

“Peculiarities” versus “Exceptions”: The Shaping of the American Federation of Labor’s Politics during the 1890s and 1900s*

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SUMMARY: The purpose of this article is to question the notion of US labour’s “exceptionalism” – of its “conservatism” and “closure” and difference from “class-conscious” and “socialist” British and European labour – with specific reference to the politics of the American Federation of Labour during the 1890s and 1900s. An approach rooted in the assumption of “norms” and “exceptions” is rejected in favour of one exploring differences and similarities. In terms of similarities, the article demonstrates the ways in which the AF of L consciously sought to model its “independent” (i.e. nonpartisan-party) politics upon the practice of the late-Victorian British TUC. With respect to differences, the article then proceeds to chart the challenges posed to the AF of L by the growing identification within British labour of political independence with independent *partyism*, as manifested especially in the TUC’s official endorsement of the Labour Representation Committee (1900) and the Labour Party (1906). Resistant to the adoption of the new “British road”, the AF of L nevertheless defended its “traditional” form of political independence far more in terms of experiential US “peculiarities” than “exceptionalist” structural determinations.

During the past two decades the notion of US workers’ and organized labour’s “exceptionalism” – of their “conservatism”, “lack of class-consciousness” and enduring, “liberal” commitment to “the market economy” – has been subjected to heavy criticism. The combined effect of the work of several scholars has been convincingly to demonstrate that, substantively, US workers have historically often been far less, if at all, deficient in collectivism, militancy and solidarity than their supposedly more class-conscious European and British counterparts; and that, methodologically, the notion of US exceptionalism has rested on very shaky “ahistorical and essentialist” foundations, upon an absence of “rigorous comparison with other cases”, and the false assumption of a normal pattern of working-class

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development and US deviation from that norm.¹ In the light of this work, there is currently far less concern, among comparative labour historians, with norms and exceptions than with teasing out and evaluating differences and similarities among workers and labour movements both within and across nations. The purposes of the present article are to put this concern with similarities and differences into practice, and further to question the validity of exceptionalism – “a corpse that continually springs back to life”² – with specific reference to the politics of the American Federation of Labor (AF of L) during the 1890s and 1900s.

According to the exceptionalist case, these two decades were characterized by AF of L *conservatism*; *closure*; and blanket *differences* and simple, contrasted *outcomes* as between the Federation and labour movements in Europe and Britain.³ Thus, it is claimed that not only did the AF of L become the dominant numerical force within the US labour movement, but also that it became a conservative body, as manifested in its narrow and exclusive (ie. predominantly white and skilled male) “business” unionism and its successful opposition to independent labour party and socialist politics. Furthermore, in consciously rejecting the broad and transforming vision of “artisan republicanism” which had underpinned the Knights of Labour and many other “producerist” radical movements of the nineteenth century, and in setting its sights only upon the attainment of “the American standard”, or “MORE”, by permanent wage earners, the AF of L of Samuel Gompers is seen to have epitomized American workers’ pragmatic, and absolute or “closed” acceptance of the capitalist system. Finally, this was at a time when, so the exceptionalist case runs, workers in Britain and Europe were, in marked contrast to their American counterparts, turning to the left politically, and in which their labour (and especially trade-union) movements were assuming more of a “modern”, mass character.

To be sure, the exceptionalist case has met with serious criticism. For example, Eric Foner and others have convincingly shown it was not their absence, either inside or outside the AF of L, but rather their inability to achieve sustained mass influence and power, which effectively debilitated

1. Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris (eds), *American Exceptionalism?: US Working Class Formation in an International Context* (London, 1997), especially ch. 1; Larry G. Gerber, “Shifting Perspectives on American Exceptionalism: Recent Literature on American Labor Relations”, *Journal of American Studies*, 31 (1997), pp. 253–274; Neville Kirk, *Labour and Society in Britain and the USA 1780–1939*, 2 vols (Aldershot, 1994); James E. Cronin, “Neither Exceptional nor Peculiar: Towards the Comparative Study of Labor in Advanced Society”, *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), pp. 59–75.

2. Halpern and Morris, *American Exceptionalism?*, p. 1.

3. For discussion of the “exceptionalism” of the AF of L see Kirk, *Labour and Society*, 2, *Challenge and Accommodation 1850–1939*, pp. 134–144; *idem*, “American Exceptionalism Revisited: The Case of Samuel Gompers”, *Socialist History*, 16 (1999), 1–26; Robin Archer, “Why is There No Labour Party? Class and Race in the United States and Australia”, in Halpern and Morris, *American Exceptionalism?*, ch. 4.

Labour- and Socialist-party politics in the United States in these years.⁴ Julia Greene, likewise, has successfully challenged the view of an apolitical, “pure and simple trade-unionist” AF of L.⁵ Moreover, important revisionist work in Britain has shown that the establishment and development of the Labour Party was far from smooth and even, and that many workers, both organized and unorganized, retained their allegiances to the Liberal and Conservative Parties. More generally, this body of revisionism exhorts us vigorously to contest the traditionally dominant emphases of class and discontinuity in relation to British labour and social history.⁶ Notwithstanding these varied lines of criticism, and the arguably considerable influence of revisionism in relation to British history, it is, however, the exceptionalist paradigm of conservatism, closure and difference which continues centrally to inform most accounts of the dominant characteristics of American labour during the decades in question.

In questioning this paradigm, we will first of all suggest – with special reference to the thoughts of Samuel Gompers – that the AF of L’s overall character and development during the 1890s and 1900s were significantly informed by both traditional republican and newer class-based forms of radicalism, by fluidity and contingency, and by the complex interplay of conservatism and radicalism. Second, focusing upon the politics of the AF of L during the 1890s and 1900s, the main body of the text argues that the Federation’s independent political stance had far more in common, at least officially, with the political practice of the late-Victorian British Trades Union Congress (TUC) than an exceptionalist emphasis upon difference would suggest. For example, we will see that Gompers modelled the independent, nonpartisan lobbying activities of the AF of L directly upon those of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, and that, as a result of their conflation of independent labour and independent labour *party* politics, exceptionalist historians have largely overlooked the similarities and commonalities of the politics of the AF of L and TUC.⁷ Furthermore, they have tended both to underestimate the considerable, if ultimately unsuccessful, amount of support for the creation of a “British-style” labour party, complete with a comprehensive commitment to a socialist programme, *inside* the AF of L, and have failed sufficiently to take on board the British

4. Eric Foner, “Why is There No Socialism in the United States?”, *History Workshop Journal*, 17 (1984), pp. 57–80.

5. Julia Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism 1881–1917* (Cambridge, 1998).

6. Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid (eds), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and The Labour Party 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990).

7. See Neville Kirk, “Transatlantic Connections and American ‘Peculiarities’: The Shaping of Labour Politics in the United States and Britain, 1893–1908”, paper presented to the 113th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington DC, January 1999.



