Harry Ed Graham, *The Paper Rebellion: Development and Upheaval in Pulp and Paper Unionism* (Iowa City, 1970), 3-4; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (NY, 1955), Vol. 2, 182-5; Morrison to Gompers, May 18, 1906, Reel 54, *AFL Records*; International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite, and Paper Mill Workers, *Proceedings*, 1907, 57.

Makers, and, further, that they have not had proper representation." Controversy peaked when the new union sought an AFL charter. For the next several years, both unions fought one another in an escalating internecine war that harmed each side. The IBPM, for instance, scabbed on pulp workers in Mechanicsville, NY breaking a strike. Pulp workers retaliated by staying at work despite an IBPM strike against the International Paper Company. Such conflicts created divisions among the industry's workers and undermined unionism throughout the country.³¹

The AFL acknowledged the legitimacy of the pulp workers' complaints, but initially respected the IBPM's jurisdiction. It denied a charter to the new union, but AFL officials attempted to resolve the differences, refusing to pursue punitive actions against supporters of the unaffiliated pulp workers. The AFL encouraged either amalgamation on a basis providing for complete equality or recognition by the IBPM of the pulp workers' jurisdiction.³² The IBPM would not cooperate, however, contending that any sort of accommodation would only strengthen the seceders. IBPM leader Jeremiah Carey asserted there was no reason for the pulp mills to be "stripped" from his union and a unity conference would be of no benefit. Indeed, he could not "understand why the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor encourages secession, by their lack of consideration of the rights and jurisdiction of a proper affiliated organization."³³ Carey found that the AFL had "given every consideration" to the seceders who caused "the disruption in our ranks." The Federation's Executive Council pressed for an agreement. Finally, in June 1909, both sides signed a treaty granting jurisdiction to each respective union. Objections removed, the AFL chartered the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite and Paper Mill Workers in July.³⁴

To be sure, Gompers never relished rank-and-file dissent, and his willingness to oppose established union leaders in furthering organized labor's growth had many limitations. By the turn of the century, for example, the AFL President had retreated from his earlier support for organizing black workers. In 1893, he had refused to charter the International Association of Machinists because its constitution included a "whites only" clause. A decade later, Gompers by and large accepted labor's exclusionary practices and had given up fighting working-class

³¹Zieger, 46-7; Graham, *Paper Rebellion*, 4; AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," June 18-23, 1906, Reel 3, *AFL Records*; James Fitzgerald to Morrison, Feb. 15, 1906; Jeremiah Carey to Morrison, Oct. 22, 1907, Reel 54, *AFL Records*.

³²AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Mar. 18-23, 1907, Reel 3, *AFL Records*; Morrison to Thomas Mellor and James P. Fitzgerald, both on July 7, 1906, Reel 54, *AFL Records*.

³³Carey to Gompers, Oct. 10, 1906, Reel 54, *AFL Records*.

³⁴Carey to Gompers, Oct. 10, 1906, Reel 54, *AFL Records*; AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Mar. 22, 1907, Apr. 12-19, June 15-19, 1909, Reel 3, *AFL Records*.

racism.³⁵ Similarly, there is no evidence that he supported women's rights to equal treatment within the labor movement. In fact, when women who had been excluded from male-dominated unions applied for direct affiliation to the AFL, Gompers denied their request, agreeing only "to endeavour to reach an understanding" with unions on the subject of admitting women members.³⁶ Nor were Gompers and the AFL Executive Council very supportive of left-wing dissidents. In 1907 Boot and Shoe Workers leader John Tobin used a technicality to erase a socialist victory in his union, and the AFL officers showed their anti-socialist leanings by supporting Tobin's actions. Insurgent union members broke off and formed the United Shoe Workers, but the Executive Council never gave the rebels a fair hearing.³⁷

