

ARE LABOR UNIONS A THREAT TO AMERICA?

LETTERS OF
SAMUEL GOMPERS
 President, American Federation of Labor
 and
WILLIAM A. QUAYLE
 Bishop, Methodist Episcopal Church

1920 EXCERPTS

In February 1920, amidst the Red Scare, nationwide strikes, and widespread hostility to unions, a prominent clergyman accused the labor movement, and AFL president Samuel Gompers specifically, with threatening the “very existence of our republican form of government.” Gompers responded to the clergyman’s charges in a letter, and a brief correspondence ensued. It did not end well. Published by the AFL that year as *Letters to a Bishop*, the interchange provides a capsule summary of the deeply held positions fueling the labor union con-troversy of the early 1920s.



Samuel Gompers, 1923



Bishop William A. Quayle, n.d.

LABOR IS SCORED BY BISHOP QUAYLE

Baltimore American, February 11, 1920

Methodist Orator Hits Out from the Shoulder—Goes for Samuel Gompers—The Bishop Says the Very Existence of Our Republican Form of Government Is Seriously Threatened Because of the Attempt of Organized Labor to Dominate Congress—Away with Gompers and His Policies, He Says

“The very existence of our republican form of government in this country is seriously threatened because of the attempt of organized labor to dominate the halls of Congress,” declared the noted Methodist Episcopal orator, Bishop William A. Quayle, in an address at Mount Vernon Place Methodist Episcopal Church last night. In a scathing denunciation of the means now being employed by labor unions to obtain their ends, Bishop Quayle unqualifiedly declared that any body of men who sought success through threats against the peace and prosperity of the nation were not worthy of citizenship. Such a condition as now obtains, he claimed, is a direct and deadly threat against popular forms of government.

“Labor’s threat is a challenge against all we have and are in government,” he stoutly maintained, “and as such it is our duty as American citizens to accept the challenge and in our strength rise up and crush the foe to our most cherished ideals. Our government is for all the people, not for any one class or faction.

“By what right does the railroad brotherhood threaten the rest of the nation with hardship, if their own requests are not granted? Who gave the Coal miners the privilege of freezing the nation? I thank God there has risen up in defense of the principles upon which our great republic is founded, such men as Governor Coolidge

Coolidge [Massachusetts] or, as the governor of Kansas who took energetic action to defeat the forces of organized labor when their activity threatened to work evil to the citizens he was sworn to protect.”

The Bishop then launched into a severe arraignment [accusation] of Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, who he declared was more or less a blind leader of the blind. “Who is this Gompers, anyway?” he queried. “Who gave him power to tell the people of the land what they could do, or what they must not do? Was his name ever on the ticket of any party, or did Republican or Democrat ever cast his ballot for him at the polls? Away with him, and such policies as he represents. They will, if continued in and advanced in their logical conclusion, banish political liberty from the land.”

Anarchy was given as an instance of another deadly foe to the liberty of the American people. Bishop Quayle also advocated, in the course of his address, that the Kaiser should be brought to trial, and that Germany be made to pay the full measure of her crimes.

The audience approved most heartily the militant view of the celebrated churchman, and frequently interrupted his remarks with vigorous applause.

LETTER from Samuel Gompers to Bishop Wm. A. Quayle, Feb. 14, 1920

REVEREND SIR: . . .

I cannot in justice believe that you are quoted correctly [in the newspaper article]. A man whose aim in life is to make people better, to raise hopes of a future life as a reward for pure living and honesty of purpose in all their dealings, should not be charged with such utterances unless he over his own signature confirms the published reports of same.

If you did make the statements attributed to you it is undoubtedly because, unfortunately, you are not acquainted with the aspirations of the American Federation of Labor and its efforts to raise the standard of citizenship in our country.

I therefore take the liberty of sending you a number of documents bearing on the aims and objects of the trade union movement. They include the declaration of "American Labor in Peace and in War," its "Reconstruction Program," adopted in June 1919, declarations of principles made December 13, an editorial from the *American Federationist* on bolshevism [Communism], and my address before the Boston Chamber of Commerce on the Boston police strike [1919]. I also commend for your further enlightenment "Labor and the War," which contains my speeches during those terrible times.

If after you have read these documents, which would not be asking too much because of the seriousness of the charges alleged to have been made by you, will you kindly give your opinion of the American Federation of Labor?

Is it a menace to our country?

If the American Federation of Labor was loyal during the war, how can it be charged with being a menace in peace times?