Figure 1. Group portrait of officials and the Parliamentary Committee, Trades Union Congress, Plymouth, September 1899, (from the Report of the Thirty-Second Annual Trades Union Congress). It was the 1899 Congress's adoption of J.H. Holmes's resolution, to secure "a better representation of the interests of labour in the House of Commons" which led to the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. *National Museum of Labour History, Manchester*

dence which demonstrates the somewhat uneven and limited progress made by British advocates of a labour party and socialism inside the late-Victorian TUC.⁸

It is the case that the establishment of the TUC-inspired Labour Representation Committee in 1900, which in turn formally became the Labour Party in 1906, did mark a significant change in the "official" political policy of the British trade union movement. Notwithstanding internal tensions and disagreements, the TUC now officially equated the pursuit of political "independence" with partisan support for the Labour *Party*, rather than, as in the past, with the "official" nonpartisan lobbying of Parliament and the two main parties.⁹ The adoption by the TUC of this new course posed obvious difficulties of choice for an AF of L attached to the "old" British model of nonpartisan independence and, above all, the eschewal of "slavery" to any one political party.¹⁰ Our third concern will be to attend to this area of difficulty, indeed growing political divergence, between the political practices of the AF of L and the TUC. We will outline the AF of L's reactions to the formation of the British Labour Party, and explain its decision to persist in its political nonpartisanship rather than to tread the "new" British path. However, in so doing we will, in contrast to the practice of exceptionalism, afford major causal importance to experiential US "peculiarities" rather than to largely unchanging structural factors or "exceptions".

Fourth, in conclusion, we will present an overall assessment of the balance of forces of similarity and difference, as compared with Britain, and closure and contingency in the late 1900s AF of L. Ironically, by that point in time, AF of L leaders were drawing attention to the ways in which their movement had successfully overcome domestic difficulties and "peculiarities", to become firmly set upon a course of "trade unionism first" and political nonpartisanship which was claimed to be both different from and superior

8. Joseph Finn, "The Great Debate, 1893–1894: A Study of the Controversy on Independent Political Action in the American Federation of Labor in the First Half of the 1890s" (M.A., University of Warwick, 1969). Growing, if far from smooth and uninterrupted, socialist influence in the 1890s TUC is revealed in the annual reports of the TUC held at the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester. Particularly useful is *History of The Congress: The Twenty Seven Previous Meetings*, contained in the *Report of the Twenty-Eighth Annual TUC*, Cardiff, 1895.

9. Notwithstanding the official nonpartisanship of the TUC, the late-Victorian "labour interest" had, of course, been served in practice mainly by the Liberal Party and the Lib.–Lab. MPs. From the 1870s onwards a "small, but distinct" group of Lib.–Lab. MPs, strongly representative of coal-mining trade unionism, operated in Parliament as Labour members, but "sat on the Liberal benches [...] and took the Liberal whip". This group of MPs opposed the move to independent labour representation in the 1890s and 1900s TUC, while simultaneously describing themselves as "a distinct Labour group" and even as "the first 'Labour Party'". See John Shepherd, "Labour and Parliament: The Lib.–Labs. as the First Working-Class MPs, 1885–1906", in Biagini and Reid, *Currents*, pp. 187–213.

10. Stuart B. Kaufman, Peter J. Albert and Grace Palladino (eds), *The Samuel Gompers Papers, 4, A National Labor Movement Takes Shape 1895–98* (Urbana, IL, 1991), pp. 95–97, 183–185, 241.

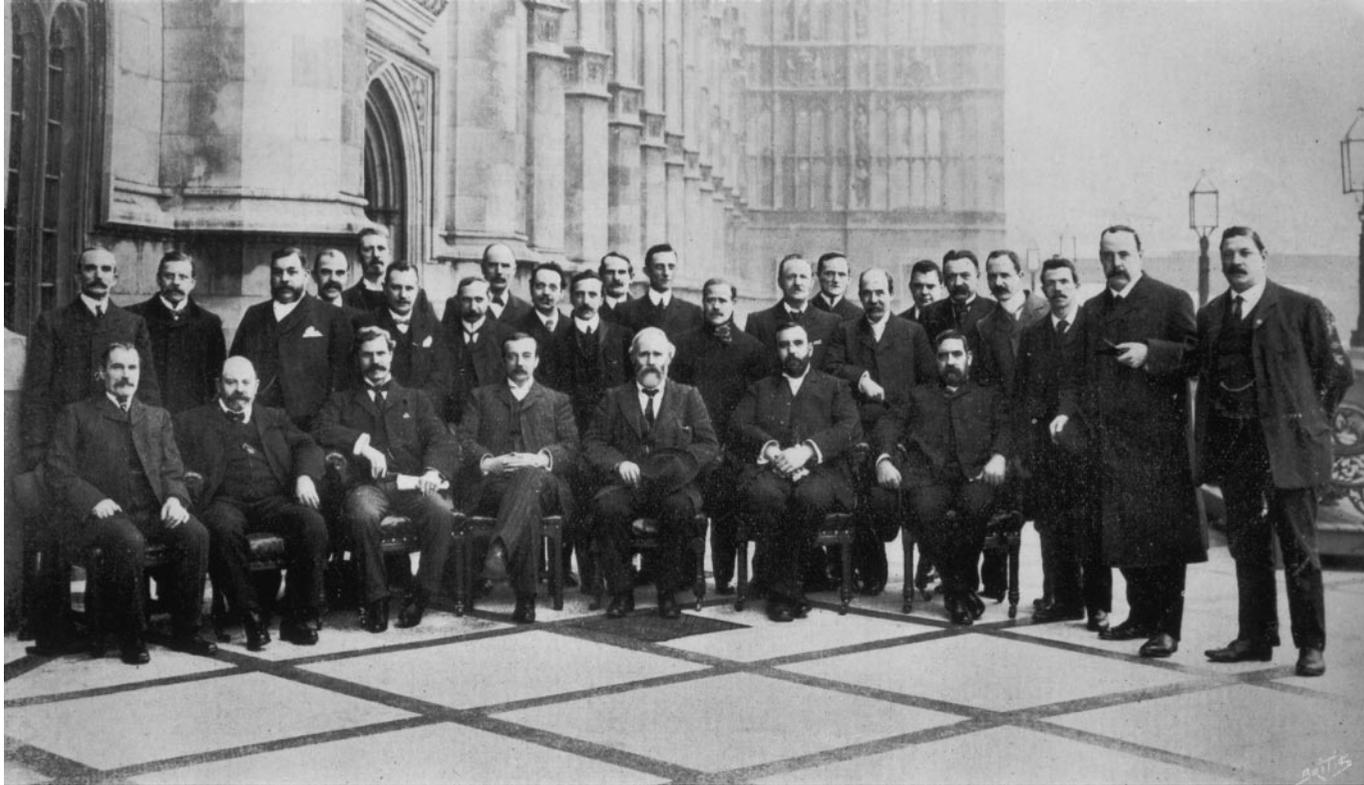


Figure 2. Group portrait of members of the Parliamentary Labour Party at Westminster, 1906; (from Labour Party Annual Reports, 1904–1911).
National Museum of Labour History, Manchester

to, but not more conservative than, the labour and socialist “political par-
tyism” of the British and many European labour movements.¹¹