These caveats aside, it is nevertheless important to note that the AFL's response to secessions was neither rigid nor one-sided before 1910, even when socialists were involved. What should we make of these responses to rank-and-file rebellion? Clearly, in a period of unprecedented growth for the AFL, Gompers was willing to use his personal prestige to intercede in union affairs so that the labor movement would continue moving forward. Although he discouraged rank-and-file secessions in virtually every case and rarely became involved until it was evident that dissidents commanded enough support to disrupt the trade-union movement, Gompers also had the wisdom to respond flexibly to union members' sense of injustice. In many respects, the AFL President anticipated Robert Hoxie's dictum that "when union bosses trod too heavily on members' rights, they were like to be swept aside by a democratic rising of the rank and file."³⁸ It was to Gompers' credit that he would not allow such rebellions to obstruct a period of labor movement expansion.

* * *

After 1906, the outlook for the AFL and the psychology of its leaders began to change. The spread of Taylorism together with a vigorous open-

³⁵Mark Perlman, (Cambridge, MA, 1961), 16-19; Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1981* (NY 1981), 70-73.

³⁶Alice Kessler-Harris (NY, 1982), 157. For a sampling of the exclusionary practices of unions toward women, see: Patricia A. Cooper, *Once a Cigarmaker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Urbana, IL, 1987) and Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana, IL, 1988).

³⁷John H. M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialism and Radical Influence in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924* (NY 1970), 83-87; Graham Taylor, "The Industrial Viewpoint: Shoe Workers' Victory for Good Faith in Trade Agreements," *Charities and Commons*, Oct. 5, 1907, 861-3.

³⁸Hoxie is quoted in James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (NY, 1980), 42.

shop movement signalled a new aggressiveness on the part of manufacturers, while unfavorable court rulings — the Danbury Hatters' case and the Buck's Stove and Range case — challenged organized labor's legal standing.³⁹ As a result, trade-union membership stagnated for nearly a decade following 1904. At the same time, the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the steady growth of the Socialist Party defied the AFL's right to speak for the American working class.⁴⁰ Finally, radical strength within AFL affiliates threatened to undermine organized labor's internal organizational stability by ousting the presidents of the Tailors, the Miners, and the Machinists unions, among others, and scaring the leaders of several others.⁴¹

In this milieu, the AFL Executive Council began to show a more rigid front to rank-and-file activism. Indeed, Gompers' response to the Boot and Shoe Workers' secessionists reflects, in part, this new rigidity. The Boot and Shoe Workers rebellion did not become a benchmark, however. In fact, just a year later in 1908, a rebellion in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) received very different treatment from the AFL Executive Council despite the fact that the IBEW conflict also involved socialists and industrial unionists. In the course of what became one of the longest and most disruptive rebellions, AFL policy changed. Through the IBEW conflict it becomes possible to witness a turning point in the labor movement, one that made it increasingly difficult for AFL leaders to play a mediating role in the internal disputes of affiliated unions.

Like the Pulp and Sulphite Workers' dispute, the IBEW conflict originated in the attempts of more skilled electrical workers to control their labor market at the expense of the less skilled. The union harbored two major groups: one faction, comprised of highly-skilled inside wiremen, was aligned with the well-paid building trades, the other faction consisted of less-skilled linemen employed principally by telephone and telegraph companies on outside work. The inside men dominated the IBEW, in large part because of their connections with the powerful building trades unions. At the 1905 IBEW convention, they banished outside men to separate second-class locals, requiring linemen

³⁹Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement, 1880-1960* (NY, 1985), chapt. 3.

⁴⁰In particular, here, see the work of Julia Greene cited in f.n. 17. See also, Taft, 294-7; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (NY, 1987), chapt. 6. For a differing analysis, see Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875-1920* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), chapt. 5.

