

Samuel Gompers (b. 1850) was elected president of the American Federation of Labor at its founding convention in 1886 and remained so for all but one year until his death in 1924. The AFL was an alliance of trade, or craft, unions—labor unions that represent workers according to the particular skill they perform. As the AFL grew into the largest labor organization in the United States, Gompers himself came to be viewed as the foremost spokesman for the American worker. Earlier in his career, however, as a young cigar maker in New York, Gompers had to choose among various approaches as to how workers might go about improving their lives. The following excerpt from his autobiography sheds light on how he personally came to embrace trade unionism and reject radicalism.

The Weakness of Radical Tactics

(Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography*, edited and with an introduction by Nick Salvatore, Cornell University, 1984, pages 25-26 and 31-35; Gompers' autobiography was originally published by E.P. Dutton, Inc., in 1925.)

The man whom I loved most and for whose brain, heart, and character I have always had boundless admiration was Karl Malcolm Ferdinand Laurrell. He was so gentle and yet so able. I heard much of him about the shop before I met him—his was the dominating mind. Laurrell spoke with a distinct Teutonic accent and very tersely—especially when not pleased. He didn't seem to think much of me at first. But that was probably due to my enthusiasm for the fraternal orders. Karl, Pher-kopf (*Pherd Kopf*—horse head) as he was generally called, had passed through that stage of thought and had been convinced that the trade union was the fundamental agency to which working people must trust. At first he regarded me as “fresh,” but soon he began talking to me, explaining a bit now and then as though he would teach me. He afterwards explained he thought he saw ability in me, and he wanted to save me from mistakes. His kindly talks and warnings did more to shape my mind upon the labor movement than any other single influence. The principles of trade unionism that I learned then remained the basis upon which my policies and methods were determined in the years to come. I have always felt that he watched over me with chastening criticism, for he wanted to save me from allowing my sentiment and emotion to be perverted into the channel of “radicalism.”

Laurrell was a Swede by birth—a bit wild as a lad, his mother put him under a sea captain, and for two years he learned discipline in the stern school of seafaring life. After he came on shore he went to Copenhagen where he learned the cigarmaker's trade. There he came in contact with German thought and the continental labor movement—political and economic. Strong and vigorous, mentally and physically, he forged to the head of both the revolutionary and labor movements. He was elected secretary for the section of the International Workingmen's Association comprising Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Through this work he came into correspondence with German leaders. When the revolution was stirring all of Europe in the seventies, Laurrell was in the crowd that made a demonstration before the royal palace in Copenhagen. For days he hid from the soldiers, and when his bruises had healed, made his escape to the Navy yard where he had friends and from there found passage to Hamburg where he worked for several years. Then he came to New York. Laurrell knew from experience the revolutionists, the Socialists, the anarchists, and the trade unionists.

...In 1873 began my experience with financial crises. The one that followed the Civil War occurred before I was old enough to watch with understanding. As a New York workman in 1873, I first watched the crisis and depression of what we now call the business cycle. During the summer of that year we heard rumors of pending financial troubles. The goldbugs were getting a tight clutch on the gold supply—and this the cigar manufacturers gave as their reason for dismissing the workers and reducing wages. The crash came in September when the Jay Cooke Company and Fiske and Hatch announced failure. The scenes downtown were wild on that rainy day.

Probably [labor's] first move came from the Arbeiter Union, or its official paper the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, suggested perhaps by the International or at least by members of the International. The Workingmen's Council followed quickly and these two organizations jointly worked out a plan including a mass meeting in Cooper Union December 11. Then the Spring Street Council pounced upon the dramatic possibilities of the situation [and] issued a circular.

Meanwhile the Tenth Ward, according to the plan of the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, had been divided into four sections and men sent out to take the census of unemployment. The same plan was followed in other wards. The result gave a definite basis upon which to form a plan for relief. The following fundamentals were endorsed by ward meetings and were urged upon the public: (1) employment for the unemployed on public works; (2) maintenance or money for at least one week for the needy while out of work; (3) Mayor and Governor to prevent evictions of unemployed because of failure to pay rent. This was frankly an emergency program—a prototype followed in practically every succeeding crisis until an effort was made to develop a constructive program in 1921.

The mass meeting authorized the appointment of a Committee of Safety—a name borrowed from the dreaded specter-conjuring agency of the French Revolution. Many street meetings followed to burn into the hearts of all tragic demonstrations of human need. The unemployed filled the city's streets and squares and marched to conferences with Aldermen and Mayor at the City Hall. It was a folk movement born of primitive need—so compelling that even politicians dared not ignore. There is something about a marching folk-group that rouses dread. Those in authority did not rest comfortably. The press began hinting at the "Commune."

Meanwhile plans were moving forward for a big out-of-door mass meeting in Tompkins Square on January 13, 1874. Mayor Havemeyer had promised to be present and to address the meeting.