AGAINST EXCEPTIONALIST CONSERVATISM AND
CLOSURE

Before moving to our central concern with politics, it is important to alert the reader to the fact that a simple, largely unqualified picture of AF of L conservatism, closure and difference from Britain during the 1890s and 1900s is certainly open to objection on many counts. For example, as I have argued at length elsewhere,¹² Samuel Gompers continued throughout these decades to articulate a sharp republican and class-based critique of American society and the wider world which grew out of the crisis of late nineteenth-century “competitive” capitalism, the rapid and violent transition to corporate or “monopoly” capitalism, and the perceived hijacking of American society by the “unrepublican” and militantly anti-labour corporate “capitalist class” and its allies in the judiciary and elsewhere in the machinery of state. Gompers’s critique embraced notions of necessary, if at times variable, production-based conflict between labour and capital; the primacy of a trade union movement seeking to organize all wage earners and concerned not only with “more”, but also to “civilize” and “moralize” market relationships and to bring about fundamental social change; and powerful support for trade-union based “international brotherhood” and “universal peace”. In addition, he expressed equally powerful opposition to “the cruel barbarism of war”, and the “new imperialism” – driven by “bondholders and speculators”, the “capitalists” and the “ruling class” – of force, annexation and conquest. In sum, Gompers’s critique is hardly in accord with the dominant historiographical view that it was during the mid-1890s, or, at best, the early 1900s, that the AF of L president underwent a more or less unqualified and irreversible “transition to conservatism”.¹³

To be sure, Gompers’s views and actions were often more complex and, at times, more contradictory than suggested in the previous paragraph, and the passage of time did bring about modifications, complications and changes to his class-based radicalism.¹⁴ For example, during the course of the 1900s he combined continuing and militant opposition to anti-union judges and employers with an active desire to “do business” with those

11. *American Federationist*, 16 (1909), pp. 661, 1077, 1086; 17 (1910), pp. 151, 225, 243.

12. Kirk, “American Exceptionalism Revisited”.

13. John H.M. Laslett, “Samuel Gompers and the Rise of American Business Unionism”, in Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren van Tine (eds), *Labor Leaders in America* (Urbana, IL, 1987), pp. 62–88; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 2, *From the Founding of the American Federation of Labor to the Emergence of American Imperialism 1895–1902* (New York, 1975). chs 26 and 27, pp. 426–429, 437–439.

14. For such developments see Kirk, “American Exceptionalism Revisited”.

employers in the National Civic Federation who were prepared to recognize trade unions. As a result of the AF of L's favourable treatment at the hands of President Woodrow Wilson and the spectacular gains in membership, recognition and national, indeed in some instances international, influence registered by the Federation during the period of World War I, Gompers and the AF of L as a whole became far more accommodating towards, indeed actively involved in, the machinery of government and the state. In the postwar period, however, Republican ascendancy witnessed much-diminished AF of L influence upon and, arguably at least, accommodation to the "establishment". Similarly, nationalism, as expressed, for example, in his support for American involvement in the First World War (at the expense of his previously strong pacificism), and opposition to "Orientals", IWWers, "Bolsheviks" and many, but by no means all, socialists, coexisted with Gompers's continued internationalist searches for postwar world peace and trade union cooperation, not only with his European brothers and sisters, but also with those in Latin America, some of whom were active socialists. Continued opposition to "formal" imperialism in the 1900s and 1910s, and active support for the trade-union, civil and political rights of workers in Mexico, Puerto Rico and elsewhere (including the demand for political independence) was combined with endorsement of the "informal" imperialism of "industry, commerce and superior mentality and civilization" and the Monroe Doctrine which, in effect, justified increasing US intervention and "spheres of influence" in formally independent countries in Central and Latin America. Finally, as is well known, racialized, gendered and "skilled" limitations, boundaries and exclusions became increasingly characteristic of many AF of L unions.

We must, nevertheless, be careful to resist the seemingly attractive, but, at least from the historian's point of view, unproductive, temptation of simply swapping instances of Gompers's "radicalism", "moderation" and "conservatism". Rather such manifestations must be fully contextualized, in terms of time and place, and then carefully set against each other and assessed, in order to find out where the historical balance lies. And our considered conclusion is that in the very hostile climate facing organized labour for much of the 1890s and 1900s, Gompers's class-based radicalism, as applied to both the domestic and international scenes, overshadowed simultaneous instances of "conservatism". Furthermore, given the fact that many of his radical ideas issued from his experiences of the 1870s, when he had close contacts with Marxian socialists in New York City, and persisted into the twentieth century, Gompers's radicalism cannot be interpreted primarily as either "empty rhetoric", or as a tactical device to secure and consolidate his position within the AF of L. Rather he attempted, however imperfectly and subject to historical constraints and changes, consistently to put his class-based critique into practice during the 1890s and 1900s. Finally, we may suggest that Gompers compares very favourably in the

class-based stakes with many trade unionists, both “old” and “new”, in Britain.¹⁵

In terms of the wider picture, neither the AF of L nor the US labour movement as a whole can convincingly be characterized as “exceptional” in the 1890s and 1900s.¹⁶ To be sure, there did emerge significant differences with their British counterparts. These may be seen, for example, in the more successful and durable presence of trade union recognition, formal collective bargaining and the “new” unionism of the unskilled in Britain, of the successful birth and development in that country of a labour party, and in the more fragmented labour movement and the wider working class, especially along the lines of race and ethnicity, in the United States. Conversely, differences must not be allowed to obscure important similarities and commonalities. For example, “new” unionist upsurges, labour party and socialist initiatives both inside and outside the AF of L, and attempts to secure binding agreements with employers were far from absent in the United States. And in both countries the respective labour movements were profoundly gendered and racialized.¹⁷

Furthermore, the scale, level of violence and chronic nature of mass industrial conflicts in the United States, often involving impressive, if often temporary, displays of working-class solidarity across the categories of skill, income, ethnicity and even race, may be read as instances of militancy and class-consciousness encountered less frequently in the British experience. While internationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments exerted a powerful appeal among British as well as American labour leaders, nevertheless the “republican” underpinnings of these sentiments – of national self-determination and independence – were more pronounced among the latter. Finally, anti-imperialism *and* racism similarly coexisted in Britain. As Stephen Howe has observed, in Britain Radical–Liberal and socialist “objections to the exploitation of non-European peoples, and to the aggressive imperialism of the sort they saw in South Africa, were [...] far from incompatible with [...] the necessity of continued British governance over the

15. Alastair J. Reid, “Old Unionism Reconsidered: The Radicalism of Robert Knight, 1870–1900”, in Biagini and Reid, *Currents*, pp. 214–243.

16. The following section relies heavily on Kirk, “Transatlantic Connections”.

17. See, for example, Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); Kenneth Lunn (ed.), *Race and Labour in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 1985); Ileen A. DeVault, “‘To Sit Among Men’: Skill, Gender and Craft Unionism in the Early American Federation of Labor”, in Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene and Bruce Laurie (eds), *Labor Histories: Class Politics and the Working Class Experience* (Urbana, IL, 1998); Sonya O. Rose, “Gender and Labor History: The Nineteenth-Century Legacy” *International Review of Social History*, 38, Supplement 1 (1993), pp. 145–162.

lower races".¹⁸ In sum, the dominant conclusion to emerge from this brief survey of the wider picture is not one of simple, undifferentiated exceptionalist difference but one of a complex mixture and balance of difference, similarity and commonality.¹⁹

POLITICS: SIMILARITIES

Comparisons and contrasts between the politics of the AF of L and the British trade union movement also reveal a similarly complex picture. We will address this much-neglected topic²⁰ first by reference to the issue of similarities. Second, we will proceed to the identification and explanation of differences.

