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Marxism and the Union Bureaucracy: Karl Kautsky on Samuel Gompers and the German Free Trade Unions

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Abstract

This work is a companion piece to ‘The American Worker’, Karl Kautsky’s reply to Werner Sombart’s *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906), first published in English in the November 2003 edition of this journal. In August 1909 Kautsky wrote an article on Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, on the occasion of the latter’s first European tour. The article was not only a criticism of Gompers’s anti-socialist ‘pure-and-simple’ unionism but also part of an ongoing battle between the revolutionary wing of German Social Democracy and the German trade-union officials. In this critical English edition we provide the historical background to the document as well as an overview of the issues raised by Gompers’ visit to Germany, such as the bureaucratisation and increasing conservatism of the union leadership in both Germany and the United States, the role of the General Commission of Free Trade Unions in the abandonment of Marxism by the German Social-Democratic Party and the socialists’ attitude toward institutions promoting class collaboration like the National Civic Federation.

Keywords

Kautsky, Karl; Gompers, Samuel; Luxemburg, Rosa; Legien, Karl; American Federation of Labor, National Civic Federation, Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands

Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg and the trade unions

Rosa Luxemburg carried on a polemic with the officials of the German ‘Free’ (i.e. Social-Democratic) trade unions ever since the revisionist controversy. In her 1899 booklet against Eduard Bernstein, *Social Reform or Revolution?*, Rosa Luxemburg famously wrote that ‘the objective conditions of capitalist society transform the two economic functions of the trade unions [the defence of

labour-power against the profit system and the amelioration of the condition of the workers] into a sort of labour of Sisyphus'.¹ Kautsky endorsed this point of view, for instance in his 1906 article 'The Party and the Unions', where he wrote that, in opposition to the Social-Democratic Party's final aim (the abolition of capitalism), 'the union work, indispensable and beneficial as it is, might be called a labour of Sisyphus, not in the sense of a useless work, but in the sense of a work that never ends, and that must be every time began anew' in order to maintain the gains of the unions' struggle.² This metaphor had such an impact that as late as 1910 the General Commission of Free Trade Unions of Germany used it for their criticism of Kautsky's book *The Road to Power*.³

The General Commission of Free Trade Unions of Germany [*Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*], the federation of Social-Democratic trade unions, was established on 16–17 November 1890 by a Conference of Trade-Union Executives held in Berlin. The chairman of the General Commission for thirty years, from its establishment in 1890 until his death in 1920, was Carl Legien, a member of the right wing of German Social Democracy. Legien had a major influence on the policy of the General Commission as editor of its official journal, the *Correspondenzblatt*, whose first number appeared in 1891. As early as the 1893 Köln congress of the SPD, Legien stated that, in his opinion, the Party and the unions were 'equally important'. The speaker for the Party Executive, Ignaz Auer, accused him of attempting to separate the unions from the Party and of turning them into a rival power. In a rather awkward metaphor, he warned Legien against attempting to follow Gompers's example: 'The German labour movement', he stated, 'is not the kind of field in which the corn of Gompers and consorts bloomed'.⁴ In addition to his post in the General Commission, Legien held a number of important political posts: Reichstag deputy (1893–8 and 1903–20), secretary of the International Bureau of Socialist Trade Unions (1902), and in president of the International Trade-Union Federation (1913).⁵

Kautsky sounded the alarm against the unions' leaders striving for independence from the Party under the slogan of neutrality as far back as 1900.⁶ The *Correspondenzblatt* answered that 'even against Kautsky, we must

1. Luxemburg 1970, Chapter VII.

2. Kautsky 1906.

3. Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1910.

4. Quoted in Varain 1956, p. 16. Thirteen years later, in 1906, Werner Sombart drew the same analogy: '...the President of the American Federation of Labor, whose equivalent in Germany would be Karl Legien'. Sombart 1976, p. 36.

5. Schneider 1991, p. 86.

6. Kautsky 1900.

hold fast to the view that the tactic of the trade unions will be determined solely by the resolutions of the union congresses' rather than those of the party congresses.⁷

The Russian Revolution of 1905 and 'union revisionism'

After the so-called *Bernstein-Debatte* won over the majority of the SPD away from revisionism and into 'orthodox' Marxism, its leaders felt that their revolutionary prognoses were confirmed by the exhilarating events of the first Russian Revolution, which began on 'Bloody Sunday' (9 January 1905). All aspects of Kautsky's thought underwent a considerable radicalisation under the influence of the 1905 Russian Revolution and of Rosa Luxemburg, which given his ignorance of Russian served as the main interpreter of Russian events for him.