⁴¹Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America*, 74-83, 91-108.

to pass exams and pay additional initiation fees to transfer into the more desirable wiremen's locals.⁴²

This change coincided with a period of turmoil and challenge for the IBEW. In 1906, outside workers began a long and ultimately unsuccessful strike against the Bell Telephone Company to protest a wage cut and declining working conditions. Led by vice-president James J. Reid, the strike involved linemen in a costly battle, the cost of which, Reid felt, should have been shared by inside locals. However, president Frank J. McNulty asserted that he could not force the inside locals to contribute, and the IBEW treasury was in no position to finance the strike. Each side levelled recriminations against the other. Reid demanded bold actions from the IBEW, and blamed McNulty and the inside workers for the defeat; McNulty countered, charging Reid with incompetence for misleading the outside workers into a strike they could not possibly win.⁴³

Animosity between inside and outside workers peaked over the ensuing year. During the strike, IBEW treasurer Frank Sullivan, the one outside worker in the national office, had leaked information about the executive board's deliberations to Reid and his faction. When discovered, McNulty and union secretary Peter Collins marshalled the board's support to dismiss Sullivan. To dissatisfied members of the IBEW, this was proof of the growing dictatorial nature of the national leadership, particularly the haughty Collins. Sullivan then distributed a circular and wrote to numerous linemen leaders charging McNulty and Collins with neglect, incompetence, and corruption. Sullivan contended that the IBEW officers failed to pay death claims, refused to support local strikes, and ignored rank-and-file referenda.⁴⁴

The linemen demanded a showdown with McNulty and Collins. In 1908 five locals, as stipulated in the IBEW constitution, called for a special convention. Collins ignored the locals' request, however, because they cited the wrong clause of the constitution. By summer, the linemen were determined to hold a convention regardless of the legal maneuverings of the IBEW secretary. When Collins published the legal opinion of Louis Brandeis in the August *Electrical Worker* upholding the convention call's unconstitutionality, a member of Cleveland IBEW Local 39 filed a suit against the Brotherhood's officers. Meanwhile, more than 100 locals sent delegates to a convention that, in Collins's

⁴²This section has benefited greatly from the forthcoming excellent study of the IBEW by Grace Palladino. She has been kind enough to share chapter drafts with us, and her work has enriched our coverage of the dispute. See also, Michael A. Mulcaire, *The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers* (Washington, DC, 1923), 9-10.

⁴³Palladino manuscript, 87-95.

⁴⁴International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, *Proceedings* (St. Louis), 1908, 22-23.

mind, was unconstitutional. With neither Collins nor McNulty in attendance, the delegates elected James J. Reid president and John W. Murphy secretary. Frank Sullivan resumed his position as treasurer. Delegates left the convention assuming they had corrected the abuses of the IBEW, unaware they were participating in a secession movement. Despite lawsuits and Sullivan's bravado, however, McNulty and Collins refused to surrender their offices. The two groups, each claiming to be the legitimate IBEW, began soliciting dues from local unions and swapping lawsuits. Locals endorsing the Reid faction represented more than three-fourths of the organized electrical workers in the country.⁴⁵

Both groups sent delegates to the December AFL convention. Although the Federation seated the McNulty faction, it appointed an arbitration committee to effect a compromise. The committee called for a new IBEW convention and the cancellation of all legal suits. Thus, the AFL stood for a solution that in all probability could have resulted in a victory for the secessionists. Matters became more complicated, however, when the Reid faction put the issue before its members through a referendum. The secessionists' rank and file rejected the AFL's terms, thus throwing the matter back to the AFL Executive Council. Still solicitous of the Reid faction despite its secession, the Council again attempted to broker a deal, but Reid was wary of McNulty's influence over the AFL officers and he refused to abandon the lawsuits. Finally, the Executive Council declared that since Reid had abrogated the agreement, the AFL would recognize the McNulty faction even though it represented a minority of the workers in the trade.⁴⁶

