The Nation

Notes from the Capital

SAMUEL GOMPERS.

By keeping him so continually in the public eye as an industrial oracle, the European war has given one resident of Washington the time of his life. This is Samuel Gompers, cigar-maker, agitator, diplomatist, and president of the Federation of Labor. Nothing pleases him more than such publicity, for it is a valuable asset in his business. He has used it for years, with an effect undreamed of by people who do not come into hostile contact with him: witness his successful flight to procure immunity for labor unions under the Anti-Trust law. Congress does not take a step which touches the labor question at its remotest edge without consulting Gompers. A former Commissioner of Indian Affairs, hoping to train some of his wards into a habit of self-support and teach them the value of a dollar, prepared plans for a series of public improvements on certain reservations—building roads, bridges, warehouses, etc.—on which he was to use Indian labor at the current rates of pay; but, as most of his red workmen had to come a long distance from home, it was found that an eight-hour day would not answer, so a ten-hour day, with only four working days in the week, was substituted. Some petitfogger protested to the Secretary of the Interior that this arrangement violated the statute limiting working hours to eight in all branches of labor and mechanics employed on Government work. The Commissioner, therefore, proposed to procure an amendment making the statute inapplicable to work done by Indians on the reservations for their own benefit. When he brought this measure before one of the appropriate committees of Congress, the first question put to him was: "Have you seen Gompers?"

"Yes," was the answer. "If there was no help for it, I should see Gompers, or drop the subject. Gompers, accordingly, was seen. He veiled the project at once. It amounted not to point out to him that the local conditions were so unusual as to compel a resort to unusual methods; that the Indians were interfering with no other laborers, since, unless the work were done by them, it would be left undone; nor that the work was not Government work in the sense intended by the law, being charitable and educational only. A great principle was involved, Gompers declared in oratorical tones, and nothing, whether philanthropic or otherwise, could be permitted to get in its way. So the either who had postulated his prides so far as to plead as a favor for what the Government should have demanded as a right, had to abandon his enterprise, and the Indians, who had enjoyed the blessings of Indian life, lapse back into comparative idleness.

In this incident we may read a fair measure of Gompers's intelligence, if we have not already read it in his appearance. Note his big head, heavy foreign features, and burly frame. His face is as hard as a mask, his voice has nothing winsome in it, his manner is forbidding. We can hardly be surprised at learning that in the financial struggle of the early nineties he was on the side of industry, and perhaps of capital, in the great strike of 1894 for reducing wages by the United States, or that he found not a little to commend in Coxey's programme of economic reforms. He has always opposed compulsory arbitration in labor disputes, lest it "might react dangerously against the progress of organized labor," which "has too slender means at its command to indulge in dubious experiments." One of the worst mistakes he has made in all his life was his failure to advert to these theories when the ill-fated boycotts were declared against the Baux Store & Range Company and the Danbury hatters, or when the dynamite squad headed by Alexander Berkman—for whom Gompers vouched as a worthy citizen—undertook their murderous campaign of terrorism a few years ago.

To do Gompers justice, his most conspicuous faults are probably due more to his slow perception of relations and issues which most persons apprehend by instinct, than to deliberate obduracy. In spite of his hard-handed creed, he is not personally a man of violence. I do not recall any instance where he has used his power against his interests, to the injury of any German submarine practice of firing without warning. He condemns mercilessly the methods of the I. W. W. Whether he would become a Socialist of the advanced type if that offered the only opening for his work for labor reform, it is hard to say—perhaps he would. For the present, however, he sees no need of revolutionizing the whole structure of society in order to make life more comfortable for the wage-earner; the existing organization, based on the competitive idea, seems to him to fit human nature better than any novel scheme of things evolved from mere rationalization without the support of common experience.

Gompers is of Dutch ancestry, but was himself born in England. This is undoubtedly what makes him feel so competent to teach Americans the way of industrial salvation. He is familiar with a fairly fair sort of several languages spoken by our immigrant laborers, so as to be able to make himself understood by almost any restless audience he is called to address on his favorite themes of the cigar maker and the burdens which he smokes very steadily, when contrasted with the neatness of their wrappers, indicates that his eye is more highly cultivated than his taste.