

LABOR LEADERS AND DIRECT ACTION—A CONTRAST

I—ROBERT SMILLIE: LEADER OF THE BRITISH MINERS

BY WORTH M. TIPPY

PROTAGONIST of direct action, uncompromising opponent of the present economic order in Great Britain, opposed to the war in England as was Eugene Debs in America, friend of Soviet Russia, ardent advocate of the miners and their families, informed and skillful in discussion and acutely embarrassing to opponents because of his human sympathies and knowledge of the mining industry—such is Robert Smillie, leader of the British miners.

In order to understand him personally I visited his home in Larkhall, near Glasgow, in mid-August, 1919, and during the same week a conference of the Scottish miners at Ayr by which he was signally honored.

The Smillies live in a miners' stone house, one of a long row of two-room cottages built end to end, flush with the sidewalk, and with gardens in the rear. The Smillies have added bath and sleeping rooms, but they livesimply, like their neighbors, the miners with whom Mr. Smillie used to work. Mr. Smillie was not at home.

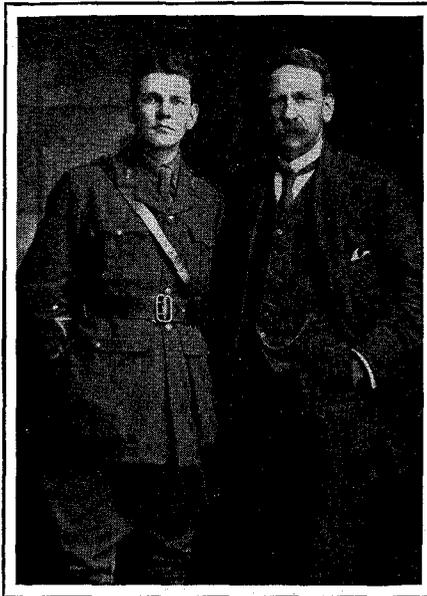
Mrs. Smillie is a typical Scotch mother—gentle, religious, devoted to her husband and nine children. Two of their sons were in the service. James, whom I found at home, had been gassed twice, and had been ill for three years as a result of shell shock. Two other sons were conscientious objectors, and one of the two had been imprisoned. Mrs. Smillie told me that during the Boer War her husband had openly opposed the war, but that James, who was then a boy, was an ardent defender of the Empire. One evening she sent James to the door to get the evening paper, an anti-Boer War journal. He returned without it. Questioned, he confessed that he had thrown it behind the door. Threatened with punishment if he did not bring it at once, he said, "I will take the whipping, mother, but I will not get the paper." Mr. Smillie interceded, and James was relieved from the odious task. Later James came to his father protesting against having to argue against two of his brothers on the rightness of the Boer War. He could hold his own, he said, with one of them, but it was not fair that he should have to face the two, and they older. Mr. Smillie took the lad's part.

The Smillies are members of Trinity United Free Church and rent a family pew, but are not regular attendants. Mr. Smillie is absent a great deal, and Mrs. Smillie is taxed by the duties of her home. The pew is not, therefore, regularly occupied, although an older daughter is active in the church. One

could discern a manifest and growing estrangement between the family and the church. The church did not seem to me to realize the significance of Mr. Smillie's membership.

At the Ayr Conference I met Mr. Smillie personally. My journal for the day has this description:

He is tall, a little stooped, slender, dark-reddish hair, a little gray, deep-set eyes, bushy eyebrows, thoughtful, silent, finely drawn. He speaks with



Monapenny, Glasgow
ROBERT SMILLIE, ENGLISH LABOR LEADER, AND HIS SOLDIER SON, JAMES SMILLIE

simplicity, precision, great earnestness, but quietly and with wisdom and force. I was impressed by his courage, earnestness, and capacity.

