
Chicago Labor Breaks with Old Parties as J. Fitzpatrick Balks: President of Body Refuses to Carry Out Decision in Resolution [event of April 17, 1910]

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Everything that looked like an old political party was thrown overboard. Samuel Gompers' policy of political action was repudiated and a firm stand for independent political action was taken by the Chicago Federation of Labor at its Sunday [April 17, 1910] meeting.

So far as the Chicago Federation is concerned, the days of begging favors at the hands of either the Republican or Democratic parties is at an end, all the high officials of the American Federation of Labor to the contrary. The delegates of Chicago's workers declared for political action emanating entirely from themselves and not based on capitalist political party philosophy.

Fitzpatrick Supports Gompers.

The passing of resolutions to this effect was not accomplished without stormy debate, President John Fitzpatrick, candidate for the Democratic nomination for Congress against James T. McDermott in the stockyards district, vainly striving to keep the delegates in line along the plain laid down by [Samuel] Gompers during his recent visit to this city.

The fight that President Fitzpatrick made on the resolutions, in some cases amounting to personal denunciation of Charles Dodd, head of the Piano and Organ Workers' Union and former chief of the federation, who championed independent political action, as well as declarations that political trickery was afoot to defeat the cause of the workers, proved futile in the face of the determined stand against AF of L political policies.

Fitzpatrick's struggle to keep the workers in line, more than anything else, would indicate that the organized workers of the United States lead into the camps of the old parties. The first step that was to be taken in this direction was for President Samuel Gompers and other labor leaders to attend the Farmers' convention to be held in St. Louis on May 2 [1910] to arrange an offensive and defensive political alliance to be agreed upon.

What Started Debate.

The stand taken by the Chicago Federation came as the result of resolutions introduced by George Macey of the Stereotypers' union, and T. P. Quinn of the Actors' union. They are as follows:

Whereas, A federal court, sitting in judgment on the Danbury Hatters' case, has recently given its decision sustaining the lower court; and

Whereas, This decision to all intents and purposes means the impoverishment of every member of the union involved, having property that can be attached; and

Whereas, Said decision, if permitted to stand as the law of the land, will drive the great majority of home-owning or property-holding members out of labor unions; and

Whereas, These judges and the laws they give us are the direct results of our own political inactivity; and

Whereas, It is our judgment and the verdict of history that no old political party proved competent to deal with or solve new questions, having in them larger liberties for the people; and

Whereas, The great question and problem before the American people at this time for solution is the question of the laborer and the capitalist, and the problem is the industrial problem; and

Whereas, the history of our country indicates the desire of our citizenship to solve all such questions and problems through the machinery of the ballot box; therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Chicago Federation of Labor instruct its executive officers to immediately communicate with the President of the American Federation of Labor [Samuel Gompers] and request that he take such steps as may be necessary to enlist the cooperation of farmers' unions and all other bodies seeking political and industrial reform, to the end that the democracy of the nation, now scattered among all existing political parties, wasting its efforts and dissipating its influence, be welded into one great industrial political movement, having for its purpose

industrial liberty, be brought into existence as soon as possible; and be it further

Resolved, That President Fitzpatrick, our delegate to the Farmers' convention, be instructed to use his influence to develop sentiment favorable for this end.

The resolutions were sent to the federation by the resolutions committee, of which Frank Buchanan, of the Ironworkers, is chairman, without recommendation. An attempt was made to show that the matter in the resolutions was already covered in the resolutions passed at the time Gompers was in Chicago. Gompers at that time claimed he had something up his sleeve that would be taken out at the meeting of the AF of L Executive Committee held soon after. Buchanan urged that the federation await the advice of the American Federation of Labor officials.

When the Storm Broke.

The storm broke immediately the delegates began showing that they had waited for some advice or information as to the intentions of the American Federation of Labor. The Executive Board had met but it had also kept its deliberations secret. Not a word had the Chicago Federation heard from the AF of L headquarters at Washington, DC. The delegates seemed to take this silence to mean that they were again to be led into the camps of the old political parties and they resented the plan.

"I defy any Republican or Democratic delegate in this Chicago Federation of Labor, in this room, to show what either the Republican or Democratic parties have done for the masses of the nation," declared Delegate Macey in support of the resolutions. "The American Federation of Labor should receive instructions from its locals."

