

SAMUEL GOMPERS WRITES ON TRADE UNIONISM IN FRANCE

Charge That French Government is Opposed to Working
Class Organizations is Baseless, According to M.
Vivain—Gompers Has a Busy Time

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PARIS, July 17.—The various passing phases of trade unionism in France, as coupled with revolutionary projects, form a stock theme for writers of all sorts of opinions on the subject, from the dreamer who catches in one or another of the attendant circumstances, a promise of the fulfillment of his ideal state, to the cynical newspaper man who sees in the continuous performance of the contesting leaders an endless supply of "copy." There is always something new to chronicle, something fresh to be offered in comment, I cannot, of course, offer in this letter the confident conclusions to which one might arrive after an exhaustive inquiry into the present phase, but my opportunities during the last week have been unusually good for seeing some of the governing facts in this situation.

I have been in touch with the leading characters in the French labor movement, in and out of office, have spoken at an important meeting where representatives of all sides were present, and free to ask me questions, and have been interviewed by a swarm of newspaper men who waited at my hotel to make articles out of me, to earn their honest living and who in turn I have interviewed.

My short trip to France now over, with many events occurring daily that had some relation with my mission, I feel called upon first to say that the cordiality with which I was treated on all occasions, most gratifying it was, left me with the feeling that the organized French workmen recognize the significance to themselves of the American labor movement and wish to learn the principles which have been the cause of our success. While in my talks, in public and private, I was called upon to explain our methods, at times to that necessary extent which embodied the criticism of the sort of politics that hamper the French labor movement, I was listened to in every instance with attention and respect. There was shown very little of that spirit of wrangling and demonstration that has unfortunately characterized those leaders of socialism in America who without cause reason pretend to think that they are promoting the same cause as the socialists of Europe.

The reader may at once get a point of observation which whether entirely correct or not, will enable him to survey the situation as a whole. I begin by stating the views of M. René Vivain, Minister of Labor and Member of the French Cabinet, as he gave them to me in an interview on Thursday, the morning after the national celebration of the fall of the Bastille, July 14th. His are, of course, the views of the present administration—as they say here, government of France. I was presented to M. Vivain formally in his office by M. Harlet, one of the investigators of the department to whom the usual courtesies to strangers had been extended by me last year at the American Federation of Labor headquarters in Washington.

M. Vivain is an enthusiastic admirer of American trade unionism. After the greetings, I asked M. Vivain what grounds there were for the statement I had frequently heard before and since coming to France, that his government was opposed to working class organizations to such an extent that on the occurrence of a strike of any character the authorities might be expected to order the intervention of the army or provide a supply of strike breakers. M. Vivain replied that the charge was baseless. Never had the present government interfered on any occasion when the strike was between a private employer and his men, except when actual violence had taken place, with attacks upon persons and destruction of property. It was then only when government employees had gone on strike, endangering the public safety, that soldiers were sent to the scene or men hired to take the place of the strikers. In these cases," said he, "the nation being the employer, the suspension of an essential public business and the stability of society were threatened. A strike of government functionaries could not be tolerated. The work of postmen and government telegraph operators, for example, must go on uninterruptedly if a country is to maintain order, peace, communication from place to place, publicity of current events and those conditions of commerce in which above all other classes the masses of working men have a vital interest. The present government found it necessary to put an end to the strike of the postmen and telegraphers and then made its explanations to parliament and had been sustained in the action, and now promises to continue the policy that had thus far been followed. The malcontents were led by politicians holding extreme, impractical and inconsistent views. They were trying to mislead the working classes while often promoting their own political fortunes. As to the "C. G. T." (Confédération Générale du Travail) General Federation of Labor, it by no means represented the majority of the organized industrial workers of the country. By an unfair system of voting at its delegate sessions, a comparatively small number of extremists controlled its actions. The large and sane rational unions such as the Typographical, the Metal Workers, the Bookbinders, the Miners were thus criticized by delegates representing cases, but a few hundred members of the C. G. T. represented only about one-third of the union members of France.

The uninformed readers of certain French daily newspapers," he continued, "might be led to believe that the country was in a constant state of riot and disorder arising from the

government's attitude on the labor question. Not so. Much attention given the disturbers by the press in general because of politics and not as a result of real gravity in the situation. France, in general, was at peace industrially. The unions were quiet, but persistently pursuing their work of organizing and promoting the welfare of their members; the scenes of outbreaks were only in Paris and occasionally in a few other industrial centres. The government had been more sympathetic in its efforts on behalf of the working classes than any preceding government in France. The establishment of this department, now in its third year of its existence, earnestly striving to be of service to labor and of the country, is one of the best proofs of my statements. The cabinet will continue its present course, depending upon the common sense of only of the French people generally, but of the working people of France particularly for support.