In May 1905 the Social-Democratic Free Trade Unions held their fifth congress at Cologne (Köln), in which they flatly rejected the use of the mass political strike – a demand inspired above all by the revolutionary events in Russia. The General Commission's spokesman on this issue, Theodor Bömelburg, president of the construction workers' union, attacked not only the SPD left wing but even Eduard Bernstein (who saw in the general strike not a revolutionary means to overcome reformist parliamentarism, but a means of defending the parliament and democratic rights from the attacks of reaction), arguing that 'in order to expand our organisation, we need peace and quiet [*Ruhe*] in the labour movement'.⁸

The resolution adopted by the Cologne trade-union congress rejected the mass strike as a political tactic and prohibited even the 'propagation' (i.e. the propaganda or discussion) of this means of struggle. It also argued that the mass strike was defended by 'anarchists and persons without any experience in economic struggles' and warned the organised workers 'to avoid being hindered from the everyday work of strengthening the workers' organisations by the adoption and promotion of such ideas'.⁹

When Kautsky criticised the resolution,¹⁰ the central organ of the SPD, the *Vorwärts*, under the direction of Kurt Eisner, accused him of being a doctrinaire ideologue who preached the neo-anarchist utopia of conquering

7. *Correspondenzblatt der Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*, 1900, p. 11. Quoted in Varain 1956, p. 30.

8. Bömelburg 1970.

9. Luxemburg 1972a.

10. Kautsky 1905a.

political power through the general strike. In October 1905, Eisner and four other editors were dismissed, and a new left-wing editorial board took control of the *Vorwärts*.¹¹

In November 1905 Kautsky argued that, precisely when the bankruptcy of theoretical and political revisionism (ministerialism) had become evident,

a new kind of revisionism arose, the *trade-union revisionism*, which found its support in a part of the union bureaucracy. This revisionism preached, under the flag of neutrality, a disavowal of Social Democracy. It did not regard Social Democracy as the party of the working class, but as a party like any other. Not as the party that *unites* the proletariat, but as one of the parties in which the proletariat is *divided*. Social Democracy was seen as a factor hindering the organisational union of the proletariat. If one wanted to unite the Catholic, conservative and liberal workers with the Social-Democratic ones in a trade union, then that should be done, not by showing the usefulness and necessity of Social Democracy, but by the union relinquishing the Social-Democratic spirit out of which it had been born.¹²

At the Jena Congress of the SPD, convened in September 1905, Bebel criticised the hostility of the trade-union leaders towards the political mass strike as dangerous ‘pure-and-simple unionism [*Nurgewerkschaftlerei*]’.¹³ Against the resolution of the Cologne trade-union congress, the Jena Congress adopted a resolution endorsing the use of the mass political strike in the fight for electoral and democratic rights; though, at the insistence of Bebel, it was described as a defensive tactic against the expected assault of the bourgeoisie on the growing gains of the socialist movement.¹⁴ The *Correspondenzblatt* rejected even this watered-down version of the general strike. It reported that ‘Legien called the propaganda for the political strike an unseemly concession to the anarchists’ and added that, although ‘the motion of Legien and his comrades was rejected and the resolution of Bebel adopted by 288 votes against 14’, it was ‘impossible for the Party to force its resolutions on the trade unions. It can only be a question of reaching an agreement on this issue’.¹⁵

And so it turned out to be: at a secret conference of the SPD executive and the General Commission held on 16 February 1906, the party executive pledged ‘to try to prevent a mass strike as much as possible’. If it should nevertheless break out, the Party would assume the sole burden of leadership:

11. Salvadori 1979, pp. 96–7.

12. Kautsky 1961a, emphasis in the original.

13. Bebel 1970.

14. Kautsky 1905b; Luxemburg 1972b.

15. Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1961a.

the trade unions would not participate in it officially, and agreed only ‘not to stab it in the back’.

‘Comrade Luxemburg and the trade unions’

In April 1906, Kautsky was forced to come out in defence of Rosa Luxemburg, who was then leading the revolution in Warsaw and had been arrested together with Leo Jogiches on 4 March 1906, when she was attacked by a trade-union organ. The *Zeitschrift für Graveure und Ziseleure* wrote that it had ‘witnesses of flesh and bone that comrade Luxemburg in a Berlin assembly “drivelled” about the trade unions being an “evil”’. Kautsky replied that it was

not comrade Luxemburg that undermined the relations between the Party and the unions, but those union officials and editors that have taken Rexhäuser¹⁶ as a model. The narrow-minded hatred of these elements against any form of the labour movement that sets itself a higher goal than five pennies more per hour is indeed an ‘evil’.