In Gompers's opinion, the young AF of L (born officially in 1886) needed, above all, to heed the trade-union and political lessons of its stronger and more experienced late-Victorian British counterpart. Thus, "the British model" of placing a premium upon the establishment of strong trade unions and seeing independent labour politics as an *auxiliary* to trade unionism, was seen to constitute the way ahead for the AF of L.²¹ According to Gompers, trade unionism constituted the "natural" and unifying organization of the working class under capitalism, rooted as it was in the common fact of wage-earning and attempting, in theory at least, to unite all wage-earners under its banner. By way of contrast, Gompers saw religious and party political attachments as "enslaving" of workers to a partisan cause and divisive of working-class solidarity. Furthermore, given the "special" or "peculiar" conditions of the United States – possessing, in relation to Britain, weaker trade unions, a more heterogeneous working class and a more militantly anti-union employing class – it became, in Gompers's opinion, even more imperative to attend to the basics of building up a strong union base, avoiding "impractical" and debilitating "visionary" and party-political

18. Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: the Left and the End of Empire 1918–1964* (Oxford, 1993), p. 35. See also Henry Pelling, "British Labour and British Imperialism", in his *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968); Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire* (London, 1968).

19. For a penetrating critique of comparative work which deals in long-term and macro-contrasted differences and outcomes see John Breuilly, "Comparative Labour History", *Labour History Review*, 55, 3 (1980), pp. 6–9.

20. The subject of comparisons and contrasts between the politics of the AF of L and the TUC has not been studied in any depth. For references see Henry Pelling, *American Labor* (Chicago, IL, 1960), pp. 82, 115–116; Gary Marks, *Unions in Politics: Britain, Germany and the United States in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1989); Kirk, *Challenge and Accommodation*, pp. 136–139.

21. For Gompers's "trade unionism first" philosophy see Stuart B. Kaufman (ed.), *The Samuel Gompers Papers, 1, The Making of A Union Leader 1850–86* (Urbana, IL, 1986), pp. 21–43, 83–84; *American Federationist*, 5 (1898), pp. 55–56, 115; AF of L, *Procs.*, 1898, pp. 5–6; Kirk, "Transatlantic Connections".

entanglements, and ensuring that the unions pursued independent politics designed to strengthen rather than weaken their cause. As he declared in his report to the 1894 AF of L convention advocating “first things first”:

It is ridiculous to imagine that the wage-workers can be slaves in employment and yet achieve control at the polls. There never yet existed coincident with each other autocracy in the shop and democracy in political life. In truth, we have not yet achieved the initial step to the control of public affairs by even a formal recognition of our unions [...]. Before we can hope as a general organization to take the field by nominating candidates for office, the workers must be more thoroughly organized and better results achieved by experiments locally. A political labor movement cannot and will not succeed upon the ruins of the trade unions.

In the same report he gave examples of the past mistakes of premature political action and “putting politics first”:

During the past year the trade unions in many localities plunged into the political arena by nominating their candidates for public office, and sad as it may be to record, it is nevertheless true that in each one of these localities politically they were defeated and the trade union movement more or less divided and disrupted.

And,

I need only refer you to the fact that the National Labor Union, the predecessor of the American Federation of Labor, entered the so-called independent political arena in 1872 and nominated its candidate for the presidency of the United States. It is equally true that the National Labor Union never held a convention after that event.²²

We can thus see that, contrary to the “pure-and-simple” bias in the traditional historiography of the AF of L, politics constituted a necessary, but supplementary, part of Gompers’s and the AF of L’s outlook; a part which would not be allowed to threaten, in any way, their guiding attachment to the principle of “trade unionism first”. The strategy was to adopt the “British model”, albeit within the “peculiarly American” context of an AF of L which had not yet gained the strength, success or influence of its British counterpart. The wisdom of this strategy increasingly became apparent. Whereas the Knights of Labour, complete with their very broad goals and “improper” encroachments upon trade-union autonomy, fell by the wayside, and those seeking to commit the AF of L to socialism and other forms of party politics suffered a crucial, indeed irreversible, defeat at the 1894 convention, the mainstream, “trade union first” AF of L was seen to prosper. Not only did the Federation survive the worst depression of the whole century, between 1893 and 1896, but also the serious attacks launched against its unions by corporate capital, the courts and the state, to demonstrate impressive early

22. “President Gompers’ Report”, in Stuart B. Kaufman and Peter J. Albert, *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, 3, *Unrest and Depression 1891–94* (Urbana, IL, 1989), pp. 611–612.

1900s growth. “With the abrupt quadrupling of union membership between 1897 and 1903”, observes David Montgomery, the AF of L “for the first time secured its place as the ‘House of Labor’”.²³

Having located the place of politics within the AF of L’s overall scheme of things, we must also appreciate the force and consistency of its political commitments. As Gompers declared in his report to the AF of L convention in 1898:

We want legislation in the interest of labor; we want legislation executed by labor men; we want trade unionists in Congress and more trade unionists in the State legislatures [...]. We shall secure them, too, by acting as trade unionists rather than turning our trade unions into partisan ward clubs.

And,

No-one having any conception of the labor problems – the struggles of life – would for a moment entertain the notion, much less advise the workers, to abstain from the exercise of their political rights and their political power. On the contrary, *trade union action upon the surface is economic action, yet there is no act which the trade unions can take but which in its effects is political.*²⁴

British influence was, once again very much in evidence. “In that country”, observed Gompers in 1894,

[...] the organized wage-workers avail themselves of every legal and practical means to obtain the legislation they demand. They endeavor to defeat those, and elect those who support, legislation in the interest of labor, and whenever opportunity affords, elect a bona fide union man to parliament and other public offices. The Parliamentary Committee of the British Trades Union Congress is a labor committee to lobby for labor legislation. *This course the organized workers of America may with advantage follow*, since it is based upon experience and fraught with good results.²⁵

The AF of L’s commitments to the primacy of trade unionism and voluntarism, and the unwelcome facts of life of state hostility and the power of the courts to “strike out” legislation as unconstitutional (the power of judicial review) did undoubtedly place limits upon both the extent and depth of its legislative demands. These limits and their effects, however, were less profound and exceptional than suggested in the recent emphases upon AF of L voluntarism by Victoria Hattam and William Forbath.²⁶ To be sure, the

23. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism 1865–1925* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 5.

24. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1898, p. 6 (emphasis added).

25. “President Gompers’ Report”, Kaufman and Albert, *Gompers Papers*, pp. 611–612 (emphasis added).

26. Victoria Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: the Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

voice of delegate Blackmore was raised at the 1902 AF of L convention in support of the adoption of the legislative road in Britain and against its practicability in the United States, in the following manner:

[...] conditions in England differ very materially from those which confront trade unionists in America. In England, once an act is approved by Parliament, it is fixed, and no supreme court or other tribunal can declare it unconstitutional or otherwise check its force [...]. It will be seen, therefore, that the chief efforts of trade unions in Great Britain, in national matters, must be toward securing the election of their own members or safe friends of their cause as members of Parliament.²⁷

Blackmore’s was, however, very much a minority, indeed largely isolated, view within the AF of L. The majority view was to continue, notwithstanding adverse circumstances, to seek “legislation in the direct interest of labor”. Perhaps the most telling illustration of the latter view was provided between 1906 and 1908 when, in response to the most serious judicial onslaught in its history, the AF of L continued, indeed more actively and concertedly stepped up, the campaign (in the forms of its 1906 “Bill of Grievances” and its 1908 “Protest to Congress”) to seek from Congress anti-injunction and anti-damages relief and trade-union exemption from the terms of the Sherman Law.²⁸ As Gompers remarked at the AF of L’s 1907 convention in relation to the British Trade Disputes Act of 1906 – restoring the pre-Taff-Vale situation of union immunity from damages – that was “a law which we have been trying to get from our Congress in vain for these past several years”.²⁹ AF of L affiliates, such as the United Mineworkers of America, also continued, *pace* Hattam, very actively to seek political redress for “workplace concerns” by means of lobbying for safety and other legislation.

