AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR.

A short history of the A.F.of L. from an article by Samuel Gompers in the Encyclopedia Americana, 1925 edition:

The A.F.of L. is "a federation of trade-unions of the United States, Canada, Porto Rico and Panama, in which the rights of constituent units are preserved intact. As in the Federal Government, all powers not expressly granted in the written constitution are reserved to the subordinate bodies, but still further, as in the Articles of Confederation, it has not power of compulsion (except to suspend or expel a union), and any union can override its decision as far as its own action goes. To this is due its steady growth and harmony. What every union fears most of all is being controlled in matters pertaining to its own trade by persons outside that trade.

"The Federation originated in 1881. Its predecessors had been the National Labor Union (1866-1872), which ended its career by entering politics and nominating a candidate (David Davis) for the Presidency, and a number of sectional orders, of which the Knights of Labor (1869) was the chief. The latter were generally hostile to trade-unions, holding them based on false and selfish principles of temporary advantage, to the sacrifice of the general interests of labor, and the Knights attempted to break down trade barriers in workmen's action by organizing local assemblies of miscellaneous laborers. This antagonized those who believed that only members of a given craft, trade, or industry had a right or the proper knowledge to direct its action; and on August 2, 1881, representatives from trade-unions, the Amalgamated Labor Union (a split from the Knights of Labor) and the Knights of Industry, both secret orders, held a conference at Terre Haute, Indiana, ostensibly to establish a national labor union congress, but in reality (as stated) to form a new order to supplant the Knights of Labor. This was defeated, and the conference issued a call for a convention at Pittsburg in November, where the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada was constituted. On December 8, 1886, this fused with a separate trade-union conference and changed its name to the American Federation of Labor: and in 1889 acknowledged the continuity of its existence by dating the proceedings to 1881. Its membership is of local unions, central unions of cities, State federations, and national and international trade-unions. As a local union may thus belong to three different superior bodies, with a possible conflict of jurisdictions, the Federation takes charge of the mutual relations. It recognized the national and international unions as having supreme jurisdiction, but it approves and urges State and central bodies as helpers in gaining common objects.

"These objects, as stated in its constitution, are: (1) 'The encouragement and formation of local trades and labor unions, and the closer federation and combination of such bodies, to secure legislation in the interest of the working masses.' (2) 'The establishment of national and international trade-unions, based upon a strict recognition of the autonomy of each trade,' etc. (3) 'An American Federation of all national and international trade-unions, to aid and assist each other,' and 'the sale of union-label goods, and to secure national legislation in the interest of the working people, and influence public opinion by peaceful and

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legal methods in favor of organized labor.' (4)'To aid and encourage the labor press of America.'

"Its executive organization at first was a secretary and legislative committee,and it announced that it would have no salaried officials: but for efficient working it has been compelled to modify this rule. It has a salaried president and secretary,a treasurer and eight vice-presidents,who together form the executive council,which meets quarterly.-----

"The funds are levied from a per capita tax.----Until 1887 it could not grant money in aid of strikes; but in that year a revised constitution gave the executive council the right to call on the unions for financial aid to such strikes as it approved. This voluntary aid was insufficient,and in 1889 another amendment permitted it to levy a compulsory tax of one cent a week on each member of an affiliated union,for not over ten weeks in any year,in aid of strikes or lockouts.

"The policy of the Federation is fixed in open conventions held in a different city each year. For years these conventions were held in November. The 1917 convention changed to time to the second Monday of June. The affiliated organizations are entitled to but one delegate until their membership numbers 4,000, two delegates up to 8,000,three delegates up to 16,000,four delegates up to 32,000,fice delegates up to 64,000 and so on. But delegates from organizations,either national,international,or local unions,are entitled to cast one vote for every hundred members they represent. Thus the number of delegates is kept within such limits so that the conventions shall really be legislative bodies, and yet the spirit and purpose of democracy is maintained so that the delegates have voting power in proportion to the numerical strength of their respective constituencies.

The American Federation of Labor confines its membership to wage workers,men and women,skilled and unskilled,not admitting even farmers who are employers of labor on their farms. The Federation realized that the organization of each trade in its particular union and the affiliation of all unions in a comprehensive federation was sure to strengthen each and bring advantage to all. The Knights of Labor confounded all distinctions and potentially overruled each trade by the vote of outsiders.------

"Its activity in securing favorable and defeating unfavorable legislation for laborers has been very great and very successful. These are too many in detail: but it may be said that its first convention of 1881 demanded a national eight-hour day for government employees and exclusion of Chinese and contract laborers: and all these have been enacted into law. It also secured the establishment by law of a Labor Day. Since then it has steadily favored shorter hours,non-employment of children,better sanitary conditions,regulation of convict employment,abolition of'government by injunction' etc.