He dismissed the unions’ accusations as a false and added:

It is new in our movement, indeed unheard-of, for comrades to hurl such nonsensical and frivolous accusations against a leader of the proletarian class struggle precisely at that moment in which the hangman of all freedom [the Tsar] has arrested her and made her defenceless, because of her tireless work at the service of the proletariat. Even our bourgeois opponents, at least the more decent ones – to be sure they are not many – avoided attacking comrade Luxemburg. It is with the most infamous and shameless press flunkies of capitalism and the aristocracy [*Junkertum*] that a trade-union organ goes hand in hand in this worthy business.¹⁷

The organ of the General Commission, the *Correspondenzblatt*, considered ‘shocking’ the adoption of such tone by ‘the alleged first theoretician of the Party’, and asked rhetorically whether effrontery was the necessary product of an academic education.¹⁸ Kautsky answered by asking why the unions failed to name those alleged ‘witnesses of flesh and bone’ against Rosa Luxemburg.¹⁹

16. Ludwig Rexhäuser was the editor of the *Correspondent für Deutschlands Buchdrucker und Schriftgiesser*, the organ of the printers’ union (*Verbandes der Deutschen Buchdrucker*). See Luxemburg 1973b.

17. Kautsky 1961b.

18. Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1978a, p. 1550.

19. Kautsky 1961c.

‘The Party and the unions’

Between the Jena and Mannheim SPD congresses, in August 1906, Kautsky wrote his major work on the relationship between the political party and the trade unions, where he argued against the political neutrality of the unions and demanded their subordination to the revolutionary leadership of the Party. The article pointed out that, depending on the political circumstances, the unions could become the élite of the working class or a narrow-minded aristocracy of organised skilled workers; a means for the class struggle or a hindrance to it. The unions represented the momentary economic interests of its members, while the revolutionary party represented the interests of the whole proletariat as well as the final aim of its struggle: the conquest of political power by the working class. It attacked the ‘reine Gewerkschafter [pure unionists]’ as much as the union officials dismissed the ‘Nurpolitiker [pure politicians]’. To many union leaders, the Party appeared as a threat to their peace and quiet and as the harbinger of political catastrophes that could ruin the unions. Kautsky’s article denounced the ‘search for a new trade-union theory’ among union officials who felt constrained by the ‘party theory’ of the class struggle.²⁰ With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the warm reception accorded four years later to Samuel Gompers’s gospel of ‘pure-and-simple’ unionism by the General Commission of the Free Trade Unions and by Legien was not so much a question of an American ‘business unionist’ corrupting the German Marxist union officials as of a German union officialdom in open rebellion against the Party’s programme seeking for support among like-minded union leaders across the ocean.

Kautsky recalled how the English union officials in the First International

felt Marx’s leadership to be an increasingly unbearable ‘authoritarianism’, and did not hesitate to unite themselves with the ‘revolutionary romanticists’ of the Bakunin fraction, as soon as Marx’s tendency to establish an independent political workers’ party in England became clear.

They did so because they

instinctively felt that in that way a power would have been created which would have put an end to their autocratic rule. In the same way, there is in America no more poisonous enemies of the Social-Democratic Party than the mass of the trade-union officials, with Gompers at their head.²¹

20. Kautsky 1906, p. 718.

21. Kautsky 1906, p. 750.

Interestingly, in its answer to Kautsky's article the *Correspondenzblatt* correctly pointed out that 'Kautsky's struggle is not aimed against the union *organisations* but against the union *leaders* and *editors* . . . *in order to shake the confidence of the union members in the leaders of their organisations*'.²²

The Mannheim Congress of the SPD

The polemic continued at the SPD congress held in September 1906 at Mannheim. In his speech to the congress, Kautsky openly posed the question of the rising bureaucratisation of the Party itself, and drew attention to the danger of the formation of a conservative bloc between the Party and union apparatuses:

Our own party, as it grew larger, has become in a certain sense a rather cumbersome apparatus. It is not easy to bring new ideas and actions into this apparatus. If now the trade unions want peace and quiet, what perspectives open up for us if they are fastened to the already cumbersome party body as brakes.²³

Kautsky compared the breach of discipline by the union functionaries (i.e. the rejection of the Jena resolution on the mass political strike by the Cologne trade-union congress) with that of the French socialist members of parliament when Millerand became minister of the bourgeois government headed by René Waldeck-Rousseau – a move which resulted in a split in French socialism and in the expulsion of eighteen deputies from the French Socialist Party.

Legien, in turn, pointed out that the anarchists had regarded the Jena resolution as a shamefaced adoption of their own idea of the general strike, and that, even within the ranks of Social Democracy, many people had understood from it that the Party was ready to use the political mass strike in the near future, especially to obtain the general suffrage in Prussia. Against this attitude, Legien recalled that 'for more than two decades we in Germany were educated in the conception of [Ignaz] Auer that "general strike is general nonsense" [*Generalstreik ist Generalunsinn*]'.

He emphasised the reformist tactics of the SPD:

It has been taught for ten years in the Party that revolutions in the old sense are no longer possible. We have always said that we grow best in the framework of legality. We have time and time again said that we can organise no violent resistance.

22. Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1978a, p. 527, emphasis in the original.

23. Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands 1961.