The decision to back the McNulty faction wreaked havoc on local labor movements throughout the country. Internecine strife erupted as each side scabbed against the other and organized rival locals, while employers played off the two factions to increase their power. Closely affiliated trades, such as those in the construction industry, were adversely affected by the continuous strife punctuated by heated jurisdictional struggles. In a move that also forecast how desperately the AFL wanted to stabilize its ranks in a time of stagnating union membership and criticism from outside and within, the Executive Council took the unusual step of insisting that affiliated city assemblies comply with the AFL constitution and expel the Reid locals. This only aggravated the situation and added fuel to the growing internal opposition

⁴⁵*The Electrical Worker* (Reid faction), May 1911, 336; Mulcaire, *The Electrical Workers*, 19-21; *The Electrical Worker* (McNulty faction), Aug. 1908, 463-5, Sept. 1908, 522-3.

⁴⁶AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Jan. 11-16, 1909, Reel 3, *AFL Records*; Mulcaire, 18-20; *The Electrical Worker* (Reid), Jan. 1909, 11-12.

to the AFL bureaucracy. Two state federations — Ohio and Iowa — and almost 20 city assemblies defied the Federation.⁴⁷

City federations, in particular, provided alternate sources of power for the dissident faction. H. D. Thomas, secretary of the United Trades and Labor Council of Cleveland, protested the ultimatum on the grounds that the electrical workers had the "inalienable right of the members to revolt against International officers who are wrongfully carrying out the purposes of the organization, and who refuse to recognize the members' appeals for a Convention to right these wrongs." Furthermore, he continued, they had "the inalienable right of the majority rule . . . which at the present time you are denying to a three-fourth majority of the Electrical workers." To many, it appeared that the AFL was using the "*Big Stick to Club* the three-fourths majority to bow to the will of the one-fourth minority." The local focus of the city trades assemblies encouraged support for the faction that was strongest in the immediate area, in most cases the Reid union.⁴⁸

AFL officers, however, contended that they could not allow city or state assemblies to recognize seceding unions. Such recognition threatened the authority of the national organization, for it implied an "understanding that they may sit in judgement upon the merits or disputes that may arise within the ranks of trade, a right which is primarily that of the international organization of the trade." For the first time in a factional battle, the AFL used its power; it expelled the defiant central bodies and quickly chartered rival organizations of loyal locals.⁴⁹

Why, in 1909, did the AFL depart from its more tolerant handling of secession movements? In part, the surprising expulsion of such a large number of city and state assemblies resulted from the power within the AFL of the building trades unions that were sympathetic to McNulty. But more importantly, the Reid faction included many with Socialist and industrial union leanings at a time when many national union leaders faced radical challenges within their own ranks. Early in the struggle, McNulty and Collins linked the Reid faction to socialism. Writing to

⁴⁷*The Electrical Worker* (Reid), April, 1911, 160-1. In 1911, for example, building trades councils in St. Louis, Omaha, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, and Providence recognized the Reid faction. In St. Louis, the council called strikes on jobs where McNulty backers worked. In Philadelphia in 1910, however, the Allied Building Trades Council sided with a dual McNulty local and advertised for scabs when the Reid local participated in a sympathy strike with carmen. Reid to Gompers, May 18, 1910, Reel 37, *AFL Records*; V. H. Clifford to W. J. Spencer, July 24, 1909, Reel 25, *Ibid.*; AFL, *Proceedings*, 1909, 76-82.

⁴⁸Quoted in Foner, *History of Labor*, III, 166. Foner sees the electrical workers struggle as involving simply the question of corruption. For the response of other central bodies to the AFL decision, see AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Oct. 18-23, 1909, Reel 3, *AFL Records*.