"The A.F.of L. during the first part of its history followed the policy of recommending to the members of its affiliated organizations the independent use of the ballot. This policy was pursued until 1906 when the Federation inaugurated an active non-partisan political policy of rewarding its friends and voting against its enemies. It was felt necessary to

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make this change of policy because of the urgent need of remedial legislation. Abuse of the injunctive process and the perversion of the Sherman Anti-Trust Law to apply to assbciations of wage-earners organized not for profit constituted such a menace to the activities and the very existence of the organizations of workers that the enactment of laws, regulating and limiting the issuance of injunctions and specifically taking associations of wage-earners from under the provisions of trust legilation, was imperative.----

"The A.F.of L. in 1887 published an official journal called the Union Advocate. In 1894 it began the publication of a monthly magazine, the American Federationist." (Which later became a weekly.)

Additional material on the Federation from Morton A. Aldrich's study on the "American Federation of Labor," in the American Economic Associatbn's "Economic Studies": (1898)

"When the A.F.of L.was founded in 1881, many of the local trade unions had already begun to learn the lesson of combination. In the decade before the Civil War, local unions in several industries had united into national unions (often called 'international' unions when they included Canadian branches); but each of these central organizations was confined to the unions of a single trade. The next step was the federation of all unions in a single city, of whatever trade, into a delegate body, usually called a central labor union. What these central labor unions do for the trade unions of a city, the A.F.of L.does for the trade unions of the country.

"The A.F.of L. was not without precedents in the American labor movement. Aside from the central labor unions in Cincinnati, Boston and New York, the first instance of a federation which included trade unions of various trades was the National Labor Union. This organization, founded at Baltimore in 1866, could fairly be called a national body, embracing as it did the strongest national trade unions in the country. Two decades of this union were not in vain: it pointed out the need of a national labor bureau, and it worked for an eight-hour day for all government employees. But the union itself held its last convention in 1872, when it yielded to the fatal temptation of going into politics, and nominated a candidate, David Davis of Illinois, for the Presidency. This political action provoked so much discussion, that one local union after another, believing--that the National Labor Union had entered a field of operations for which it was not intended, withdrew its support.

"In the period between the crisis of 1873 and the year 1881 half a dozen labor organizations composed of workmen from various trades had a considerable membership. They were not, however, wholly of a trade union character, but entered largely into politics; they were all secret orders; most of them were only represented in a group of states. At least three attempts were made to unite these organizations into a large federation, but failed owing to the intense rivalry between them, each anxious to overreach the other. Aside from the national unions in a few trades, the most striking characteristic of labor organizations during this period was the lack of unity. So long as the secret orders, some of which declared that trade unions had outlived their usefulness, thrived, any compre-

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hensive trade union organization was well-nigh impossible. With the exception of the Knights of Labor, all other secret orders were short-lived.----------

"To understand the organization of the A.F.of L. we must consider the various forms of unions of which it is composed, their relation to each other and their relative importance. Four varieties of trade unions are affiliated with the Federation,-local unions, national unions, central labor unions of cities, and state federations. The Federation is exclusively an association of trade unions, and has no direct relations with the individual members.

"Local unions are the most elementary form of trade union organization. Their membership is confined to workmen of a single locality, and, with the excention of the federal unions, to workmen of a single trade. The federal unions are local unions which have been organized by the A.F.of L. to provide organization for workmen in occupations in which no trade union exists, or in which the workmen are too few for a distinct union. The federal unions are strictly limited in extent; not more than three may be chartered in the same city and no workman in whose trade a local union already exists is admitted. They are regarded as recruiting unions for workmen who are to be organized as soon as possible into trade unions of the various trades.

"In most trades the local unions all over the country are united into a national union for the trade, as for example, the International Typographical Union. In the large cities the trade unions of all trades unite in a central labor union, and in some States the trade unions unite in a state federation for the purpose of securing state legislation concerning labor matters.

"Since the same local trade union may belong to all three of the larger organizations, questions of disputed jurisdiction easily arise. To avoid this conflict of powers and consequent loss of efficiency, the Federation has undertaken to guide the mutual relations of these organizations. Its invariable policy has been to make the national unions the units of power in the trade union world, with complete and undivided authority over their local unions. It makes great efforts to form a compact national union in every trade, and requires all local unions to join the national unions of their trade on penalty of suspension from the Federation. Thus the Federation aims to bring about the combination of all local trade unions into national unions, which in turn shall be united in the Federation.

"President Gompers of the Federation has further proposed that the workmen of each of the great divisions of industry should hold a convention to legislate upon questions which affect their own trade. The building trades, the boot and shoe workers, the textile workers, and the railway workmen (the latter, however, are not represented in the A.F.of L.) now hold such conventions. By this means the autonomy of each trade is still more firmly secured.-----

"The Federation relegates the central labor unions and the state federations to the inferior position of auxiliaries in the trade union movement. In no event are they to interfere with the jurisdiction of the national unions. Their value as a power to enforce local demands, such as state labor laws and municipal regu-

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lation of trade unions, is, however, fully recognized by the Federation, which instructs the national organizations to urge their local unions to join the central labor union in their vicinity.

