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FIRST EDITORIAL

THE BIRMINGHAM CONVENTION.

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TRADE unionism “pure and simple” gave us at Birmingham the full measure of its value as a factor in the economic and intellectual progress of the masses. If, as Mr. Gompers asserts, 750,000 wage-workers were represented there, then, unquestionably, the last convention of the A.F. of L. was, by the numbers of its constituency, the most powerful representative labor body that had ever met on this side of the Atlantic. At the same time, however, it proved, by its action, the most impotent; no mountain of less size ever brought forth a mouse so puny.

We shall not “libel” Mr. Gompers by questioning his figures. The larger they may be, the stronger the argument against the principle, or lack of principle, and the consequent policy, or lack of policy, which, taken together, constitute the system, or lack of system, formulated by its advocates as “trade unionism pure and simple.”

With 750,000 organized working people ready to sustain it, or even with half that number, the convention—if fully impressed with the magnitude of the force behind it, and if guided by the only sound theory of the labor movement that a knowledge of the most obvious facts of our economic development can suggest—could have exerted a lasting influence upon the destinies of the nation. It did practically nothing, however, that will entitle it to remembrance except, perhaps, for what it undid. The only act of this great convention that evinced some spirit of solidarity between the “federated” trades, was the appropriation of three thousand dollars for the purpose of appealing to the highest “tribunal in the land” from the decision of a lower court of Pennsylvania against the printers of Pittsburg, involving the rights of organized labor in the conduct of strikes. Even this was not granted without difficulty. President Gompers opposed the motion for the sake of economy. Vice-president P.J. McGuire opposed it also; but while

he took the anti-pure-and-simple ground that the workingmen should use their political power in composing the legislatures and tribunals upon which they depended for justice and its administration, it does not appear from the reports heretofore received that he advocated independent political action. As a resolution recommending such a step was defeated later on, we may well imagine what the fate will be of the proposed appeal to the highest plutocratic tribunal in the land. Mark that the defeat of this resolution was a gigantic crab step, which carried the Federation several years backward, since a similar resolution had already been adopted in 1886 by the Columbus convention.

In the same light we may foresee the practical effect of the grandiloquent resolutions actually passed by the convention, appealing to our National and State plutocratic legislatures in favor of compulsory education and other measures favorable to the working class, condemning the Secretary of the Treasury for his interpretation of the alien contract labor law, denouncing the Chicago police for its brutality, etc., etc.

A further crab step was the practical abandonment, for the time being at least, of the eight hours movement. Not only by failing to designate the trade which is next to enter the fight for a reduction of the working hours has the convention made a public admission extremely damaging to organized labor; but, by repealing the special tax provided for this purpose it has actually made it impossible for the Federation to sustain any trade in a conflict having this end in view, the regular tax being hardly more than sufficient to cover ordinary expenses, while "voluntary contributions" have never as yet proved a certain and timely resource.

In other words, politically and economically, the American Federation of Labor has deliberately emasculated itself.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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