After the address of the new President, Mr. James Robertson, M.P., Mr. Smillie spoke to the delegates. "Labor," he said, "has a great work to do through the House of Commons. We must use political and industrial action at the same time, but it will be a long time before we can give up direct action for political action. I have always been a peacemaker in Scottish mining, trying to keep men at work and to avoid loss of time."

Mr. Smillie then advised the delegates to avoid incidental strikes. He advocated the lightning strike, preceded by negotiations.

He went on to remark that "the main thing to keep in mind is our wives and children." (I observed that note in all his speaking. He was thinking of the wives and children of the miners more than of the mechanics of the labor movement.)

Speaking of nationalization of the mines, he said: "We have made our

case before the Commission (the Sankey Commission) and are entitled to nationalization. Capitalists are fighting because they know that nationalization of minerals means the surface next, then the factories."

Mr. Smillie's injunction to Mr. Robertson, the new President of the Scottish miners, his own successor, was characteristic. He advised Robertson to rule with a strong hand. If he made a mistake, hold to it and apologize later. (Laughter.) His own power, such little as he had, was because of his earnestness, he stated frankly.

In the Conference on Thursday and Friday it became evident that the delegates were wholly committed to the nationalization of mines. There was unanimous sympathy with Soviet Russia. One delegate referred to Denikine and Kolchak as cutthroats, and he was applauded. Mr. Smillie said in a discussion: "No power on earth could stop our striking under certain circumstances, not even death or imprisonment."

The chairman in his inaugural inveighed against "political blacklegging" by the workers. "Out of three hundred labor candidates only sixty had been returned, when all might have been elected had the workers kept their ranks." Evidently the labor vote in England cannot be delivered, and from interviews with individual workers I began to suspect that the rank and file of labor is not as united as were the delegates to the Ayr Conference.

On Friday I was invited to join some of the officers of the Conference on a seventy-mile trip by automobile. We stopped by the seaside and Mr. Smillie and I had a walk along the shore. I asked about general welfare, and whether the miners' officials were taking it into consideration. He thought that they were; that they meant to do so. He in turn asked me about Mr. Lincoln. Had I seen the Drinkwater "Lincoln" at the Gaiety, London? Would I not see the play on my return to London and give him my impressions? Was Abraham Lincoln a compromiser? He thought not. I said that he was tenacious of his purposes, but adjusted his programme to conditions. Mr. Lincoln is an ideal to Mr. Smillie, but he was not certain about that one point. Clearly Mr. Smillie had determined for himself not to compromise. It is not in his makeup.

That is Robert Smillie as I saw him. Differing with him as I do in most of his radical points of view, especially in the matter of direct action, and believing that British labor

is safer with moderate men, such as Clynes, Thomas, Barnes, and Stewart Bunning, I yet felt that in his devotion

to the families of the miners, in his unselfishness, single-mindedness, and courage, I had met no more Christlike man

in Great Britain than the miners' executive. It was painful to feel obliged to disagree with him on his policies.

II—SAMUEL GOMPERS: PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR

BY SHERMAN ROGERS

INDUSTRIAL CORRESPONDENT OF THE OUTLOOK

*Mr. Sherman Rogers,
New York City.*

My dear Mr. Rogers:

In a recent speech delivered by you in Boston you made the statement that organized labor had stood for stability and construction during the last twenty-five years, and that you believed Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, had demonstrated highly commendable loyalty before the war and during the war, and that you personally believed the country owed Mr. Gompers as much as any single man for the successful prosecution of the war. I believe whole-heartedly in your advocacy of better relations between capital and labor, relations that will be founded on the absolute certainty that a vast majority of the laboring men of the country are absolutely square. I believe, as you do, that we have entered a new era so far as recognizing justice in industrial affairs is concerned, and I also believe, as you have so vigorously stated, that, in proportion, there are just as many I. W. W.'s among the ranks of capital as there are in the ranks of labor, and that the I. W. W. capitalists are just as great a menace to the country, and probably more so, than the I. W. W. laboring man.