Why should it be necessary for a citizen to have been voted for in an election or to hold office before he is entitled to a hearing?

The American Federation of Labor is fighting against the stealing of democracy in government from the people and the introduction of an autocracy.¹ Does that make it a menace?

The statement attributed to you, if true, would mean that you are in favor of an autocracy in which involuntary servitude would be a benefit to the nation.² I cannot bring myself to believe you would take such a position.

You are reported to have said:

"Who is Gompers, anyway? Who gave him power to tell the people of the land what they could do, or what they must not do? Was his name ever on the ticket of any party, or did Republican or Democrat ever cast his ballot for him at the polls? Away with him, and such policies as he represents. They will, if continued in and advanced in their logical conclusion, banish political liberty from the land."

What have I done that you or anyone else should say, "Away with him?" All my life I have tried to be of service to my fellows and my country, for men, women and children. My aim is to bring light into their lives, to take the children from the workshop and factory and place them in school and the playground, in a word to make their homes more cheerful in every way, to contribute an earnest effort toward making life the better worth living, to avail the workers of their rights as citizens and to bear the duties and responsibilities and perform the obligations they owe to our country and our fellow men.

The statements printed are so important they should be answered, if made by you. Therefore, I am asking if you hold those views?

Yours truly,

SAMUEL GOMPERS
President
American Federation of Labor

¹ I.e., in Gompers's view, total control by the industrialist leaders.

² I.e., that working men who are not allowed to negotiate with their employers over wages and conditions are, in effect, slaves of the industrialists.

LETTER from Bishop William Quayle to Samuel Gompers, March 17, 1920

DEAR MR. GOMPERS:

I have your letter and your enclosures for which I thank you and am glad to have this conversation in writing with you and should be more glad to have a conversation *vivavoce* sometime if it were opportune.³

. . . I believe in the honorableness of labor and the dishonorableness of indolence [laziness]. I believe that an American Citizen has a right to a job if he is honest, industrious and capable, and that no man or men or set of men have a right to hinder him in getting it. I believe in labor's right to organize as I believe in money's right to organize.⁴ But I do not believe in the right of organized labor or organized capital⁵ to do unjustly by any man or set of men of the United States people. I do not believe in the autocracy of a Kaiser⁶ or a President or a group of labor or a group of capital. I believe the United States Government is for all United States people and when any interest or individual or organization interferes with the rights of the American People, then that interest or man or organization must go.

. . .
During the recent strikes and proposed strikes, for instance the coal strike, which was at the beginning of the winter, and the proposed railroad strike, which was scheduled for the month of February, I never heard the slightest intimation in any quarter of the rights of the American People. It was proposed to freeze them by giving them no coal, and it was proposed by giving them no transportation, to freeze them and starve them. It need not require any acute observation to know that that was a thing unthinkable and which never should occur again. A few hundred thousand men cannot be tolerated to administer the Government for their own special and private purposes. Government by threat can not continue if a Republic is to continue.

. . .
We are at one in wishing a living wage and first-class social and family conditions for the American people. Wages should be as high as the well-being, that is continuance, of business and the rights of consumers will permit. When they go beyond this and consider only the wishes of the man demanding wages, they become an infringement on the stability of business and the living rights of the body of the American people.

. . .
To have a due regard for the rights of all is the mark of world brotherhood and world manhood. In the matter of collective bargaining, your organization demands two things and denies a third thing. You demand collective bargaining and you deny and fight collective responsibility. In the steel strikes you demanded not collective bargaining for your organization only, but to do the collective bargaining for all other labor units, not allowing that they had equal rights in that with you. This is not American.

. . .
Would you kindly state to me what number of the membership of the American Federation of Labor is alien membership and what number American Citizens? And will you state to me in your kindness on what authorization as American citizens some of your membership can with the same voice demand a lower cost of living and a higher wage for themselves.

I hope you will consider my letter to be in the same frank and open spirit which you expressed in your letter to me and that we as American citizens and friends of workers and hired men ourselves, can without acrimony or misjudgment of motives, inquire into these things which as many of us believe lie at the root of American institutions.

Yours,

WILLIAM A. QUAYLE

³ I.e., to speak with you directly, face-to-face, when possible (*viva voce*: "in living voice," Latin).

⁴ I.e., in businessmen's right to unite in businessmen's organizations, etc., what Quayle calls "organized capitalism" later in the sentence.

⁵ *Capital*: i.e., industry and finance. *Capital* is money used to generate more money through investing, creating a business, loaning money for interest, etc.