By means of these gradualist methods, the SPD had won many electoral successes, but ‘then came the events of the Russian Revolution’, making many people ‘look for new means of struggle and consider it necessary for the political mass strike to be recognised as such in a resolution’. Legien concluded: ‘I consider the discussion about the political mass strike dangerous.’²⁴

Rosa Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the mass strike

It was against the background of this attitude in the leading circles of the German Social-Democratic trade unions that Rosa Luxemburg published, in the same month of the Mannheim Congress (September 1906), her famous brochure *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, which defended the idea of the mass political strike as the main lesson of the first Russian Revolution for the German working class, counterposing the spontaneous revolutionary initiative of the working masses to the conservative policies of the labour leaders.²⁵

The resolution of the Mannheim Congress, again drafted by Bebel, represented a historic victory of the trade-union bureaucracy vis-à-vis the revolutionaries in the SPD. Even though it did not reject the general strike in principle, the Mannheim resolution stated that the party executive could undertake no action which the trade unions would not approve of, effectively giving them veto power over party decisions. The radical *Lepiziger Volkszeitung* drew from the resolution of the Mannheim Congress the bitter conclusion that ten years of struggle against revisionism had been in vain, ‘for the revisionism we have killed in the Party rises again in greater strength in the trade unions’.²⁶ Kautsky deluded himself into thinking that, as regards ‘the central question of the conference, the relation between the Party and the unions’, the results of the Mannheim Conference had been satisfactory, because ‘the unions leaders accepted the viewpoint of the Party on the question of May Day and the mass strike’ – though in fact the contradiction between the Jena resolution and the Cologne resolution had simply been glossed over. But he did recognise that ‘Bebel’s speech in Mannheim gave the impression of representing a step back vis-à-vis Jena, as if today he considered the possibility of applying the mass strike in Germany much more remote than a year ago’. He concluded that ‘the party congress at Dresden meant the end of theoretical

24. Legien 1970, p. 402.

25. On the Mannheim Congress of the SPD see Luxemburg 1972b.

26. Schorske 1970, p. 52.

revisionism, but our opponents set even greater hopes in the “practical revisionism” of the unionists’.²⁷

The ability of the union leaders to impose their line on the SPD derived from two main sources: the vast membership of the unions and their even larger financial resources vis-à-vis the Party. From 215,000 in 1892, the membership of the Social-Democratic Free Trade Unions rose to more than 1.1 million in 1904 and to 2.5 million the year before the outbreak of the First World War, leaving the liberal Hirsch-Duncker associations and the Christian unions trailing in their wake with, respectively, 106,000 and 218,000 members in 1913.²⁸ In 1906, when the SPD took its first census, it emerged that its membership was 348,327 as against 1,689,709 for the Free Trade Unions. In 1913 the ratio was still two and a half to one in favor of the unions. In addition, the party income for the fiscal year 1906–7 was 1,191,819 marks; that of the trade unions 51,396,784 marks – that is to say, about fifty times as great.²⁹ Not surprisingly, the proportion of trade-union officials in the SPD Reichstag faction rose from 11.6 per cent in 1893 to 32.7 per cent in 1912.³⁰

Samuel Gompers, the American Federation of Labor and socialism

Samuel Gompers was president of the American Federation of Labor from its foundation in 1886 until his death in 1924, with the exception of a single year (1894), when he was temporarily unseated by the populist candidate John McBride. Originally a protégé of the German-American Marxists, towards the end of the nineteenth century Gompers became increasingly conservative, under the influence of the craft-labour aristocracy that he came to represent. In 1894, he opposed the proposed adoption by the AFL of the British Trade Unions Congress’s programme, whose plank 10 demanded the collective ownership of the means of production. Gradually, he also began to oppose industrial unionism and the formation of a labour party, to accept racist policies (such the exclusion of Chinese immigration and Jim Crow segregation in the South) and – after an initially radical reaction, when he joined the Anti-Imperialist League – to support the new imperialist foreign policy inaugurated by the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Gompers came out publicly against socialism at the 1903 convention of the AFL when, during the debate on the labour party, he turned on the socialists

27. Kautsky 1961, p. 2.

28. Schneider 1991, pp. 70, 75.

29. Schorske 1970, pp. 13, 93.

30. Schneider 1991, p. 92.

saying, '[e]conomically, you are unsound; socially you are wrong; industrially you are an impossibility'. After this carefully planned attack, Gompers was hailed as a hero by the press. The National Civic Federation printed a picture of him on the front page of its journal with the caption, 'Socialism's Ablest Foe'.³¹

The National Civic Federation

The National Civic Federation (NCF) and its parent body, the Chicago Civic Federation, emerged from the social and political unrest resulting from the Panic of 1893, which was one of the worst economic crises in American history. The Chicago CF played an arbitration role in the 1894 Pullman strike. The NCF was formally established in 1900. Its organiser and long-time chairman of its executive council was Ralph M. Easley. Gompers joined the new organisation as first vice-president, after having become acquainted with Easley through the Chicago CF's 'conciliation and arbitration' work. Gompers proved instrumental in recruiting United Mine Workers' president John Mitchell to the NCF. Other prominent union leaders in the NCF were Daniel J. Keefe of the Longshoremen's Unions and Timothy Healy of the Brotherhood of Stationary Firemen. Theodore Roosevelt, then vice-president, heartily supported the creation of the NCF, and continued to do it after he became President in 1901. So did Roosevelt's Secretary of War and future President William Howard Taft. In 1903, the *National Civic Federation Review* began publication, ultimately enjoying a national circulation of over 50,000.