"The workmen who are united through these trade unions in the A.F.of L. are in other respects by no means homogeneous. Representing the most diverse forms of industry in all parts of the country, they generally have no intimate knowledge of each other's needs. Some, such as the carpenters and printers, are comparatively prosperous skilled artisans, whose unions charge high dues and give impotant insurance benefits. Others are common laborers who cannot easily pay considerable dues. Some are women. Organizations of farmers, who are freeholders, are debarred from membership on the ground that they are associations of employers. A few local unions of farm laborers are affiliated with the Federation, but the Federation does very little to organize farm laborers, -a problem of extreme difficulty. For the most part, the Federation represents more or less skilled workmen. The race differences among the members are also great-the German element being especially strong. Except in regard to the negores, however, race disputes are unknown. Officially, the Federation refuses to draw the color line, and negroes are freely admitted to membership, although they are debarred from some Southern unions. The workmen represented are also of all sorts of political beliefs including---a group of pronounced socialists.

"Although the A.F.of L. aims to include all trade unionists, probably more than one-half still remain outside. [In 1898] The five railway unions which are united in a distinct federation, and the Bricklayers' International Union are the most important unions which have not yet joined the Federation.---Aside from the Knights of Labor and some southern and western trade unions which desire a federation of their own, most of these outside labor organizations are in agreement with the Federation in the larger questions of policy, and even willingly accord to the Federation the leadership of the trade union movement. For this reason the apparent lack of unity in the trade union movement becomes less real; but is still remains true that the efficiency of the movement is diminished by such wide-spread sectarian division.-------

"The officers of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions were at the outset confined to a secretary and legislative committee, similar to the parliamentary committee of the British Trade Union Congress after which it was modelled. The growing need of permanent executive officers was met, however, in 1887 by the appointment of a president with a salary of $1,200 per year, (since increased to $1,800). He is assisted by a secretary with a salary of $1,500, a treasurer and four vice-presidents, who together form the executive council. Since this council meets only four times a year, much power is necessarily in the hands of the president. Almost inevitably, the Federation, which in 1881 announced the intention of having no salaried officers, developed the need of an efficient and permanent executive, who should devote all his time to the supervision of the Federation.

"The strictness with which the Federation respects the local autonomy of each trade appears most strikingly on the financial side. An annual tax of three or four cents from each member of an affiliated national trade union, 24 cents from each memebr of a local union which is not connected with any national union, and ten dollars from each central labor union and state federation has

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proved sufficient to meet the necessary expenses of the Federation. This income is used to pay salaries, traveling expenses, printing, and the expenses of the convention.

"It is interesting to note that the tendency of the trade unions has been gradually to extend the financial powers of the Federation, as well as the powers of its executive. At first the Federation had no power to grant money in aid of strikes; but the revised constitution of 1887 gave the executive council the right to call on the unions for financial aid for strikes which it approved, -such contributions being, however, wholly voluntary. This system of voluntary aid was soon felt to be insufficient, and in 1889 the constitution was amended to permit the Federation to levy a compulsory tax of not more than two cents a week for five weeks on each member of the affiliated national unions for the purpose of assisting in strikes or lock-out of any of these unions. The minority presented the constitutional objection that such assessments were beyond the power of the convention and foreign to the federal character of its organization. But the need of funds to lend weight to the demand for the eight-hour day which the Federation was to support, was the deciding argument. Under this rule the Federation gave the carpenters more than $12,000 in aid of their strike for eight hours. The more far-reaching proposal to establish by tax a large defense fund, which should be lent or given to the organizations which contributed, when they became involved in a strike, has not been adopted by the Federation.----

"A few important questions have been submitted to a referendum vote of the members of affiliated trade unions. It is of interest to note that, beginning in 1894, the Trade Union Congress of Great Britain and the convention of the Federation, have each sent two delegates to the other's conventions.

"The conventions consider the recommendations submitted in the annual reports and also a mass of resolutions (144 in the convention of 1897) introduced by individual delegates. The custom of the convention is to refer all reports and resolutions at once to committees which either recommend or disapprove them. The committees are appointed by the president, and the system undoubtedly serves to steady the action of the convention by giving a measure of control into the hands of the more experienced delegates."
(Pages 221-231)

Yearly revenue of the Federation: (Footnote, Ibid, 229)

1887 --	$2,100.34	1893 --	$20,864.62
1888 --	$4,512.55	1894 --	$15,346.43
1889 --	$6,838.40	1895 --	$13,751.75
1890 --	$23,849.74	1896 --	$16,290.18
1891 --	$17,702.36	1897 --	$18,639.92
1892 --	$17,834.51		

"The revenue for 1890 includes over $12,000 given to assist the carpenters in their strike for eight hours; and that for 1893 includes $7,043.66 contributed for the cost of legal defense of workmen arrested during the Homstead strike."

The slogan which appeared on all A.F. of L. publications is the following:
"Whether you work by the hour or work by the day,
Decreasing the hours, increases the pay."

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