

Politicizing Labor Day, Part 1: DOL Scrubs Samuel Gompers Quote from Its 'History of Labor Day' Page

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Samuel Gompers

After eight years, a quote from “the greatest friend labor has ever known” has been scrubbed from the Department of Labor’s web page about the history of Labor Day. Why?

Every year [since 2006](#) at my home blog, I have put up a post that has carried verbatim the content of a DOL web page entitled “The History of Labor Day.” Though the page’s appearance has changed, its content has not.

But [this year](#), the narrative’s opening paragraph went away.

Investigating further, I found that archive.org’s [earliest record of the web page](#) is [September 2, 2001](#). That page’s narrative is identical to that found on the page [as it appeared on May 3, 2008](#), the last listing present (it’s likely that the government cut off archive.org’s ability to capture pages shortly thereafter).

Here’s the paragraph that disappeared after an eight-year run:

“Labor Day differs in every essential way from the other holidays of the year in any country,” said Samuel Gompers, founder and longtime president of the American Federation of Labor. “All other holidays are in a more or less degree connected with conflicts and battles of man’s prowess over man, of strife and discord for greed and power, of glories achieved by one nation over another. Labor Day...is devoted to no man, living or dead, to no sect, race, or nation.”

The quote doesn’t seem particularly troublesome. Then I learned a bit more about Samuel Gompers.

Based on what I’ve read, it seems reasonable to believe that so-called “progressives” familiar with Mr. Gompers’s views really don’t like him. The fact that the opening-paragraph quote has been purged would seem to indicate that some of the leftists who dominate this administration are carrying a century-old grudge.

In [a 1997 article](#), Aaron Steelman at the Cato Institute, after first criticizing AFL-CIO president John Sweeney for spending “nearly \$40 million lobbying on behalf of candidates who wished to expand the size and scope of government,” wrote the following about Gompers:

(From 1886) Gompers ... with the exception of 1895, was annually reelected president (of the American Federation of Labor) until his death in 1924. During that period — as the AFL’s membership grew to more

than 4 million — real wages increased, work weeks shortened, and working conditions improved in industry after industry.

Although he supported such legal protections as child-labor laws and general liability laws for employers, he favored union bargaining power over government regulation as a means to advance the economic standing of wage earners. As historian Florence Calvert Thorne has written, Gompers thought that “by joining hands with like-minded workers,” laborers could increase their “bargaining strength for higher wages which could make more material comforts available.” That, coupled with “personal freedom and self-dependence, would help them to be alert and responsible citizens of their community.”

From the beginning, Gompers was wary of embroiling the AFL in politics of any kind, partisan or otherwise. He had seen a rival labor organization — the Knights of Labor — implode over faulty political alliances and feared that the same thing could happen to the AFL. More fundamentally, he believed that government activism was harmful to the working man.

In 1915, he wrote, “Doing for people what they can and ought to do for themselves is a dangerous experiment. In the last analysis the welfare of the workers depends upon their own private initiative.” He applied that belief to issue after issue.

... **As for welfare programs, Gompers believed that “social insurance cannot remove or prevent poverty.” Moreover, he maintained that welfare is “undemocratic”** because it tends “to fix the citizens of the country into two classes, and a long established system would tend to make these classes rigid.”

Gompers also worried that welfare would undermine the ethic of self-responsibility.

... Undoubtedly, he would have disapproved of the modern regulatory state as well. In an article for the American Federationist, Gompers argued that “regulation of industrial relations is not a policy to be entered upon lightly — establishment of regulation for one type of relation necessitates regulating of another, until finally all industrial life grows rigid with regulation.” **And when asked in 1916 if he favored a law mandating an eight-hour day, he remarked, “Do you know where the eight-hour law in California originated? It was started by the Socialist Party of California.” For Gompers, a fierce critic of the American Socialist and Communist parties, that seemed to be a sufficient response.** Samuel Gompers’s lifelong devotion to both the union movement and Jeffersonian political principles improved the lives of millions of working men and women. **He rightly deserves to be called the greatest friend labor has ever known.**

But he apparently doesn’t deserve to be quoted in the Department of Labor’s “History of Labor Day.” Someone should ask DOL head Hilda Solis why not.

Actually, Solis has mostly answered the question herself, as readers will see [in Part 2 tomorrow](#).

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