Membership in the NCF did not require the payment of dues. The NCF's budget came from supporters like the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, traction millionaire August Belmont, New York city capitalist Vincent Astor, railroad baron George W. Perkins and banker Otto H. Kahn. Each of these men served on the NCF's first executive council. Edwin R.A. Seligman, a Columbia University economist and banker, chaired the NCF's Taxation Department, and John R. Commons, a famous labour historian from the University of Wisconsin, served as the Taxation Department's secretary.³²

The NCF opposed not only socialism but women's suffrage, and after the First World War campaigned against the recognition of the Soviet Union and fought against old-age pensions as 'socialistic'. After the Red Scare, 'the NCF declined mainly because it had accomplished its task. The forces of labour militancy were successfully suppressed, and the Federation's pioneering work

31. Mandel 1963, p. 250.

32. The data for this summary were taken from Cyphers 2002, pp. 19–37.

in mediation and arbitration had been taken over by the Department of Labor and various governmental arbitration boards'.³³

Samuel Gompers and the National Civic Federation

In December 1901, the NCF's Committee on Conciliation and Arbitration changed its name to the Industrial Department. An Executive Committee was appointed, with Hanna as chairman and Easley as secretary. During the next few years, Gompers was deeply involved in two strikes with which the NCF was not directly connected, but in which the employer was serving as chairman of the Industrial Department. Gompers supported the position of the employer against the union in both cases.

The first strike, over the downgrading of a foreman for refusing to quit the union, took place from July to August 1903 at Buffalo, and involved none other than the Chairman of the Industrial Department of the NCF, Mark Hanna. The Buffalo blast-furnace workers were organised in an industrial union comprising all the workers in the plant. After Gompers's 'mediation' of the dispute, the convention of the Blast Furnace Workers' Association revoked the charter of the Buffalo local and re-organised it, as Hanna had requested, on a craft-union basis, that is, it became an organisation of the blast furnace workers exclusively.

The second strike broke out in March 1905. The previous year, Hanna had died and been replaced as chairman of the NCF's Industrial Department by August Belmont. Shortly afterwards, Belmont took over the Manhattan Elevated Company, which began to implement a policy of longer hours and lower wages. After the outbreak of the strike, Gompers and William Mahon, president of the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees, drafted a message to the strikers warning them that their struggle was illegal under the rule of the Amalgamated, and ordering them to return to work on penalty of having their charter revoked. The strike was crushed in four days. The Central Federated Union of New York sent a committee to Belmont asking for the re-instatement of the strikers. When its petition was rejected, the union ordered any of its members or members of affiliated unions who belonged to the NCF to resign from it. Later, another resolution was introduced denouncing the NCF and the labour leaders who participated in its activities. Encouraged by this action, Victor Berger, Socialist Party leader from Milwaukee, introduced a resolution at the next convention of the AFL denouncing the

33. Zerzan 1974, p. 204.

‘hypocritical attempt of the Civic Federation plutocrats to convince organised laboring men that the interests of capital and labor are identical’ and the ‘close intimacy and harmonious relations between Samuel Gompers and other labor leaders with the great capitalists and plutocratic politicians’.³⁴ The resolution was defeated.

The NCF and American socialism

As an organ of class collaboration and co-optation of the union leadership, the NCF was opposed by the National Association of Manufacturers from the right and by the Socialist Party of America and the Industrial Workers of the World from the left. The opposition to the Civic Federation was shared by the three major factions within the Socialist Party. We have already noted the position of Victor Berger, the main leader of the Socialist Party right wing. The head of the Socialist Party centre, Morris Hillquit, wrote in the 1910 edition of his *History of Socialism in the United States* that the NCF ‘has for its ostensible object “the voluntary conciliation between employers and employees as distinguished from arbitration”’, but, in reality, it served ‘to palliate the aggressive spirit of labor without offering any concessions on the part of organized capital’.³⁵ Eugene Debs, which was both of a Socialist Party leader and a one of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World, said that ‘the Civic Federation has been organized for the one purpose of prolonging the age-long sleep of the working class’.³⁶ As for the ‘Wobblies’ themselves, in their founding convention, held in June 1905 under the influence of the first Russian Revolution, they wrote in their Manifesto that ‘craft divisions hinder the growth of class consciousness of the workers’ and ‘foster the idea of harmony of interests between employing exploiter and employed slave.’ The enabled ‘the association of the misleaders of the workers with the capitalists in the Civic Federations, where plans are made for the perpetuation of capitalism, and the permanent enslavement of the workers through the wage system’.³⁷