We should also take cognizance of the fact that the AF of L’s legislative demands, as expressed nationally and on the state and local level, were far from insignificant or insubstantial. For example, the planks adopted *seriatim* at the 1894 AF of L convention embraced compulsory education, direct legislation through the initiative and referendum, a legal work day of not more than eight hours, sanitary inspection of workshop, mine and home, employer liability, the abolition of the contract system in all public work, the abolition of the sweating system, the municipal ownership of street cars, waterworks, gas and electric plants and the nationalization of telegraphs, telephones, railroads and mines. It was, of course, the case that delegate Pomeroy’s subsequent motion that the convention “endorse the above planks as a whole” was rejected. Thereafter confusion reigned as to the precise nature of the AF of L’s formal legislative demands. However, the 1895 convention, while rejecting the notions of a formal political programme

27. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1902, pp. 129–130.

28. Marc Karson, *American Labor Unions and Politics 1900–1918* (Carbondale, IL, 1958), pp. 52–55.

29. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1907, p. 128.

and party attachment(s), did agree that the AF of L had “legislative demands”.³⁰ During the remainder of the 1890s and throughout the 1900s, in addition to AF of L opposition to Asian immigration, competition from convict labour, child labour, sweating, anti-union legislation and “judicial tyranny”, such “demands” included the eight-hour day for government employees, seamen’s rights, maximum-hour legislation for women and children,³¹ free compulsory elementary education, compulsory school attendance and free textbooks for the public schools, initiative, referendum and recall, improved sanitation, factory and mine inspection and safety laws, municipal ownership of public utilities, the national ownership of telegraphs and (on the part of some unions) railroads and coal mines, and women’s suffrage.³²

It is true that, while adopting a pragmatic approach towards the pursuit of legislation “in the labour interest”, Gompers and the AF of L also demonstrated, at the *national* level, keener and more persistent opposition than their British labour-movement counterparts towards state “paternalism” or “charity”. For example, AF of L opposition to old-age pensions, the legal eight-hour day for those workers not employed on government contracts and municipal housing provision – measures supported by many British trade unionists – was rooted in the belief that in such matters strong trade unions, dominated by male workers, should be in a position voluntarily to provide for the worker’s and the family’s material needs.³³ However, even at this level, a uniform picture of voluntarism and exceptionalism is not accurate. For example, support was given by the AF of L at both the national and local levels to maximum-hour legislation for women and children, thus demonstrating the gendered nature of its voluntarism. In 1909, 1911, 1912 and 1913 the Federation did endorse “a need-based national pension scheme”. And its endorsement of a voluntary system of industrial relations was, of course, modelled, albeit with less successful results, upon the British system.³⁴

30. For the rather confusing legislative state of play at the 1894 and 1895 AF of L conventions see Finn, “Great Debate”, ch. 6; AF of L, *Procs.*, 1895, pp. 81–82, 99–100; *American Federationist*, 1 (1895), p. 254; Kaufman and Albert, *Gompers Papers*, pp. 616–659, n. 9.

31. Notwithstanding considerable local labour-movement support, Gompers remained opposed to minimum-wage legislation for both sexes, believing that the minimum wage might become the maximum wage.

32. Karson, *American Labor Unions*, p. 43; AF of L, *Procs.*, 1906, pp. 187, 190; *American Federationist*, 4 (1898), p. 257; 5 (1898), pp. 33–35; David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 148–150.

33. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1902, pp. 129–130, 134–135; James Gray Pope, “Labor’s Constitution of Freedom”, *The Yale Law Review*, 106 (1997), pp. 941–1031.

34. Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol, “Why not Equal Protection? Explaining the Politics of Public Spending in Britain 1900–1911 and the United States, 1880–1920”, in David Englander (ed.), *Britain and America: Studies in Comparative History 1760–1970* (New Haven, CT, 1997), p. 260; Leon Fink, “Labor, Liberty and the Law: Trade Unionism and the Problem of American

Two further points in support of our anti-exceptionalist position should be noted. First, voluntarist sentiments – expressed in personal and collective independence, the trade unions, coops and friendly societies, and hostility towards “undue” state interference, especially when such interference was believed to threaten personal liberty and the authority and control of parents over family matters – demonstrated a tenacity and degree of support among British workers not fully appreciated by those pro-exceptionalism scholars wishing to contrast US “voluntarism” with British “collectivism”.³⁵

Second, the AF of L locally and at the state level simply cannot be cast as “exceptional”. Many state federations of labour, the “crucial agencies” for political action, and central labour unions embraced a wide range of fundamentally anti-voluntarist demands. These included commitments to the substantial elements of nationalization and municipalization embodied in Morgan’s 1894 “programme”, workmen’s compensation (the scheme to be administered by the state), unemployment insurance, old-age pensions and health and sickness insurance.³⁶ Finally, the San Franciscan labour movement, the stronghold of AF of L building trades’ craft unionism, not only created (albeit unusually for such crafts) a political party of labour, the Union Labor Party, to provide a political shield for the gains of trade unionism, but also supported “the establishment of an eight-hour day on all public works in California, the setting up of public works to absorb the seasonally unemployed, and public health insurance”. In so acting it was, as Michael Kazin informs us, seeking to create a “commoners’ paradise”.³⁷

In sum, the American labour movement was complex and multi-faceted in character. Above all, it combined characteristics of voluntarism and collectivism to a degree not fully appreciated by advocates of exceptionalism. In turn, “old” unionist competition from “new” unionism, the revival of socialism and the birth of the Labour Party did not signify the death of voluntarism and the triumph of collectivism in Britain. Labour movements and the wider working class in both countries continued to exhibit a complex mixture of collective and voluntary features.

The AF of L set out to attain its legislative and other political goals by a variety of “independent” means. The latter ranged from lobbying and voting to the effective screening and nomination of candidates and trade unionists

Constitutional Order”, *Journal of American History*, 74 (1987), p. 916; AF of L, *Procs.*, 1899, p. 148.

35. Hattam, *Labor Visions*, pp. 6–7; Pelling, *Popular Politics*, ch. 1, pp. 12–13; Reid, “Old Unionism”, pp. 238–243; James Hinton, “Voluntarism versus Jacobinism: Labor, Nation and Citizenship in Britain, 1850–1950”, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 48 (1995), pp. 68–90.

36. Shelton Stromquist, “United States of America”, in Marcel van der Linden and Jürgen Rojahn (eds), *The Formation of Labour Movements 1870–1914: An International Perspective*, 2 (Leiden, 1990), pp. 557–558; Gary M. Fink, “The Rejection of Voluntarism”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 26 (1973), pp. 114–126.

37. Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, IL, 1987), pp. 114–120, ch. 6.

themselves standing for political office, as seen most prominently in 1906 and 1908. As David Montgomery has noted, “the full scope of union lobbying has yet to be examined by historians”.³⁸ However, we do know that from its inception the AF of L, in conscious imitation of the TUC’s practice, was committed to the lobbying principle. Indeed, The Federation of Organized Trades and Labour Unions (FOTLU), the forerunner of the AF of L, had as one of its objects in 1881 the establishment of a Congressional Labor Committee in order to “secure the passage by the United States Congress of such laws as are needed by the various trades to better their condition”.³⁹ Five years later the founding convention of the AF of L supported a two-track course “favorable to independent political action”. State organizations of labour were to be formed to “secure State legislation in the interests of the working masses”, while the AF of L as a whole would set out “to secure national legislation in the interests of the working people and to influence public opinion by peaceful and legal methods in favor of organized labor”.⁴⁰ However, while legislative committees were soon established at the state level by the infant AF of L, it was not until formal approval had been received from the 1896 AF of L convention that the Legislative Committee was set up. It was based in Washington DC and had Andrew Furuseth, of the Seamen’s International Union, as its legislative agent. Seeking to follow the lobbying activities of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC within the House of Commons, the Legislative Committee was to target Congress “to secure the enactment of measures in the interests of labor, or to prevent the passage of measures inimical to its interests”.⁴¹ Regular reports of the Committee’s activities are to be found in the *American Federationist*.⁴²

“Independent voting” referred to the judicious exercise of the franchise in favour of candidates who, irrespective of their party-political affiliation, were favourably disposed towards the AF of L’s legislative and other political demands. This was, in effect, the most common form of “independent politics” adopted by AF of L members. In the first issue of the *American Federationist*, in March 1894, Gompers wrote:

In politics we shall be, as we always have been, independent. Independent of all parties regardless under which name they may be known. The only interest we shall have in either is their real, not merely their avowed, attitude towards labor. We shall endeavor to aid in exposing the folly of being a Union man 364 days in the year and failing to remember the Union man’s duty on election day.⁴³

38. Montgomery, *Citizen Worker*, p. 149, n. 76.

39. Kaufman, *Gompers Papers*, 1, pp. 211, 213.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 468.

41. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1905, pp. 177, 232; Philip Taft, *The A.F. of L. in The Time of Gompers*, (New York, 1970), p. 292; *American Federationist*, 5 (1898), pp. 34–35.

42. See, for example, *American Federationist*, 5 (1898), p. 17; 9 (1902), pp. 185, 233–234.

43. *American Federationist*, 1 (1894), p. 11.

As in Britain, a premium was to be placed, whenever “opportunity affords”, upon the election of candidates who were bona fide union men. In 1898 the *American Federationist* regularly ran an official declaration of the AF of L’s policies, entitled “TRADE UNION POLITY”, which outlined “the sub-joined resolutions [...] adopted at successive conventions of the AF of L” and which “*must be regarded as the practical policy of the trade union movement of America*” (emphasis added). Under the sub-heading, “Political Action”, the text read:

That the American Federation of Labor most firmly and unequivocally favors the independent use of the ballot by the trade unionists and workingmen, united regardless of party, that we may elect men *from our own ranks* to make new laws and administer them along the lines laid down in the legislative demands of the American Federation of Labor, and at the same time secure an impartial judiciary that will not govern us by arbitrary injunctions of the courts, nor act as the pliant tools of corporate wealth [...]. That as our efforts are centered against all forms of industrial slavery and economic wrong, we must also direct our utmost energies to remove all forms of *political servitude* and party slavery, to that end that the working people may act as a unit at the polls at every election.⁴⁴

Significantly, Gompers was at considerable pains to demonstrate that, far from being a new policy, “independent voting” had been consistently advocated by the AF of L since its inception.⁴⁵

In terms of routine practice, far more votes were cast by AF of L members for supposedly sympathetic middle-class Democrats and Republicans than for “men from our own ranks”. (Leading socialist, Max Hayes, offered the quip that “we have elected corporation lawyers and other capitalists to both branches of Congress”).⁴⁶ However, at times of acute crisis, such as in 1906 and 1908, efforts were considerably stepped up both to screen and nominate candidates in general more carefully and to support trade-union candidates more actively. Significantly, following the British example, the instrument created nationally by the AF of L in 1906, to realise these purposes, was given the name of the Labor Representation Committee.⁴⁷

Often in conscious imitation of British practice, the AF of L thus committed itself to independent political means which nevertheless eschewed commitments of a partisan, party-based character. In its false equation of independent labour politics with independent labour or socialist *party* politics,⁴⁸ the conventional wisdom has not only greatly underestimated the strength and consistency of the independent politics of the AF of L, but

44. *American Federationist*, 4 (1898), p. 274; 5 (1898), pp. 55–56, 94 (emphasis added).

45. *American Federationist*, 5 (1898), pp. 55–56, 73–74.

46. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1904, p. 187.

47. Julia Greene, “The Strike at the Ballot Box’: The American Federation of Labor’s Entrance into Election Politics, 1906–1909”, *Labor History*, 32 (1991), pp. 165–192; *idem*, *Pure and Simple Politics*.

48. Archer, “Why is there no Labour Party”, p. 57.

has also exaggerated the latter's differences with the political practices of the trade unions in Britain.

POLITICS: DIFFERENCES

We have seen in the previous section that in emphasizing the primary importance of trade unionism, in nevertheless seeking "legislation in the labour interest" and in its practices of independent lobbying, voting and its encouragement of trade unionists to stand for political office, the AF of L had much in common with many of the "old", craft unions of Britain. However, the politics of the AF of L and the British "old" unions were by no means totally identical or compatible. For example, Gompers selectively brought the British practice of nonpartisan lobbying to the positive attention of his AF of L brothers and sisters while simultaneously largely excluding from consideration the mixture of independent labour and partisan-party politics practised by the Lib.-Lab. MPs. Furthermore, notwithstanding domestic and external shocks and challenges to its chosen political strategy, the 1900s AF of L remained steadfast in its "independence", while the TUC now provided official backing for the LRC and the Labour Party. It is to a consideration and explanation of this area of growing political divergence that we will turn in this and the next, concluding, section.

Notwithstanding our warning against seeing the 1890s and 1900s in terms of uniform closure, there is a very real sense in which we may say that the AF of L's "independent" political stance had become established by 1908. The latter may be illustrated by the fact that two potentially major shocks to the practice of "independent voting" failed to bring about a formal change in AF of L policy. First, despite the "mass mobilizations" of 1906 and 1908 (in response to the judicial onslaught) and Gompers's endorsement of the Democratic presidential candidate in the latter year, the AF of L refused to abandon its nonpartisanship. At the federation's 1908 convention Gompers could still declare, "I owe allegiance to no political party – The American Labor movement is not partisan to a political party; it is partisan to a principle, the principle of equal rights and human freedom."⁴⁹

Second, early in 1906 the Labour Party was officially formed in Britain. During the general election of the same year the Party put up fifty candidates, twenty-nine of whom were successful (in addition, twenty-four Lib.-Lab. MPs were returned). This result was perceived as constituting a major triumph for advocates of independent political *partyism*. In addition, both the Trade Disputes Bill and a Workmen's Compensation Bill were enacted, and the newly-elected Liberals promised the passage of an Eight Hours Bill for coal miners in 1907 (in the event it became law in 1908). The American labour movement, suffering from the hostility of the courts, the state and