⁶ *Kaiser*: monarch (emperor) of Germany, which had been defeated by the Allies in World War One.

LETTER from Samuel Gompers to Bishop Wm. A. Quayle, May 22, 1920

DEAR SIR: . . .

Owing to my absence from Washington for nearly three weeks, attending the convention of the organization in which I hold membership, and of which I am vice-president, and later by reason of illness and death in my family, I have been delayed in making earlier reply to your letter of recent date.

There is so much in your letter to which exception must be taken that it may not be possible to cover all the ground you have laid out. I do feel, however, that it is necessary to bring to your attention some of the most serious errors of statement in your communication. It is quite clear that you have a misunderstanding of the whole philosophy and purpose of the labor movement, and that for this reason you are unable to properly analyze its actions and understand its motives. . . .

. . . The trade union movement came into being as a movement of hunger. It was made necessary by conditions. It was in the beginning formed in response to a hunger for enough to eat, enough to keep the body alive. As it became possible to secure more food, other hungers demanded satisfaction. They demanded satisfaction through the union, because they could get it through no other agency. The demands were for more and better food, for better clothes and for better homes. It required a struggle to satisfy these needs. The struggle was frequently most bitter in character. This was so because at every step of the way it was necessary to overcome the stubborn opposition of employers who were resolved not to recede and not to relinquish any of the powers and privileges which they possessed. Through its whole history the trade union movement has been a movement whose only purpose was to satisfy the hungers and the needs of those who toil. It is today no different than it has been. Its character and its aims are as always. The needs which it seeks to satisfy may differ in nature, but they are still the needs of the human family.

. . . Working people are not pieces of mechanism to be distributed and employed or discarded at will. The church should be the first to recognize the contention of labor that the workers are human beings. They have all of the rights that go with life, and in America the rights that go with life are in theory equal among all the people. In the exercise of these rights, the organized workers not only find it necessary at times to cease work, pending the establishment of proper conditions, but they find it necessary to refuse to work with those who are willing to accept lower conditions and thus reduce the standard of living for all. Union men do not deny to non-union men the right to work. When non-union men accept working conditions and wages and hours of employment which tend to undermine the American standard of living and which tend to destroy the movement of progress, union men do, however, refuse to work with them. They refuse to give their service under those conditions. Surely, you will not place yourself in the position of denying to them this right.

You hold in your letter that "there must be in America an absolutely open door to any man who wants work to get it without being anything more than an American citizen." I wonder what you have had to say to the employers of America. You ask for a "validating of American citizen's rights" so that he will only be asked when he wants a job "whether he is a loyal American citizen and competent for the job." I wonder what you have had to say to those employers of the United States who in the past have brought to the United States year after year shipload after shipload of the peasants of southern Europe and of Russia to replace American citizens in their employment, at a wage insufficient to maintain the American standard of living. . . .

. . . May I point out to you that working people do not strike because they find pleasure in striking, or because they want vacations. To strike means sacrifice. Frequently it means acute suffering. Always it means a degree of hardship which has in it no element of pleasure. The strike is a protest. It is the one argument left to workers who can find no other avenue of relief, no other argument that will prevail in the overthrow of conditions which are unbearable. It is not to be denied that lives have been lost in strikes. It is not to be denied that many have been injured in strikes. Nor is it to be denied that at times the inconsiderate and impetuous [impulsive] action of striking workmen has been the cause of some of these

deaths and injuries. It is, however, a proven truth, an established fact, that in the vast majority of cases where violence has accompanied strikes, the violence has been engendered by the introduction into the strike of those paid by employers to bring about violence.

...

I quote again from your letter your expression that "all American citizens are entitled to rights of any American citizen and there must be equal laws affecting all." This is true, but there is another truth which might accompany it and that is, that there must be equal opportunity under the law for all. Equal opportunity is not something which is made effective by the law. Equal opportunity can come only when industrial justice is done, and it has been too frequently the case that industrial injustice has been done, not only in spite of the law, but with sanction of law. There has been no force or factor in our country that has done so much to insure equal opportunity as trade unionism.