At the thirty-first convention of the AFL, held in 1911, three resolutions were submitted condemning the NCF and instructing all Federation officials to sever their ties with it. The position of the Socialist Party in the debate was defended by Duncan MacDonald of the United Mine Workers, whose union

34. Mandel 1963, pp. 240–9.

35. Hillquit 1971, p. 325.

36. Debs 1905, pp. 6–7.

37. Trautmann 1905.

had passed a similar resolution. Gompers came out in defence of the NCF and the resolutions were eventually defeated by 12,000 votes to 5,000.³⁸

The polemic over the statistics on American wages

In May 1909, Kautsky published his book *The Road to Power*, which Lenin called ‘the last and best of Kautsky’s works against the opportunists’.³⁹ Using statistics of the United States Bureau of Labor, Kautsky argued that, despite all the industrial struggles of the American workers, the buying power of US wages had stagnated for more than a decade, especially due to the growth of trusts and employers’ associations, and that the unions were therefore forced to enter the political arena and collaborate closely with the socialist party if they wanted to be able to withstand the employers’ pressure and defend the living standards of their members.⁴⁰ This analysis led to a furious exchange with the organs of the unionist right wing of the SPD, especially the *Grundstein* and the *Correspondenzblatt*, which accused him of being ‘an opponent of unionist organisation’ and of ‘belittling and undervaluing’ trade-union work. Robert Schmidt wrote an article series in the *Correspondenzblatt* under the title ‘The Way to Illusions: Sisyphus Work or Positive Achievements?’ which accused Kautsky of wanting to turn ‘the previous achievements of the trade unions into future failures’ and of being ‘very little qualified to show us the way to power’.⁴¹ The *Correspondenzblatt* praised the success of the American unions in shortening the working day by almost 5 per cent from 1898 to 1907 and accused Kautsky of anarcho-syndicalism. ‘Kautsky doesn’t care about the development of the trade unions into powerful economic organisations in economic life. What he has in mind is nothing else but French syndicalism’.⁴²

Kautsky countered the *Correspondenzblatt*’s charges by arguing that the industrial struggles could raise wages at a given moment, but not determine their long-term evolution, which depended on deeper economic processes. Given a rising tendency, the unions could raise wages more quickly; given a declining one, they could slow down their diminution. But they could not control these tendencies at will as the reformists argued. The unions were able ‘to maintain wages at a *relatively* higher level than they would otherwise reach,

38. Kipnis 1952, p. 342.

39. Lenin 1972.

40. Kautsky 1909a, Chap. VIII: The Sharpening of Class Antagonisms.

41. *Correspondenzblatt der Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*, 1909, p. 624. Quoted in Varain 1956, p. 63.

42. *Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands* 1978b, p. 641.

but they cannot guarantee an uninterrupted absolute rise in wages'.⁴³ If they wanted to be able to withstand the concentrated power of the capitalists and their state, they were forced to become more and more political and had to be prepared to employ their most powerful weapon, the mass political strike. Kautsky was confident that, as in the case of Great Britain and Austria, in Germany too 'the great struggles that we are going to meet will closely unite the Party and the unions into one mighty phalanx, in which both parts will not check each other, but on the contrary will encourage and strengthen each other for the fight'. His aim in writing *The Road to Power* had been 'to encourage this process by emphasising those great goals that can only be achieved through a common struggle of the Party and the unions, by accentuating the growing impotence to which isolation will condemn both sides', but his arguments had sparked a storm of controversy from his 'critics of the *Correspondenzblatt*. They have aligned themselves with Rexhäuser and Gompers'.⁴⁴

Samuel Gompers's European tour

The exchange over the American statistics grew sharper on the occasion of Samuel Gompers's trip to Europe and Germany. At that time, the AFL had more than 1.5 million members. Gompers's decision to visit Germany came after the fraternal delegates from the British Trade-Union Congress at the AFL convention in 1908 invited him to attend their congress the following year. The Federation dutifully sent him as a special representative and instructed him to attend the International Federation of Secretariats of the National Trade-Union Centres (International Secretariat), which met in Paris in 1909, and to visit such other countries as the Executive Council should determine.

Gompers and his family left New York on 19 June 1909, and arrived arriving in Liverpool a week later. On 1 and 2 July, he attended the meeting of the General Federation (executive council) of the British trade unions at Blackpool. He then visited Dublin, Manchester, and London, and then he went on a two-month tour of the continent, giving conferences in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, and Holland. Everywhere he carried the gospel of pure-and-simple unionism. 'And so the light is spread!', Gompers exclaimed.⁴⁵

A report to the *Washington Star* sent from Paris on 17 July 1909 reported that the French socialists had expressed opposition to Gompers's policy.