⁴⁹*The Electrical Worker* (Reid), May 1910, 35-36; Morrison telegram, Oct. 11, 1909; and Gompers to Executive Council, July 17, Sept. 24, 1909, all in "Vote Books," Reel 11, *AFL Records*; AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Oct. 18-23, 1909, Reel 3, *Ibid.*

Gompers, McNulty asserted that Reid and his supporters had "discovered that the Socialists, headed by Max Hayes, are opposed to the decision rendered in our case by the Executive Council and they openly declared they will give the secessionists all the assistance they possibly can."⁵⁰

The expulsions only intensified the struggle, however, especially since both sides purposely misled their allies. Eventually though, the Reid faction moved to address some of its members' grievances. The secessionists reduced the distinctions between the status of inside and outside electricians and reorganized the union to facilitate the decentralization of power through strong District Councils. Its advocates contended that the District Council plan was based "on the theory that the reins of government should be as nearly as possible in the hands of the rank and file; that power should flow from the bottom up, rather than from the top down." Thus, the change constituted "the perfection of a popular form of government as worked out in a labor organization."⁵¹ These reforms blended with a growing socialist and industrial union perspective which became increasingly explicit in the Reid faction. A more radical approach to unionism was largely the natural outgrowth of the outside workers' concerns. Indeed, to be effective against the large companies that employed linemen, the union needed to organize all workers, not just a craft elite. In addition, many linemen, like Reid, favored state ownership of the large utilities and communication facilities. But the Reid faction's radical leanings increased because the most vocal support for the group came from left-wing critics of craft-union leaders.⁵²

Local unionists and Socialists protested the AFL's dismissal of the Reid faction and demanded a settlement. Gompers retreated from his initial harsh policies against the rebel IBEW. Even as late as 1910, Gompers showed concern for rank-and-file grievances, and appointed an arbitration committee to work out a compromise. This time, Reid

⁵⁰*The Electrical Worker* (McNulty), May 1910, 7; *The Electrical Worker* (Reid), Mar. 1913, 154; McNulty to Gompers, Mar. 4, 1909, Reel 37, *AFL Records*; *International Socialist Review*, Oct. 1909, 372.

⁵¹*The Electrical Worker* (Reid), Feb. 1910, 72, June 1910, 318-9, Dec. 1910, 688, Oct. 1911, 657, Mar. 1912, 959-60, May 1912, 1101, Aug. 1912, 1237-9, Oct. 1913, 619-20.

⁵²The Reid faction amended the IBEW constitution to endorse the "National, State and Municipal ownership of all public utilities." *The Electrical Worker* (Reid), Sept. 1913, 564-5, Feb. 1910, 72, Mar. 1912, 959-60, June 1912, 1108-9, Dec. 1913, 760. For Socialist support of Reid, see Max Hayes's column, "The World of Labor," in the *International Socialist Review* generally during these years. In 1910, Collins complained about Socialists' attacks on the McNulty faction: "We know Socialists and their methods, and are neither pained nor surprised at their tirade. The *New York Call*, *Chicago Daily Socialist*, and the Socialist publication, *St. Louis Labor*, centered their artillery of misrepresentation upon us, and charged that the editor (Collins) is the *minion* of the plutocrats and the capitalists." *The Electrical Worker* (McNulty), Mar. 1910, 7.

proved more compliant, but McNulty withdrew from the negotiations. Although a staunch opponent of Socialism and industrial unionism, arbitrator John Frey of the Iron Molders charged McNulty with acting "in exceedingly bad faith," and condemned his action as "one of the grossest and most flagrant violations of good faith and trade-union ethics which I have yet encountered."

The following year, in spite of Gompers's repeated attempts to set up a conference, McNulty again refused to cooperate.⁵³ McNulty and his supporters became increasingly confident that court decisions would vindicate their actions, and demanded that the AFL ignore the complaints of the Reid faction. At the 1912 convention, McNulty backer James A. Short warned other delegates that continued toleration of debate on this issue will encourage "more and more dual associations, and no one knows what trade will be singled out for the next attack. Now is the time to take decisive action and for all time stamp out this intolerable condition." According to McNulty such action would serve as a "warning to all dissatisfied and discreditable members of organizations who may contemplate secession."⁵⁴