I confess that I had heard officials even in the United States and elsewhere glibly make statements of a similar character, but M. Vivain really impressed me with his sincerity. I differ with him strictly as to the right of the working people in any employment whether private or public, to cease work. The right to cease work distinguishes the free men from the slave who must work regardless of the conditions imposed upon him by his employer, whether that employer be an individual, a firm, a corporation or the state, but in France as in many countries, the pernicious tendency is to the man to his work.

At M. Vivain's mention of the generally stable character of the unions in France outside of the few industrial centres I recalled my visit to Calais, with its many pleasant features. When with my little party I landed, on coming from Dover accompanied by Secretary Appellon, of the General Federation of Trades of Great Britain, we were met by a score of delegates of the Lace Makers' Union, which is strong in the northeast of France. In appearance and address these men were of the very best type of wage workers. Their union, they explained to me, had been modelled on the English system, and they had mainly followed through trade union methods in increasing wages and otherwise improving their conditions as workers. Their wage scale now compares well with that of the English workmen of the same industry, especially, where the industry has grown considerably in recent years, the union has at the same time developed strength. At present employers and employees are both doing well. The mayor of Calais, who was present, and some of the councilmen, are union members. They have helped in the improvement of the municipality sufficiently well, in fact, to be re-elected to office. Some of these councilmen call themselves socialists, in which case the name does about as much good, or about as much harm, as it does in the case of the unitary co-operative society of Calais, which also goes by the title of socialist. In either case work is done for the present day, beneficial in character. There have been strikes in Calais at times; but neither unionism nor the public welfare have thereby suffered seriously. On the contrary they have abolished grievances and brought about improved conditions. Incidentally to such few strikes which have occurred, agitation had been lively and some friction with the police has occurred, but neither unionism nor the public welfare have thereby suffered seriously. France could and will very well get along and progress with such a character of trade unionism as is practiced by the Lace Makers at Calais and the practical trade unions, which obtain in many trades.

The morning I reached Paris "Le Matin" contained a letter from Lebel, who had just resigned as secretary of the "C. G. T." in consequence of a decision by its delegates contrary to his convictions, and because of which he deemed it obligatory upon himself to resign his office. M. Niel described the "C. G. T." in his letter, as ruled by politics. While admitting that he was a socialist, he denied that he ever permitted his political opinions to influence his trade union activities. He said that the "C. G. T." is now in full power in the general organization, asserted that "their Unionism was but Anarchism under another name." "Politics," wrote M. Niel, "has always been a poison to trade unionism." "Never was trade unionism in France so invested with politics as today." "In 1902 the C. G. T. at the Congress of Amiens had solemnly interdicted all unionists from introducing in the organization politics of any kind whatever." But while this interdictum still remained in the text of the rules, the fact in practice was otherwise. "Unionism has closed the front door to the socialist virus, to open the back door to the Anarchist poison." And now, the more solid unions were about to try to regenerate the labor movement. The miners, railroad men, printers, textile workers, commercial employees and others were about to organize a central Union Committee to promote trade unionism without party politics.

M. Niel, who is a Union printer and a Socialist, had written a letter published in M. Jean Jaurès' paper, "L'Humanité," on July 6th, in which he spoke of my coming visit and described the work of American Trade Unionism. He said it was more practical than ideal, more conservative than revolutionary. He expressed a welcome to me to France as the representative of the American Federation of Labor. Now it is quite significant

both of the French spirit of hospitality towards America and of the intention of the leaders and followers of the various groups in the C. G. T. to show that they were willing to hear me explain my mission, that in "La voix du peuple" of about the same date, M. Georges Yvetot, another Union printer, who is an Anarchist, and M. Niel's antagonist, also welcomed me warmly and in his letter said that the occasion of my address before the C. G. T. would be "salutary instruction for all various reasons." I may add that during my stay in Paris, M. Niel and M. Yvetot were amongst those who were indefatigable in showing me and my friends all possible hospitality. And when they met in the presence of us Americans they were not only respectful to me but also to each other.