43. Kautsky 1909b, p. 523.

44. Kautsky 1909c, p. 832.

45. Mandel 1963, p. 331.

The speeches of Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, delivered this week before the French labor organizations, are arousing intense interest in labor circles. The extreme socialists bitterly condemn him as a reactionary and scoff at his big salary, but the moderates have shown much sympathy in his denunciation of the futile political role which the French General Confederation of Labor [Confédération Générale du Travail] is essaying in its revolutionary, socialistic and anti-patriotic campaigns. The moderate press of all shades of opinion expresses the hope that the French labor organizations will heed Mr. Gompers' words, abandon revolutionary agitation and devote themselves, like the American organizations, solely to the advancement of professional interests.⁴⁶

Kautsky's article on Gompers

In Berlin, a meeting was organised to greet Gompers on 31 July 1909. It is against this background that Kautsky published, on 13 August 1909, his article against Gompers, which we translate here for the first time. This was Kautsky's major article on the American labour movement after his 1906 answer to Werner Sombart's book *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*⁴⁷ Kautsky's criticism of Gompers was a projection of the struggle against the German union bureaucracy waged by the revolutionary wing of Social Democracy. Lenin's criticisms of the German union leadership echoed Kautsky's.⁴⁸ Lenin viewed Gompers as the representative of the 'America's working-class *aristocracy*' and of the '*bourgeois labour policy*' within the workers' movement.⁴⁹

On 30 August 1909, Gompers attended the conference of the International Secretariat at Paris. Following the international conference, Gompers went to Ipswich to attend the British Trade-Union Congress. He sailed back to the United States on 29 September 1909. In November, at the Toronto convention of the AFL, he reported on his trip to Europe and recommended on affiliation to the International Secretariat, a motion which the convention approved unanimously.⁵⁰ The following year, Gompers published a book on his European tour, which was reviewed in *Die Neue Zeit* by Louis Boudin of the Socialist Party of America.⁵¹

46. *Washington Star*, 18 July 1909, quoted in Kaufman 1999, p. 479.

47. Kautsky 2003. See also Gaido 2003.

48. See, for instance, his article on Legien: Lenin 1970.

49. Lenin 1974.

50. A selection of Gompers's letters, articles and speeches from the period of his first European tour appears in Kaufman 1999, pp. 474–90.

51. Gompers 1910, and Boudin, 1911.

The aftermath of Gompers's visit to Germany

Two and a half months after publishing his article on Gompers, Kautsky wrote a sequel to it called 'The Civic Federation', where he defended the main organ of the Socialist Party of America's German federation. The *New Yorker Volkszeitung* had been accused by the *Correspondenzblatt* of advocating a split in the ranks of the AFL – in other words, of supporting the Industrial Workers of the World. Kautsky replied by quoting an article from the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, where the editors denied that the journal supported 'any special movement against the Federation, because for us the unity of the trade-union organisation of our country is above everything else'. Endorsing the policy of 'boring from within' the AFL rather than forming separate revolutionary unions like the Industrial Workers of the World, the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* editors admitted that they fought 'against the Gompersian spirit of the Federation, but the AFL as the unity of the American union movement has no stronger supporter than our paper'.⁵² Kautsky concluded by calling the Civic Federation 'a band of our filthiest and bitterest enemies', and wondering how Legien could consider himself a friend of Gompers.⁵³ For more than three months, the controversy over Gompers and the National Civic Federation continued to rage on the pages of the German Social-Democratic press.⁵⁴

One of the last items in the exchange was Kautsky's note answering the *Correspondenzblatt's* charges of 'misrepresentation' for having compared the National Civic Federation with the Reichsverband gegen die Sozialdemokratie (Imperial League against the Social Democracy), a monarchist and militarist organisation founded on 9 May 1904.⁵⁵ Kautsky concluded his article, called 'Once Again the Civic Federation', with these words:

According to the account of the *Correspondenzblatt*, one could assume that I wilfully picked up a quarrel against them about Gompers and the Civic Federation. Nothing could be more erroneous.

Gompers came to Europe to gain new prestige for his struggle against the Social Democracy. Had he been fêted in Germany without finding the slightest opposition, he would have exploited that fact against our American comrades at his return.

The interests of American socialism imperatively required that at least the *Vorwärts* and the *Neue Zeit* should show Gompers to the German workers as he

52. Kautsky 1909d.

53. Kautsky 1909d, p. 137.

54. Kautsky 1910a. See also Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1909.

55. See Fricke 1959.

actually is. That was not only our *right* but was our duty of *solidarity*, which unites most closely the socialist parties of the world against all their enemies.⁵⁶

Gompers's European tour was reciprocated three years later, when Carl Legien made a three-month trip to the United States. Legien wrote a book about his experiences in America, where, among other things, he stated that 'one should not speak about a corrupt officialdom in the American unions, as is so often done', that 'one cannot say that the views of the American Federation of Labor are conservative', and that even 'the membership of the leading officials in the AFL in the Civic Federation... does not give to the AFL a reactionary character'. Gompers reciprocated by stating that 'what Legien aspires to for the workers of Europe, we want for the workers of this country'.⁵⁷