Regardless of their reservations about McNulty, AFL leaders finally moved to his defense. To be sure, McNulty's victory in a court case in 1912 strengthened his hold. In addition, the AFL Executive Council learned that the Reid faction had used lies, deceptions, and unethical practices in pursuing its grievances against McNulty. But equally important, Gompers and AFL officials were reacting to the strong support the Reid faction received from industrial union advocates and Socialists. By 1912, many trade union leaders perceived this struggle to be symbolic of a broader contest by radicals for control of the labor movement. The McNulty faction added to that perception by red-baiting their opponents. Not surprisingly, one of its key leaders, Peter Collins, left the IBEW to direct the rabidly anti-Socialist Militia

⁵³For Gompers's efforts to achieve an amalgamation see: Frank Duffy to Gompers, Apr. 30, 1910, Gompers to McNulty, Mar. 14, 1910, Frey to Gompers, Mar. 19, 1910, Gompers to Executive Council, May 9, 1910, Frey to Gompers, May 26, 1910, Duffy to Gompers, May 21, 1910, Reel 25, *AFL Records*; Reid to Gompers, Nov. 19, 1910, AFL Vote Books, Reel 11, *Ibid.*; Gompers to Reid and Murphy, Feb. 18, 1911, Gompers to Reid, May 24, 1911, SGLB. Even as late as March 1912, Gompers wrote McNulty that he desired to: impress upon your mind, and upon that of your colleagues . . . if anything can be done by which the situation may be cleared entirely, by which an appeal may be avoided, and that an honorable arrangement may be made . . . that course should be pursued. Gompers to McNulty, Mar. 30, 1912, SGLB.

⁵⁴*International Socialist Review*, Jan. 1910, 649-50, May 1911, 716; F. J. Sullivan to "All Electrical Workers," Nov. 16, 1909, McNulty to Morrison, Mar. 5, 1912, McNulty to Gompers, Mar. 16, 1912, Reel 25, *AFL Records*; *The Electrical Worker* (McNulty), Nov. 1910, 16, Jan. 1912, 151-7.

of Christ. He pledged to devote his life to "fighting the menace of Socialism in the Labor Movement."⁵⁵ The IBEW struggle seemed to provide lessons both for unionists who genuinely dreaded the growing factionalism and turmoil in the labor movement and for leaders who took up red-baiting as a response to any complaints—legitimate or otherwise—from below.

* * *

Collins's view of factionalism as intricately tied to radicalism and disunity rapidly became the dominant perspective in the AFL. The Federation's leaders became increasingly wary of even listening to complaints against union leaders. Indeed, in 1913, president George Berry of the Printing Pressmen's Union chastised the AFL Executive Council for allowing his opponents to testify against him in a meeting at which Berry was not present:

To officially receive the complaint of representatives of an International Union and decide upon the complaint without giving the International Union a chance of being heard, is, I dare say, unprecedented in the history of the American Federation of Labor. It is an unfair and unwarranted usurpation of power by the Executive Council that deserves a most severe rebuke.

Of course, such interventions were not "unprecedented," but the Executive Council at its next meeting merely turned over the written complaints of secessionists from the Printing Pressmen's Union to Berry without comment, and notified the Central Labor Federation of New York that it would be suspended if it continued to seat the rebel Pressmen's local.⁵⁶

During those same months, the AFL Executive Council learned of a secession from the International Seamen's Union. Atlantic Coast seamen complained that international president Andrew Furuseth was