I agree with you on the fundamental principles of the ideas and ideals you are giving all your time to. But, and I want to spell that "but" with a capital "B," I think you are dead wrong when you hold Samuel Gompers up as a patriotic leader. I think his acts in the last three years should place him in the same category as other radical revolutionary labor leaders not connected with the American Federation of Labor who believe in destroying the present system and establishing the new-fangled and destructive notion: namely, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

I trust you will believe me an enthusiastic believer in the doctrines you advocate, and trust also that you will kindly write me how you can be so inconsistent as to spoil your good work by making the statement above referred to.

Sincerely yours,

FOLLOWING is my answer to the above letter: In the first place, my views and those of Samuel Gompers are not identical in all cases; yet I must confess that I hold few men in America to-day in higher regard than the venerable President of the American Federation of Labor, who has demonstrated his sound judgment, clear

vision, and constructive stability continuously since he became President of the A. F. of L. thirty-five years ago.

I do not agree with all the principles of the American Federation of Labor, but I do sincerely contend, as Samuel Gompers so eloquently stated



Underwood & Underwood
SAMUEL GOMPERS, AMERICAN LABOR LEADER,
ON HIS WAY TO ROCHESTER BY AIRPLANE

in his recent debate with Governor Allen, in Carnegie Hall, that the American Federation of Labor is mainly responsible for the elimination of miserable sweatshop conditions, child labor, especially child labor in the coal fields, and, in fact, I go Sam Gompers one better by stating that in a great degree the American Federation of Labor under the leadership of Mr. Gompers deserves much of the credit of placing labor in America on a higher standard in regard to social and economic conditions than anywhere else in the world.

In regard to Samuel Gompers's loyalty, his past private utterances, his published articles, and his speeches of record speak for themselves. The veteran needs very little defense. All that is necessary to prove that Mr. Gompers is a real American and a sincere friend of labor is to bring to light excerpts of speeches made by him or articles from his pen.

You apparently term Mr. Gompers an I. W. W. I emphatically state that the American Federation of Labor, through the energetic and tireless efforts of its great leader, has been and still is one of the *greatest bulwarks against Bolshevism existing in the*

United States to-day. I quote an excerpt from a signed article written by Samuel Gompers in "McClure's Magazine" of April, 1919:

"I do not know that I am entitled to very great credit because I am not a Bolshevnik. With my understanding of American institutions and American opportunities, I repeat that the man who would not be a patriot in defense of the institutions of our country would be undeserving the privilege of living in this country. . . . If I thought that Bolshevism was the right road to go, that it meant freedom, justice, and the principles of humane society and living conditions, I would join the Bolsheviki. It is because I know that the whole scheme leads to nowhere, that it is destructive in its efforts and in its every activity, that it compels reaction and brings about a situation worse than the one it has undertaken to displace, that I oppose and fight it."

In "McClure's" of April, 1919, Mr. Gompers wrote:

"America is not merely a name, a land, a country, a continent; America is a symbol. It is an ideal, the hope of the world. . . . It is the duty of every citizen to stand by his country in times of stress and war as well as in times of peace. The man who would not fight, or make the supreme sacrifice, if necessary, to save and protect his home and his country, who would not fight for liberty, is undeserving and unworthy of living in a free country."

Does that sound like the principles of an I. W. W.?

In a report to the A. F. of L. Convention at Atlanta, Georgia, in November, 1911, Mr. Gompers said, in part:

"It [the American Federation of Labor] has pursued its avowed policy with the conviction that if the lesser and immediate demands of labor could not be obtained now from society as it is, it would be mere dreaming to preach and pursue that will-o'-the-wisp, a *new society constructed from rainbow materials—a system of society on which even the dreamers themselves have never agreed.*"

Permit me again to say that I am not attempting a wholesale defense of Mr. Gompers in all of his beliefs, nor in all of the tenets of the American Federation of Labor; I quote the above in answer to the statement made in your letter of September 5.