Marxism, centrism and social imperialism

Kautsky's article against Gompers was the swan-song of his revolutionary career. Although, as we have seen, the traditional fear of the SPD leaders had been that Legien and his fellow union officials would separate themselves from the Party and, under the banner of political neutrality, turn the General Commission into a power independent from and opposed to the Party, actual historical development turned out to be the opposite. After waging an attrition war against the revolutionary wing of the Party and the idea of the political general strike for more than a decade, the growing bureaucratisation of the Party itself created a community of interests between the union officialdom and most of the 4,000 paid functionaries of the Party, so that eventually the reformist views of the unions – which were, at bottom, but a refurbished version of the old revisionist views of the supporters of Eduard Bernstein – held sway over the party executive, turning the union officials into supporters of party discipline and party unity, and the SPD left wing into eventual advocates of a split with the Social-Democratic Party. If this process was lost to many close observers of the SPD, such as Lenin and Trotsky, it was to a large extent due to the role played by Kautsky since 1910, when he broke with Rosa Luxemburg to become the main ideologue of the dominant SPD 'centre' fraction.

As late as 26 September 1909, Kautsky complained in a letter to Victor Adler about 'the overgrowth of bureaucratism, which nips in the bud any initiative and any boldness'. He believed that 'only when the action comes

56. Kautsky 1910a.

57. Legien 1914, pp. 151–3.

from the masses one can reckon with the necessary impetus and enthusiasm' but that 'in Germany the masses have been drilled to wait for orders from above' and the people above

have been so absorbed by the administrative needs of the huge apparatus, that they have lost every broad view, every interest for anything outside the affairs of their own offices. We have seen this first in the trade unions, now we see it also in the political organisation.⁵⁸

Yet five months later, under pressure from the party apparatus whose growing conservatism he had pointed out, he refused to publish an article by Rosa Luxemburg calling for the use of the general strike in order to achieve universal suffrage in Prussia, and raising the slogan of the republic as a transitional demand, in order to turn the issue of electoral reform into a channel for revolutionary action.⁵⁹ This resulted in a furious round of polemics, in the course of which Kautsky became the leading theoretician of the SPD centrists and developed the so-called 'strategy of exhausting the enemy [*Ermattungsstrategie*]' as opposed to the 'strategy of defeating the enemy [*Niederwerfungsstrategie*]' advocated by Rosa Luxemburg.⁶⁰

According to Kautsky's best biographer, Marek Waldenberg, Kautsky considered the positive aspect of his polemics with Rosa Luxemburg to be the possibility of taking a certain distance from her extremely unpopular image in the milieu of the union bureaucracy.⁶¹ In a letter to Riazanov dated 16 June 1910, Kautsky wrote that Rosa Luxemburg's views on the general strike generated great antagonism among the union leaders, which tended to confuse his own positions with hers.

It irritated me that my influence among the trade unionists is paralysed by the fact that I have been identified with Rosa. It seems to me that in order to develop good relations between the Marxists and the trade unionists it is important to show that on this point there is a great distance between Rosa and me. This is for me the most important question.⁶²

Yet Kautsky's hopes of ingratiating himself with the unionist right wing, in order to win their support so that the SPD leadership would remain in the

58. Adler 1954, p. 501.

59. The article was finally published as 'Was Weiter?' in the *Dortmunder Arbeiterzeitung*, 14–15 March 1910. See Luxemburg 1972c.

60. Kautsky 1910b, Luxemburg 1973c, Kautsky 1910c, Luxemburg 1973d.

61. Waldenberg 1980, pp. 673–4.

62. Quoted in Laschitz 1969, p. 246, as quoted in Waldenberg 1980, p. 673.

hands of the centre fraction, ended up in failure. Within the party itself power was shifting rapidly from the Kautskyst 'centre' to the openly reformist and chauvinist right wing. In the words of Zinoviev, by the time of the Copenhagen Congress of the Socialist International (28 August–3 September 1910),

the opportunists (that is to say, the future social-patriots) had the majority in the German Social Democracy. That was demonstrated by the discussion on the colonial question. By then, in German Social Democracy, the true masters were already, not [the centrist] Ledebour or even Bebel, but Legien, Sudekum and David.⁶³

The shift to the right of the party executive was so marked that 'Legien could declare at the trade-union congress of 1911 that there were no differences with the Party, but only with individual party writers'.⁶⁴ This amalgamation of the party and union bureaucracies paved the way for the debacle of 4 August 1914, when the SPD Reichstag fraction voted in favour of the war credits, and for the collapse of the Second International as a revolutionary organisation of the working class.

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63. Zinoviev 1970, Volume 2, p. 232.

64. Varain 1956, p. 62.

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