The meetings of the C. G. T., to which I had been invited, I found, from the newspapers and otherwise was attracting general attention from all that part of Paris which has an interest in social problems. What was going to take place? What would the radicals present say or do? Friday, the evening set for the occasion, I went to the hall of the "Eclair," Rue Sambr-et-Meuse, accompanied by half a dozen American friends and also by a committee representing various shades of French working class opinion. When the meeting was opened about 100 persons were present. M. Yvetot introduced me, his address being cordial and well adapted in every sense to the occasion, and declared for a fair hearing for me and earnestly said that all no doubt had something to learn from the great and successful American labor movement. No applause whatever greeted me as I arose to address the meeting. But during more than an hour with perhaps not a score of persons in the audience who understood me, a respectful and a patient audience was maintained, evidently the audience knew or imagined that I had something to say and was saying it to its members and that they wanted to hear. When I had finished a former member of the American Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Mr. D. Mikol of Boston, who had taken long hand notes, arose and translated my entire address into French. Several persons present, who understood both languages, said that the performance of the task was remarkably well done, though, as it turned out, he made one or two mistakes. I was then pointed upon by critics among the so-called "intellectuals," on hand with pencils and note books. As Mr. Mikol proceeded in an animated manner applause became frequent. I could perceive that while certain groups were approving those expressions which were broad enough to gratify all, others were in manifest contempt, and a higher and higher plan for labor, other groups were reserving manifestations of sympathy for the passages in which I stood up for true trade unionism. Very hearty applause came with the close of Mr. Mikol's translation.

When his critics got from him his explanation that in his almost instantaneous interpretation of sentence by sentence he had, as they pointed out, translated my address into French, I was warranted by a letter perfect adherence to the original, they trained their eyes upon the speaker, and the speaker, who was a socialist, and theories of an exploded socialism. What had I to say about the "C. G. T." in consequence of the employment of the abolition of the wage system? What about the general strike? How was to be the anti-militarism and anti-patriotism? Did not the trusts in America simply raise prices when the Union raised wages? etc. In brief I replied that I was not sure I wanted the wage system abolished, I should like first to see closer some of the possible results of the project of abolishing the wage system, enterprise and management of a higher developed industrial system of our time. As to the general strike its utility was questionable, but in any event, in the present state of labor organization in France, the comparatively few organized working people of France, were doing little or nothing but talk about it. As a matter of fact the confusion of a general strike had the tendency to keep working men away from, instead of being attracted to the unions. In any event it would be necessary to organize first for material improvement, and to be enabled to conduct lesser strikes to a successful result before making the subject of a general strike the chief issue of labor. The question of anti-militarism, anti-patriotism, and the like, were not questions in which the American working men had been interested, but I was certain that if I were a Frenchman I would uphold my country and not have it placed at the mercy of others. I would not insist that my country should disarm while other countries were arming to its teeth, but I would ever earnestly strive for general disarmament and international peace. I showed that though misery obtains in all countries; that the organization of our Trade Unions, our Federations are a standing protest against these great human wrongs, yet it is a fact incontrovertible, that misery is less and the conditions of the workers best in those countries where wages are highest and hours of labor least—that is where a normal work day obtains. I closed my part in the evening proceedings by urging all to

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Such conservative papers as the "La Temps" besides describing the meeting in several columns gave it leading and editorial prominence. "Le Temps," in summing up its conclusions said: "Will the French trade unionists some day understand the beneficent role the unions can play in the economic and social organization? The trade union ought to be a part in the organization of society, not a ward machine directed against it. It ought to help in regulating the relations between the categories of production, the employers and the employed. It could be the agent of a beneficent collaboration, a source of common prosperity, instead of a cause of division between men and of a industrial paralysis.

Revolutionary, liberal and conservative shifts alike, cited the principal points of my theory. The failures in the early attempts to mingle party political creeds with trade unionism; the simplicity and unlimited scope of our organizations and federations; its plain and practical objects; its greatness and development; its achievements in advancing wages, reducing the hours of the work day, protecting women and children, obtaining the cooperation of the National and State Labor Departments, improving conditions in the workshop, factory and mine, and perform the duties of great benefit societies.

In bidding au revoir to Paris—for I expect to be there again at the end of August to attend the International Trade Union Congress—I look back over my brief visit to the beautiful city with genuine satisfaction in spite of hard work which occupied nearly my entire time. Aside from the exceptions partly to be expected in certain forms of business, devoted to commerce or getting at any cost the cash of tourists, the people of Paris seem to me to be good-natured, obliging, sincerely polite, of a fine intelligence, ever ready with a sympathetic word and smile. The committee-men, who acted as my hosts, anticipated every wish of the little party with which I travel. My short visit has shown me a wonderful city—a hard working city, as a back ground to the city of pleasure seen by the stranger who looks no deeper than the surface; a city in the main of earnest people, characterized by a commendable pride in their personal appearance, by the expression of

many sentiments that add happiness to life and in general to a charm of manner that must at bottom spring from a goodness of heart and kindly intentions toward their neighbor who ever for the passing hour may be that neighbor.

SAMUEL GOMPERS.

Teacher—Johnny, what is the meaning of the word "procrastinate"?
Pupil—To put off.
Teacher—Right. Use it in an original sense.
Pupil—The brakeman procrastinated the tramp from the train.

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