⁵⁵*The Electrical Worker* (Reid), Mar. 1910, 7; *The Electrical Worker* (McNulty), Mar. 1912, 243-7, April 1912, 295-6; *International Socialist Review*, Feb. 1912, 513. Strong AFL support for McNulty gradually weakened the Reid faction. For instance, it refused to support any labor struggle, regardless of merits, that involved Reid supporters and dual locals. (Morrison to AFL Executive Council, Sept. 3, 1913, "AFL Vote Books," Reel 12, *AFL Records*). After the court decision, most Reid locals rejoined the AFL-endorsed union. Acknowledging that the AFL was the predominant influence among workers, both organized and unorganized, leaders of the Reid West Coast District Council No. 1 asked its membership: "are we to stubbornly remain on the outside and simply howl at the moon, or shall we get on the inside and with other militant and progressive organizations such as the Wes. Fed. of Miners, the Uni. Mine Workers of Am, Brewery Workers, and numerous other organizations, attempt to eliminate this policy and institute in its stead a broader and better one of education, moral suasion and example?" E. E. Smith, *et al* to locals of IBEW, Dec. 1913, Reel 25, *AFL Records*.

⁵⁶George Berry to Morrison, Aug. 4, 1913, "AFL Vote Books," Reel 12, *AFL Records*; AFL Executive Council, "Minutes," Oct. 12-17, 1914, Reel 3, *Ibid*.

incompetent, and that he had "absolutely disregarded and neglected the interests of the sea-faring men of the Atlantic" for over two years. Opponents of Furuseth felt that the president's neglect was responsible for the IWW's successful challenge to the ISU at several Atlantic ports, and sought to avoid paying dues while the Coast ports were in turmoil. Adding to the dissatisfaction of the Atlantic Coast seamen was Furuseth's strong advocacy of reform legislation, which many seamen rejected.⁵⁷

Furuseth responded to the Coast seamen by chartering another local of seamen loyal to his leadership and by revoking the charter of his opponents, some 3000 seamen. The Atlantic Coast opponents then obtained support from the Central Federated Union of New York which interceded on their behalf and urged the AFL Executive Council to investigate the charges against the ISU. But by this time, the struggle in the IBEW had changed the flexible attitudes of AFL leaders; the Executive Council decided that it could not investigate "except upon the request of the officers of the international in interest." Hence, in the case of the rebellious seamen, only upon the recommendation of their international president, Furuseth, could the AFL intercede, a ruling obviously designed to chill protest. Indeed, Furuseth answered the Executive Council's query by acknowledging "that while [the ISU] recognized fully the good intention of the Executive Council in their desire to be helpful, yet [the ISU's] Executive Board had reached the conclusion that it would be impossible to bring about a satisfactory adjustment of the difficulty" through AFL intervention. The AFL then instructed central bodies to "unseat the delegates of the independent union."⁵⁸

The importance of the IBEW rebellion in congealing the AFL leadership's new rigidity against rank-and-file movements became even more apparent at the 1914 AFL convention. In the preceding year, perhaps the most celebrated secession movement of the Gompers years occurred when a large faction of clothing workers rebelled against the conservative and unimaginative officers of the United Garment Workers. At the 1914 convention, delegates from the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union presented a resolution instructing the AFL Executive Council to appoint a committee to bring about unity in the trade. However, Andrew Furuseth, a man with his own reasons for opposing AFL intervention, was chair of the committee to consider the resolution.

⁵⁷T. A. Hanson to Ernest Bohm, June 20, 1913, Morrison to Hanson, Aug. 6, 1913, Reel 41, *AFL Records*; Joseph Goldberg, *The Maritime Story: A Study in Labor-Management Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 1958), 33-41.

⁵⁸Frank Morrison to Ernest Bohm, Sept. 15, 1913, Reel 41, *AFL Records*.