Several times before that day groups of unemployed ranging from hundreds to thousands in numbers accompanied their spokesman to the City Hall. They remained outside listening to speakers, while suggestions were submitted to city authorities. Their physical presence gave urgency to their needs and demand for relief. The Police Commissioner granted a permit for the mass meeting and parade as far as Canal Street, thus protecting the City Hall from unpleasant personal contacts. This restriction blunted the effectiveness of the plan for the demonstration. Banks and McGuire protested but without avail. Elliott

telegraphed to Governor Dix who declared he had no authority to intercede and referred the whole matter to the Mayor. The Mayor left all to the Police Commission, which was controlled by a former associate of Boss Tweed. Dissension developed within the ranks of workingmen. The group of radicals, so-called Communists, saw in the situation an opportunity for propaganda. Propaganda was for them the chief end of life. They were perfectly willing to use human necessity as propaganda material. Practical results meant nothing in their program. This group got control by self-appointment to a provisional committee of the Safety Committee. They got money for their campaign from Mr. Kayser, ex-member of the Tammany ring. They issued circulars that had artistic and literary merit. They made speeches that contained good headline stuff. They painted the skies with "true" revolutionary plans and extravagant ideals.

Another group, representing the workingmen's unions, protested against demagogic methods and urged that relief for human beings was the real thing. The daily press played up the picturesque and made the city feel that Communists were in control and that they were on the verge of a revolutionary uprising. On the day before that set for the Tompkins Square demonstration, the Park Commissioners sent an order to the Police Commissioner forbidding the gathering because it "threatened public peace." The Police Commissioner sent an order to the Safety Committee demanding the return of the permit. But the Safety Committee was not to be found—none of them went to their homes that night.

But some of the labor men not on the Safety Committee, who learned of the situation, feared the results for those who would go to Tompkins Square the next morning. Laurrell was among this number. On the night of the twelfth he went to union meetings and, wherever he knew that working people would be gathered together, told them of the withdrawal of the permit and warned them against going to the Square on the morrow. That was not a pleasant task and required courage of a very real sort. As it was not generally known that the permit had been withdrawn, Laurrell was unjustly derided as a renegade.

Next morning people began assembling early in the Square. I reached the Square a little after ten. Soon the park was packed and all the avenues leading to it crowded. The people were quiet. There was nothing out of harmony with the spirit of friendly conferences between the chief public official and workless and breadless citizens. The gathering was planned as visible proof of suffering and destitution among New York unemployed. It was about 10:30 when a detachment of police surrounded the park. Hardly had they taken position before a group of workers marched into the park from Avenue A. They carried a banner bearing the words "TENTH WARD UNION LABOR." Just after they entered the park the police sergeant led an attack on them. He was followed by police mounted and on foot with drawn night-sticks. Without a word of warning they swept down the defenseless workers, striking down the standard-bearer and using their clubs right and left indiscriminately on the heads of all they could reach.

Shortly afterwards the mounted police charged the crowd on Eighth Street, riding them down and attacking men, women, and children without discrimination. It was an orgy of brutality. I was caught in the crowd on the street and barely saved my head from being

cracked by jumping down a cellarway. The attacks of the police kept up all day long—wherever the police saw a group of poorly dressed persons standing or moving together. Laurell went to Tompkins Square and received a blow from the police across his back, the effect of which remained with him for several months.

The next few days revealed revolting stories of police brutality inflicted on the sick, the lame, the innocent bystander. Mounted police and guards had repeatedly charged down crowded avenues and streets. A reign of terror gripped that section of the city. They justified their policy by the charge that Communism was rearing its head.

The Tompkins Square outrage was followed by a period of extreme repression. The New York police borrowed continental methods of espionage. Private indoor meetings were invaded and summarily ended by the ejection of those present. The police frustrated several meetings held to protest against police brutality and in defense of the right of free assemblage for a lawful purpose.

I was in no way connected with the arrangement of this demonstration and was present as an intensely interested workingman and the import of the situation bore in upon me. As the fundamentals came to me, they became guide-posts for my understanding of the labor movement for years to come. I saw how professions of radicalism and sensationalism concentrated all the forces of organized society against a labor movement and nullified in advance normal, necessary activity. I saw that leadership in the labor movement could be safely entrusted only to those into whose hearts and minds had been woven the experiences of earning their bread by daily labor. I saw that betterment for workingmen must come primarily through workingmen. I saw the danger of entangling alliances with intellectuals who did not understand that to experiment with the labor movement was to experiment with human life. I realized too that many of those of the radical, revolutionary impatient group were of the labor movement and just as sincere as many of those whose judgment was more dependable. The labor movement is made up of men and women of all sorts of natures and experiences. Their welfare depends on solidarity—one group cannot sit in judgment upon others or condemn publicly, but all must do what they can for mutual protection. Division is the great hazard of the labor movement.

...Conditions which in part shaped the happenings of January 13 were urging men in the various labor organizations in New York to unflagging search for something constructive. Within the International were staunch trade unionists who wanted to start an American labor organization. Among these men were my friends Ferdinand Laurell (and ten others)... This group formed the Association of United Workers of America which intended to further and promote trade unions. Laurell was a member of the first Federal Council of the Association.

The fundamentals which this organization endorsed were: “The emancipation of the working class can be achieved through their own efforts and that emancipation will not bring class rule and class privileges for them but equal rights and duties for all members of society. Economic betterment is the first step to the desired end; to its achievement all political effort must be subordinated..