49. AF of L, *Procs.* 1908, p. 34.

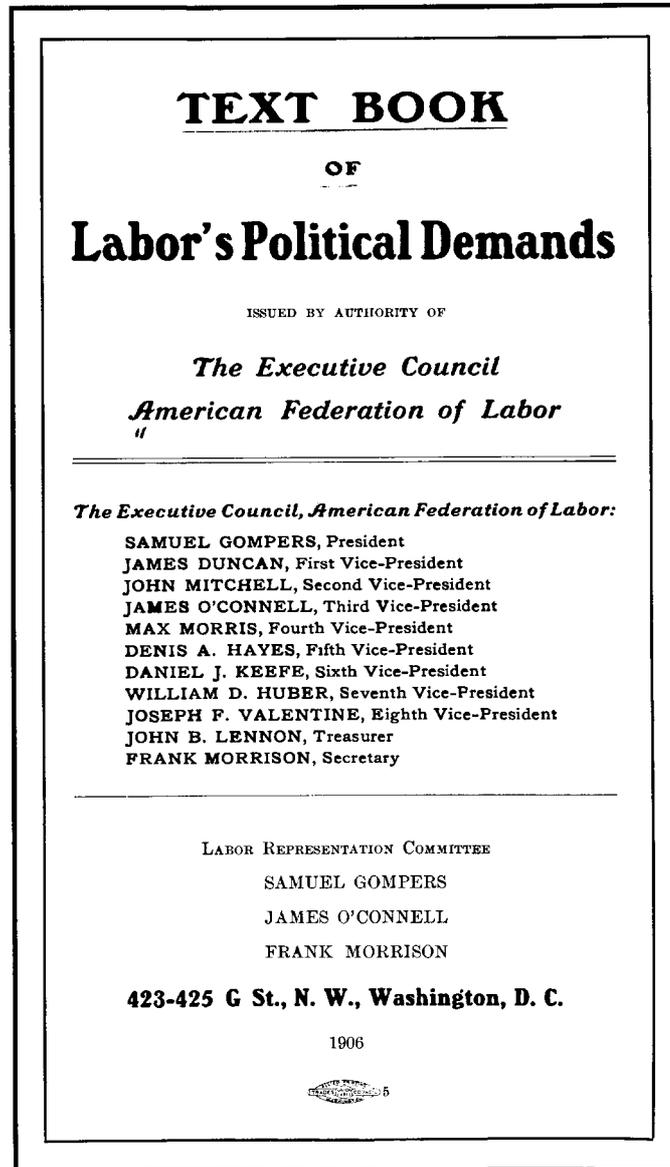


Figure 3. The text book formed part of the AF of L's "mass mobilization" of 1906, directed mainly against anti-union judges and employers.
The George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, MD

business-dominated political parties, looked with a mixture of envy, fascination, and genuine respect and awe, at the successes of its traditional role model in Britain.⁵⁰

Such perceptions were doubtless compounded, if also somewhat muddied, by the fact that British fraternal delegates to the AF of L conventions of 1906 (J.N. Bell, National Amalgamated Labour Union, and Allen Gee, Textile Workers) and 1907 (David Shackleton, Textile Workers, and John Hodge, Steel Smelters) were wholehearted in their praise of the Labour Party. They argued that fears concerning potentially debilitating divisions between British socialists and trade unionists working within the new party had not been realized. Furthermore, both the LRC and the Party had *strengthened* rather than weakened the cause of trade unionism, and especially, as reflected in the legislation of 1906, the successes achieved by trade-union pressure upon Parliament. The creation of a new, trade-union-based, and independent political presence in Parliament had also given the trade union leader greater confidence in “speaking out” on political matters without fear of “injuring his position as a responsible leader of the men and women in purely trade union work”. Above all, perhaps, in electing its “own” members, Labour was no longer obliged to go “cap in hand” to political parties in many instances dominated by anti-labour capitalist interests. Rather, the cause of “independent” labour had engendered a new-found spirit of unity, confidence and clarity of purpose within the movement.⁵¹ The AF of L was strongly advised to follow suit. John Hodge, for example, had no reservations in urging his AF of L audience to cast aside their differences and “nail the colors of Labor Union” to the mast of a labour party, and “make that your politics”.⁵²

The views of the British fraternal delegates met with a respectful response from their American hosts. And David Shackleton was afforded a hero’s welcome by Gompers, being presented to the 1907 convention as organized labour’s driving force behind Liberal enactment of the historic Trade Disputes Act.⁵³ However, as in the case of the adverse domestic situation, external advice from the British delegates and the demonstrable successes of the new Labour Party failed to move the AF of L from its chosen “independent” path. The dominant response from the Federation was one of extreme scepticism concerning “true” and lasting British commitment to a new form of political independence, rooted in allegiance to a class-based Labour Party, at the expense of the traditional attachment to the independent lobbying of all political parties. Thus Frank Foster and James Wilson, the AF of L’s

50. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1906, pp. 100–102, 183–204 for extremely interesting debates concerning domestic and external political and trade union developments.

51. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1906, pp. 120–124; 1907, pp. 131–132.

52. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1907, p. 134.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 127–131.



Figure 4. A. Gee (left) and J.N. Bell (right), British fraternal delegates to the 1906 AF of L Convention.

The George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, MD

fraternal delegates to the 1906 TUC, viewed “the future of a class party with unionists forming the bulk of the membership” as “at least problematical”. And,

We repeat [...] that while the trades union political movement in Great Britain is in a very interesting experimental stage, yet its lines are by no means fixed, nor is the movement by any means committed to the creation of a separate and distinct party machine upon class lines; nor, moreover, in our judgement, will it become so identified.⁵⁴

The attention of AF of L members was also drawn, in 1906 and 1907, to the continued opposition in Britain of “many of the older and more powerful unions” to affiliation to the Labour Party, to an alleged loss of effectiveness in trade-union matters on the part of British trade union leaders standing as political candidates and to the continued perils of attempting to commit the AF of L’s “many sided and much diversified membership” to a single party-political course.⁵⁵ In sum, the risks involved in setting the American labour movement on what was perceived to be an unproven, and in all probability ephemeral, “new” British course were deemed to be unacceptably high. Independent, non-partyism remained the AF of L’s chosen political path.

