

"Labor is Not a Commodity"

By JOHN REED.

Impressions of the A. F. of L. Convention.

SAMUEL GOMPERS has fought for years for legal recognition of the fact that "Labor Is Not a Commodity or Article of Commerce." At the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor just ended, Mr. Gompers proudly proclaimed from the platform that he had written this sentiment into the Peace Treaty at Paris. It developed that after the American delegates left Paris the provisions of the International Labor Charter had been "somewhat weakened"—according to a cablegram from President Wilson himself, and the sacred sentiment itself had been changed to read "Labor should not be regarded *merely* as an article of commerce." Andrew Furuseth said that it was as if he had demanded a declaration stating "Andrew Furuseth is not a scab"—and instead, they had put it, "Andrew Furuseth is not *merely* a scab."

In the great white hall out at the end of the Steel Pier at Atlantic City, with the heavy surges running underneath, and the sea-wind sweeping over, six hundred delegates of the American Labor movement met in the "reconstruction" convention. (Said one delegate, in a spread-eagle speech, "Reconstruction? We don't need any reconstruction in this glorious country. All we need is a few slight reforms!") No one suddenly dropped down in that hall would have guessed that this was the annual meeting of delegates from all sections of one of the most powerful labor movements in the world. Portly figures, good clothes, expensive cigars, diamond rings and pins in abundance, buttons of lodges and fraternal orders—Elks, Masons—in whose ranks these "workingmen" hob-nob with business men, manufacturers, members of commercial clubs and Chambers of Commerce. Few workingmen here. It looked like the Democratic National Convention—but a little more prosperous-looking; or like the annual Congress of the Dress Goods Manufacturers.

And it *was* like that. This convention was composed of persons with a commodity to sell; and the commodity was *Labor*. Moreover, Labor was sold there—in hundreds of different ways.

Let us make a rapid survey of what was done by the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor:

1. Sentenced Tom Mooney to life imprisonment, by condemning the July 4th General Strike, and ferociously denouncing the International Workers Defense Union.
2. Officially denounced the One Big Union movement, and all forms of industrial unionism.
3. Approved of the Initiative and Referendum in politics, and disapproved of it in the American Federation of Labor.
4. Ignored the Winnipeg strike, and, in a speech by Gompers from the chair, ridiculed the Seattle strike.
5. Refused to endorse the Labor Party and advised against it—although, owing to the strength of the movement, the Federation declared that it would not interfere with the affiliated national and international unions in this matter.
6. Requested the Government to recognize the Irish Republic and *not* to recognize the Soviet Republic.
7. Condemned the Russian people to starvation wholesale by refusing to ask for the lifting of the blockade.
8. Voted down a resolution demanding the release of political prisoners, and declared

that "many of the sentences imposed were fully justified."

9. Decided to organize the Steel Industry.

10. Passed a resolution condemning the abuse of judicial powers in construing the law, and advising workers to disregard injunctions in industrial disputes.

11. Voted down a proposal to change Labor Day to May 1st, and another to arrange it that all contracts expire May 1st—because the International Labor Movement of Europe—which is revolutionary—celebrates on that day.

12. Requested the President to dismiss Postmaster-General Burlison from office.

13. Voted down a proposal that the workers demand the right to elect their foremen. ("Why," said Matt Woll, speaking on this motion, "that is the business of the employer—not the worker. You might as well have the workers elect the Board of Directors!")

14. Endorsed the bill in Congress to restrict foreign immigration for a term of years—including Mexican immigration.

15. Refused to support Soldiers' and Sailors' Councils, and in particular, the Soldiers', Sailors' and Marines' Protective Association.

16. Refused to take a stand against the deportation of radical aliens.

17. Requested the Government to repeal the Espionage Act, but only after peace is signed, when it will automatically cease to function anyway.

18. Endorsed the Labor Charter attached to the Covenant of the League of Nations—which has been denounced by the Labor Movements of every civilized country on earth—and gave its qualified approval to all the words and deeds of Woodrow Wilson and the Democratic Party.

The report of the Resolution Committee recommended that the Executive Council "give their early attention" to considering ways and means to get a new trial for Mooney. Then it launched into a bitter attack upon the International Workers' Defense League, accusing the League of attempting to break down the Trade Union movement by taking a strike referendum of the organization. "Irresponsible groups of men," it said, found in Organized Labor "a rich field for exploitation!" . . . An attempted general strike would, in the words of the Committee, "seriously injure the effort to secure a new trial for Tom Mooney." The report ended:

"The Committee would be remiss in its duties if it failed to call attention to the fact that representatives of the International Workers' Defense League who are its agents soliciting funds for T. J. Mooney's defense are doing him an incalculable injury and also creating internal disturbances within the Trade Union movement through their continuous attacks, unjust criticisms and misrepresentations of the American Federation of Labor, its officials and the officials of affiliated organizations."

Patterson, of the Defense League, was given the floor. In a passionate speech he pointed out that for two years various labor leaders had been going around the country whispering that Mooney was guilty; that repeatedly he had offered the San Francisco Labor Council and the San Francisco Building Trades Council full charge of Mooney's defense, and offered to turn over to Organized Labor all

funds and machinery and that both the American Federation of Labor and the great International Unions had refused to do anything to help Mooney, nor had the convention done anything.

Concerning the Committee's recommendation against the initiative and referendum in the A. F. of L., I interviewed Frey. His argument was that if there were initiative and referendum in the Federation, some outside organization would surely be able to get hold of the membership and break down the organization. He admitted to me that the masses of the membership could not be trusted to make laws for themselves without the interposition of some deliberate body, and some rule which provided for a "period of deliberation."

The recognition of the Irish Republic was the price paid by Gompers to the Sinn Fein politicians in the convention, in return for which they agreed to throttle Soviet Russia and support the League of Nations. This action was on a par with the deeds of the Tchekho-Slovaks, who, to gain their own independence, sold their arms to the Allied Imperialists for the black purpose of destroying the freedom of the world's workers. Anyway, it meant nothing—nothing but words; and even then, the United States Senate has demanded practically the same thing.

The Committee's objection to recognizing Soviet Russia was, according to Frey, because it was not "democratic."

"As far as I can understand it," he said, "it is a government of the workers, and the workers alone. Therefore we cannot recognize it!"

The proposal to terminate all contracts with employers on May first, and to change Labor Day from September first to May Day, was voted down for two reasons: first, because May Day was celebrated by European Labor and Socialism—and second, because if the workers of the United States celebrated on the day following the abrogation of their contracts, they would be too excited! "We don't want to have a Labor Day when every body is hot-headed," explained Frey.

Thursday, June 19th, was taken up with the report of the Committee on Executive Council's Report. At 9.30 A. M. Louis N. Morones was seated as a fraternal delegate from the Mexican Federation of Labor. At 11.30 Matt Woll read the report recommending the exclusion of foreign immigration, which was quickly amended and passed to apply also to Mexican immigration. . . . I saw Morones afterward. He was pale, and very much agitated.

"What effect," I asked him, "will this have upon the Pan-American Federation of Labor Convention, which is to meet in New York in July?"

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Disastrous!" he said. "In the present moment, when the great American interests are urging the invasion of Mexico, the Mexican workers believed that they could rely upon the American Federation of Labor to oppose these plans of annexation. They will not now be so sure."

When the question of the League of Nations came up, Andy Furuseth made a violent attack upon the Labor Charter in the Peace Treaty. He declared that it had been altered by the diplomats after the American delegation left Paris, and that it provided, anyway, that the League of Nations would be able to interfere in the daily life of every worker in the world. He said that a clause against human