On the fifth day of the convention, Furuseth presented his committee's recommendation against concurring with the resolution, asserting that "to proceed with the inquiry might be construed as recognizing a seceding faction." A debate ensued, during which Frank McNulty obtained the floor and spoke against AFL interference in or investigation of the clothing workers' rebellion. He argued that "if similar action had been taken at the time of the secession movement in the Electrical Workers the seceding organization would not have been encouraged to continue the fight in the manner they had done."⁵⁹ This had been a constant refrain in factional disputes, only now McNulty and Furuseth carried the day; the AFL not only failed to investigate the trouble in the United Garment Workers, but it also used its offices to undermine the efforts of the new organization being formed by the dissidents, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

Thus, in 1916, what Ellen Gates Starr criticized as a typical AFL response to a secession movement was, in reality, a fairly new practice. In fact, Gompers continued to maneuver behind the official statements of AFL policy. Rumors even circulated among leaders of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers that the AFL president was working to reunite all garment workers despite the objections of the UGW.⁶⁰ But with the top leadership of a number of national unions under attack both from employers and from radical critics within their rank and file, Gompers had little support from the AFL Executive Council.

* * *

Too little research has been done on the relationship of union leaders, the AFL, and the rank and file to draw more than tentative conclusions. Based on these instances of secession, however, it appears that there was a dramatic change in AFL policy around 1910 which altered the ability of union members to voice discontent. This resulted in part from the continued growth of business unionism and the AFL bureaucracy which developed increasingly sophisticated methods of consolidating the power of union officials. But the timing of the new rigid adherence to the principle of trade autonomy, which Gompers defined as the right of national union leaders "to do as they think just and proper in matters of their own trade without the let or hinderance of any body of men," shows that there were other forces at work.⁶¹

Gompers's support of business unionism did not automatically

⁵⁹J. M. Budish and George Soule, *The New Unionism in the Clothing Industry* (NY, 1920), 85-91; AFL, *Proceedings*, 1914, 308-9.

⁶⁰Eugene Brais to Sidney Hillman, Mar. 26, 1916, Reel 2, *AFL Unions*.

⁶¹Gompers quoted in David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 29.

shape an AFL policy resulting in the disfranchisement of union members, at least according to the evidence presented here. Indeed, for more than two decades the AFL had acted as a check on some of the worst abuses of business methods and trade autonomy for the sake of its own growth. It took the combination of a powerful open-shop movement, an upsurge in rank-and-file discontent, and a growing Socialist and industrial-unionist bloc within the labor movement to alter the AFL's role in intra-union disputes. These factors coalesced between 1908 and 1912, during the intense rivalry in the IBEW. The ensuing turmoil in local labor movements across the country, together with the support that secessionists received from Socialists and opponents of craft unionism, led AFL officials to link rank-and-file rebellions and radicalism. Unscrupulous labor leaders obviously exploited that link. But even Gompers, who earlier demonstrated some flexibility in matters concerning trade autonomy, became increasingly reluctant to grant so much as a hearing to secessionists. Much more work on rank-and-file resistance to business unionism needs to be done, but it appears that after 1910, the continued growth of the labor movement—even among skilled workers—took a back seat to the preservation of entrenched leaders and their power.

MARIO T. GARCIA

Memories of Chicano History

The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona

Foreword by David Montgomery

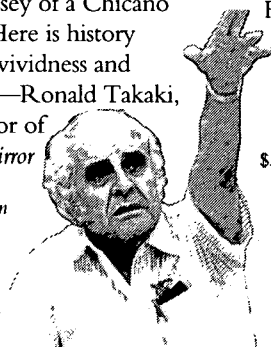
"García has listened to Bert Corona, and retold an inspiring personal story—the odyssey of a Chicano labor activist. Here is history presented with vividness and power." —Ronald Takaki,

author of

A Different Mirror

\$30.00 hardcover, illustrated, *Latinos in American Society & Culture*

Bert Corona



ANGELA WOOLLACOTT

On Her Their Lives Depend

Munitions Workers in the Great War

"A thorough and excellent discussion of the role and significance of women's work in munitions in the First World War. . . . Indubitably offers an original and unusual contribution."—Philippa Levine,

author of *Private Lives & Public Commitment*

\$38.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper, illustrated

At bookstores or order toll-free 1-800-822-6657.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Copyright of Labor History is the property of Routledge, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.