54. AF of L, *Procs.*, 1906, pp. 100–102.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

POLITICS: EXPLAINING DIFFERENCE

In addressing the refusal of the AF of L to follow the labour party road, many historians and social scientists have had primary resort to a range of “exceptionalist” structural determinations and explanations. These structural factors have included racism, working-class heterogeneity, the “promise of mobility”, the pervasive US “commitment to liberal individualism”, the traditions and values of equal rights “citizenship” versus those of hereditary privilege and “class”, and the supposedly all-consuming embrace of an “open”, largely non-ideological, cross-class political system and its two main political parties.⁵⁶

It would, of course, be foolish to deny the significance of structural factors to the politics of the AF of L and the wider working class. For example, the wide and deep embrace of the Republicans and the Democrats, and racism and other “ethnocultural” factors undoubtedly limited the mass appeal of socialist and labour party politics in the United States in the pre-1914 years and beyond. Similarly, many labour leaders, including Gompers, maintained that the culturally diverse nature of the domestic working class, coupled with the, albeit much diminished, influence and material standard of “the people” in the United States – as compared with their supposedly more homogeneous, poorer and permanently subordinate counterpart in “monarchical” and “aristocratic” Britain – made it correspondingly more difficult to establish common political commitment to a labour party among large numbers of workers.⁵⁷ Exceptionalist structural explanations, however, fail to provide a sufficient answer. There is, for example, an urgent need for more rigorous cross-national comparison in order to discover whether and to what extent structuralist “exceptions” were, in reality, unique to the United States. Furthermore, all too often the structuralist explanations offered, especially in “social-scientific” accounts,⁵⁸ are pitched in too static a manner and at too general a level to do full justice to change over time and the nuances, complexities and contradictions of specific historical conjunctures. For example, notwithstanding seemingly formidable structural barriers, large numbers of American workers turned, time and time again, to non-mainstream radical politics. Finally, an emphasis upon the key importance of “the structural factor” does not enable us convincingly to answer our central question as to why the AF of L successfully resisted the adoption of the new “British road”. For in truth, the reasons given by the mainstream

56. For a detailed discussion of the nature, strengths and weaknesses of structural determinations and explanations see Kirk, “Transatlantic Connections”, Halpern and Morris, *American Exceptionalism?*.

57. Kaufman and Albert, *Gompers Papers*, pp. 620–621; Finn, “Great Debate”, p. 220; and “President Gompers in Europe”, *American Federationist*, 16 (1909), pp. 1081–1086.

58. See, especially, Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword* (New York, 1996).

AF of L leaders for their resistance revolved far more around experiential than structural factors. It is accordingly to a brief discussion of the former that we will finally turn.

In summarizing these experiential factors,⁵⁹ we must, first of all, afford overriding importance to the “trade unionism first” concern and strategy of the AF of L highlighted earlier in this article. Gompers and his allies were both consistent and successful in their opposition to anything or anyone perceived to be advocating a course detrimental to the development and consolidation of the AF of L within the traditionally “peculiar” US context of hostility towards organized labour – of strong, anti-union employers and judges and weak trade unions. As already observed, as late as 1907 the adoption of the party-political road was deemed to carry with it unacceptably high risks for the labour movement’s central task of building strong trade unions.

Second, it was within this determining context that the mainstream AF of L’s basic source of conflict with the socialists must be understood. Given their general advocacy of the primacy of the party-political road, it was more or less inevitable that most socialists and labour party supporters, both inside and outside the AF of L, would sooner or later come into conflict with the Gompers group, irrespective of other areas of potential and actual mutual agreement and difference. Indeed, as Stuart Kaufman has reminded us, the origins of this conflict can be traced back to the disputes of the 1870s between “Marxist” proponents of the “primacy of economic organization” and Lassallean believers in the “iron law of wages” and the primacy of politics. Gompers had, of course, been deeply involved in these disputes, and remained consistent in the “Marxist” lessons derived from them.⁶⁰

Third, many AF of L members seriously questioned the validity of the socialist assumption that the state could substantially and fundamentally be transformed. In view of the experiential record of the hostility of the state towards organized labour, the former’s “capture” by the antagonistic forces of capital, and the continuing importance of the traditional republican virtues of voluntarism and weak centralized power, many within the AF of L viewed emphases upon the *primacy* of the ballot box and the socialist transformation of the state as both unwelcome and as so much “pie in the sky”.⁶¹

Fourth, and finally, Gompers in particular increasingly began to articulate the important argument that the adoption of independent, nonpartisan political means was, albeit slowly, and far more at the local and state than the national level, bringing rewards to organized labour which the party-political option would in all probability not deliver to anything like the

59. For a more detailed account see Kirk, “Transatlantic Connections”.

60. Kaufman, *Gompers Papers*, pp. 21–43, 83–84.

61. Kirk, *Challenge and Accommodation*, pp. 43–45, 246–247.

same extent.⁶² Such rewards, perceived to be far more marked in the 1900s than in the previous decade, were reflected in the passage of legislation favourable to organized labour and the election of representatives “committed to labor’s interests”. Herein – in organized labour’s attempted entry into and “warrening” of, the worlds of local, regional and national politics – lay profoundly important, if much neglected, roots of an American version of “labourism”. Future research will hopefully be moved precisely and extensively to chart the political geography of the AF of L’s spheres of influence and their limitations, the responses of external political forces, and the meanings and lessons derived from the whole process (on a par with the detailed map we now possess of the “rise of Labour” in Britain and its interplay with Liberalism and Conservatism).⁶³ In such a manner will our knowledge and understanding of the roots and nature of the AF of L’s “peculiar” labourism and the sources of political accommodation and challenge be greatly enhanced.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued against a simple, exceptionalist depiction of the AF of L as a politically closed and conservative body, and as, in all essentials, different from the British labour movement during the 1890s and 1900s. We have placed a premium upon the influences of patterned contingency and complexity, the ebb and flow of radicalism and conservatism, and the relative powers of agency, choice and opportunity upon the AF of L’s politics. However, we must conclude on an ironic note of self-criticism. By 1910 a sense of profound difference from, indeed superiority towards, British and much of European labour was now uppermost in Gompers’s thoughts. The AF of L president drew the crucial lesson from his four-month trip to Britain and Europe in 1909 that the “trade union first” and nonpartisan independent strategies of the AF of L had delivered much more substantial gains to workers than those delivered by European and British trade unions and socialist and labour parties. “In no country in Europe”, declared Gompers,

[...] does there exist a national labor organization of any form better adapted to obtain directly successful results in the interests of workers than the A.F. of L [...]. Nowhere have there been greater achievements in advancing wages, shortening the workday, generally improving workshop conditions, or in convincing all ranks of

62. For examples of such “rewards” see *American Federationist*, 5 (1898), pp. 23, 74; 9 (1902), p. 433; 15 (1908), pp. 341, 1065; AF of L, *Procs.*, 1896, p. 10; 1899, p. 14; 1900, pp. 17–19; 1904, pp. 240–241; 1906, pp. 34, 191, 198, 203.

63. For a guide to the voluminous literature on this subject see Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class: Labour in British Society* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 192–198.



Figure 5. Group portrait of the AF of L Executive Council, 1909. Seated front centre (in the chair) is Samuel Gompers.
The George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, MD

society that the organization of labor is the great contributory and potent power to social peace and general prosperity.⁶⁴

Gompers's traditional role model, British trade unionism, was now adjudged to be lagging behind the AF of L in terms of "rapidity of development" and "unity and compactness of organization".⁶⁵ The impressive, if uneven, growth of the AF of L between 1900 to 1910, from 869,000 to 2,102,000 members (as compared with an increase of approximately half a million trade unionists in the UK during the same decade) underpinned Gompers's beliefs that the Federation had "come of age" and that the "peculiar" weakness of American trade unionism was now largely a thing of the past. Most significantly, in view of this new late-1900s context of the perceived domestic gains and international superiority of the "trade-union first" American way, it had become both unproductive and unnecessary further to countenance the "British" road of independent labour partyism. The AF of L would henceforward attempt to export its "American way" to Central and Latin America and the continent of Europe itself.

64. *American Federationist*, 16 (1909), pp. 661, 1077, 1086.

65. *American Federationist*, 17 (1910), pp. 151, 225, 243.