I have not the time to go more fully into the points raised in your letter concerning the character and spirit of the trade union movement, much as I should like to. I feel, however, that I must call attention to your reference to the railroad situation and your statement that "not capital [industry] but the American people are the objects of your attack." There are in the American Federation of Labor and the railroad brotherhoods something more than five million workers. It may be said safely that these five million workers represent families having a total of twenty-five million persons. The American labor movement thus speaks with authority directly for approximately one-fourth of the population of our country. Practically all of the remainder of those who work for wages in the industries of the nation are unable to speak for themselves, because they have no channel through which they can make themselves heard. These voiceless millions are in no sense unlike those who have organized themselves and created for themselves an ability to speak. Their aspirations and their needs are the same. The organized labor movement does speak with understanding and with authority for the wage-earners of our country. The wage-earners of our country must be included in any use of the term "the people." It would be impossible for the wage-earners to hold the American people as the objects of attack. The wage-earners hold no one as an object of attack. They do attack unjust conditions and they do struggle to remedy those conditions. They do seek to make life better and finer. They do seek to remove oppression and to extend in every possible direction the practices of democracy, to which our country is committed. I ask you to think more deeply concerning this and to see if after such thought your conclusions ought not be reversed.

...

In view of the various statements in your letter to me, and in quotations attributed to you in the press, I cannot but wonder whether you are familiar with the position taken by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America at its special meeting in Cleveland, May 6-8, 1919. If you are familiar with the declaration of social ideals adopted by that meeting, I wonder whether you find yourself in sympathy with that declaration. I wonder in which of the sixteen clauses of the declaration of social ideals adopted in Cleveland you find the basis for the statements you have made in relation to labor. I call your attention, also, to a resolution adopted at the same meeting, one paragraph of which declares "that an ordered and constructive democracy in industry is as necessary as political democracy and that collective bargaining and the sharing of shop control and management are inevitable steps in its attainment." You will note that in the declaration of social ideals there is a demand for the "gradual and reasonable reduction of hours of labor to the lowest practicable point" and that in the resolution to which I have called attention, it is demanded "that the first charge upon industry should be that of a wage sufficient to support an American standard of life." These are two of the principal contentions of the American trade union movement. The gradual extension of organized effort in those two directions has resulted in bringing an annually increasing amount of life and liberty and freedom into the lives of the toilers of America. It will be interesting to know how you justify your own position with the position of cordial approval of our efforts expressed in Cleveland by the Federal Council.

...

Yours truly,

SAMUEL GOMPERS

LETTER from Bishop William Quayle to Samuel Gompers, Aug. 12, 1920

DEAR MR. GOMPERS:

I have your letter relating to the newspaper report of my address in Baltimore in which I was reputed to have expressed opinions regarding the American Federation of Labor and its operations and officers.

That letter is mandatory and intimidative. From it I gather that your organization proposes to repress the public expression of opinion concerning itself and its activities.

Of course as an American citizen I am aware that this is in direct violation of our ideals and our laws.

Yours,

WILLIAM A. QUAYLE

LETTER from Samuel Gompers to Bishop Wm. A. Quayle, Aug. 17, 1920

REVEREND SIR:

I have your letter of August 12 in which you refer to my correspondence as “mandatory and intimidative” and in which you express the opinion that Organized Labor “proposes to repress the public expression of opinion concerning itself and its activities.”

No, my dear Bishop, that is not the case. You are laboring under a serious misapprehension. Candor compels me to say that in your address at Baltimore you simply let your tongue wag like a common scold. When I courteously asked you upon what grounds you based your slandering remarks concerning the Labor Movement and your vituperation upon myself, you apparently lacked the courage to admit that there was no basis for your unjust tirade. I am reluctant to believe that any man occupying a position as high as your own is lacking the character to admit an error so grave yet I have had no such admission from you.

Of course you can not be aware of the large number of letters I have received from both clergymen and laymen of your own faith in which your utterances are most deeply deplored and in which my courteous letters to you have been most highly commended.

Because of the sincerity of my desire for some relevant expression from you I must again call your attention to the specific newspaper quotations which called forth my first letter. I quote the following two paragraphs:

“I thank God there has risen up in defense of the principles upon which our great republic is founded such men as Governor Coolidge or, as the Governor of Kansas who took energetic action to defeat the forces of organized labor when their activity threatened to work evil to the citizens he was sworn to protect.”

“Labor’s threat is a challenge against all we have and are in government, and as such it is our duty as American citizens to accept the challenge and in our strength rise up and crush the foe to our most cherished ideals. Our government is for all the people, not for any one class of faction.”

I have written you twice asking you for a candid reply. It is my desire to know upon what you base your assertions and I believe that I have the right to an answer. I have finally extracted from you your letter of August 12, which, however, deals not at all with the question at issue and which I feel sure must carry to fair-minded men a condemnation of your own course of conduct.

Yours truly,

SAMUEL GOMPERS
President
American Federation of Labor