Delegate Quinn then secured the floor and told how he had sought to introduce his resolutions at the Gompers meeting, but that they had been withheld pending action along the lines laid down. He then scored the American Federation of Labor for having made no report on the matter.

Wants a Change.

"We should do all we can to give the American Federation of Labor Executive Board our position on this matter," he said. "Gompers

is going to the Farmers' convention. The farmers are conservative men. I want a revolution in the industrial order. I want to see a complete revolution in the position of the wage workers on the political field.

“Even if all the workers should join the Socialist movement I should be highly pleased. I don't care how it comes, but I want to see a revolution in the conditions that make the worker a slave, and of the employer a master.”

Delegate C.M. Madsen, of the Painters, told how he had been absent when the federation decided that organized labor should take all of its deposits out of the banks, drawing the applause as he referred to the successfully waged fight that his organization had waged against “Skinny” Madden.

“What benefit can be derived from taking your money out of the banks?” he asked. “You can't match John D. Rockefeller dollar for dollar. But you can match Rockefeller and his class vote for vote. I would like to see all the workers join a labor party. If the Socialist Party has failed to be the expression of the working class, it is because the workers have remained outside of the Socialist Party. Get in and capture the Socialist Party. The criticisms against the Socialist Party have been of persons and tactics, not of principles.”

“I'm opposed to putting any labor man on any political ticket, labor or otherwise, that stands on the present economic basis,” said John C. Flora, delegate of the Carpenters. “If the heads of the labor movement do not see this the rank and file will learn it and taken the necessary action themselves.

Leaders Satisfied.

“The labor leaders are quite satisfied with the conditions as they exist,” said Delegate Glasgow, of the Painters. “They get good salaries so they are not very much interested in the man who gets \$1.50 a day. The policy of waiting is wrong. We should act. The people who own the wealth of the nation have always dictated its political policies. The worker must own his job.”

Delegate Dold, President of the Piano and Organ Workers' International and a former President of the Chicago Federation of Labor, then secured the floor and finished the attack on the political submission of the working class to the old parties.

“I am opposed to making the labor movement the tail of any political party kite,” he said. “I’m glad I’m here today to express the conviction that I have on the subject. I am tired of waiting for the leaders to move. The rank and file of the labor unions is demanding independent political action and it us up to this body, the strongest in the country, to lead the way.”

Adopted Unanimously.

The resolutions were adopted unanimously, showing at least that the old parties were a back number so far as Chicago labor was concerned, even if the American Federation of Labor officials refused to carry out the sentiment.

With the adoption of the resolutions President Fitzpatrick announced that he would not carry out the instructions given him and asked the federation to select someone else in his place to represent them at the St. Louis Farmers Convention.

Some of the delegates were ready to reconsider their previous action on the motion of Delegate Buchanan, after Fitzpatrick had asked the delegates to stand by the policy to be laid down by Gompers and the American Federation of Labor, but Dold stood by his guns and ridiculed the delegates for changing their minds. The war on the motion to reconsider then began.

“Are you going to make yourselves the laughing stock of the country by passing a resolution of this kind and then reconsidering it?” asked Dold. “I am sick of both the old political parties, and I am ready to stand or fall with a workingmen’s party, even if it is a mistake at this time.”

Attack Made on Dold.

President Fitzpatrick immediately turned his guns on Dold, declaring that a trick had been played upon the federation.

“Charles Dold has not attended this federation for years, and when he walked in today I wondered what scheme he had to promote. I will not go to the Farmers’ convention as a delegate to fulfill the provisions of this resolution.”

On a point of personal privilege Delegate Dold immediately explained that he had not been a delegate to the federation for the past two years. He pointed out that he had always stood for independent

political action by the workers, something that was well known to everyone connected with Chicago labor.

“We have a right to take independent action without awaiting the dictation of the men who are serving us,” he said. “I voted and worked against the policy of the American Federation of Labor in 1908 and I will do so again.

After considerable further discussion the motion to reconsider was lost by a vote of 55 to 48, but even then the matter was not settled, as the delegates refused to choose a man to go to the Farmers’ convention in St. Louis May 2. The selection of a delegate was laid over until the next meeting on May 1, when another discussion of political action by the forces of labor is expected.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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