

THE LABOR PHILOSOPHY OF SAMUEL GOMPERS

BY
LOUIS S. REED, A. M.

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN THE
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INTRODUCTION

THE Gompers epoch in the history of the American labor movement began in the seventies and eighties. Its end may confidently be placed around the second decade of the present century. This period, encompassing some fifty years in American labor history, may be called an epoch because during it the American labor movement was dominated by a particular and special type of trade unionism; a unionism mostly of crafts, more craft than class conscious, accordingly having no aspiration to control the state; concerned with industry and industrial processes generally only to the extent necessary to wrest from employers higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions. Superficially it may not seem as though this particular type of union has given up the ghost, or is about to do so. The building trades, the printing trades are still there, pursuing policies and procedures practically identical with those of two or three decades ago. But looking deeper and more closely, is it not apparent that the present decade has brought one defeat after another to this type of unionism; that during this period the American labor movement, dominated by this species of unionism, has become weaker and weaker, and confined to an ever smaller sector of the industrial field? Abroad labor grows more powerful: in England and Australia it has recently assumed the reins of government. In this country the labor movement becomes more and more impotent, less and less important in the life of the nation. It has almost come to the point where one may say that the labor movement in this country will either change its basic philosophy and policies, or there will be no labor movement worth talking about.

This volume, then, deals with the philosophy of a past or

passing epoch in American labor history. This epoch may be called by Gompers' name for certainly Gompers did dominate it. Officially, during the greater part of this period, he was the movement's head. But he was its real leader also. To a very large extent his ideas were the ideas of the trade unionists of his day; his philosophy was the philosophy of the movement. In a very real way he was spokesman for the movement, being thoroughly in tune with it. And not only did he hold and express the philosophy of the movement, but he was part author of that philosophy. During the past thirty years or more, American labor has been living upon the intellectual capital accumulated in the seventies, eighties and early nineties. In the accumulation of that capital, Gompers played a leading rôle. Accordingly this work, as a study of the ideas of Gompers relative to labor and the labor movement, is also a study of the philosophy of the dominant section of the American labor movement during the past fifty years.

By Gompers' philosophy is meant his system of ideas. His philosophy comprises his outlook upon the world in which the labor movement had its being, his basic beliefs with regard to its place and purpose, and his ideas as to the policies and strategy most suitable for achieving that purpose.

It is not adequate, however, simply to tell what Gompers thought. Why he thought what he did is also important; indeed, in many cases it is impossible fully to comprehend what Gompers' ideas were, without understanding also the situations and experiences which caused him to adopt those ideas. Accordingly this study, in dealing with Gompers' ideas and policies, attempts to account for them and to show their origin, and then in so far as his ideas and policies changed through time, to trace their development and the reasons therefor.

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