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Article Title: The Making of Labor's Democracy: William Jennings Bryan, The American Federation of Labor, and Progressive Era Politics

Full Citation: Julie Greene, "The Making of Labor's Democracy: William Jennings Bryan, The American Federation of Labor, and Progressive Era Politics," *Nebraska History* 77 (1996): 149-158.

URL of Article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/1996-Labors_Democracy.pdf
Date: 1/20/2010

Article Summary: During the years 1896 to 1912, the Democratic Party evolved from a conservative organization standing for states' rights and limited government to an effective instrument for political, social, and economic reform. The alliance between organized labor and William Jennings Bryan figures predominantly in this transition, particularly in 1908, when the American Federation of Labor and the Democratic Party shared financial and strategic decision-making as they shaped Bryan's third and last campaign for the United States Presidency.

Cataloging Information

Names: William Jennings Bryan; David Sarasohn; James Bryce; Alton Parker; Norman Mack; John Kern; Theodore Roosevelt; William Randolph Hearst; Joseph Pulitzer; Josephus Daniels; McKinley; Cleveland; Eugene Debs; Sam Gompers; James Emery; James Van Cleave; Martin Mulhall; Charles Bryan; James O'Connell; Frank Morrison; Grant Hamilton; Joseph Cannon; William Howard Taft; C W Post; Woodrow Wilson; Frank Walsh; Grant Hamilton; Thomas I Kidd; John B Lennon; Max Morris; James O'Connell; John Mitchell

Place Names: Normal, Denver, Lincoln, White House, North Carolina, Omaha

Keywords: "The Party of Reform" "Democratic Party" "American Federation of Labor" "The American Commonwealth" "NAM" "National Association of Manufacturers" "free silver" "gold standard" "Progressive era" "Jeffersonian doctrine" "Independence League" "Socialism" "New York World" "Raleigh (North Carolina) News and Observer" "Jim Crow Progressivism" "workers" "Pullman boycott" "trade union" "Industrial Works of the World" "Socialist Party" "AFL" "Sherman Anti-Trust" "Republican Party" "Democrats Labor Bureau" "Democratic National Committee" "DNC" "Labor Representation Committee" "Shall the People Rule?" "Jeffersonian" "Minute Men of Labor" "American Federationist" "Pearsons Magazine" "full dinner pail" "Denver Post" "Labor Trust" "Adamson Act" "Keating Owen Act"

Photographs / Images: Bryan, Mack and Kern, 1908; AFL Executive Council, 1900, Kidd, Gompers, Morrison, Duncan, Lennon, Morris, O'Connell, Mitchell; Democratic "full dinner pail" post card; "cartoon "The Commoner" 1908; Cartoon "The Labor Question" 1908

The Making of Labor's Democracy

William Jennings Bryan, The American Federation of Labor, and Progressive Era Politics

By Julie Greene

Historians have long recognized William Jennings Bryan as the dominant figure in the Democratic Party from 1896 to 1912. However, assessment of his role has been stymied by pervasive perceptions that the Democratic Party was in those years a moribund and reactionary organization, largely overshadowed by progressive Republicans. Recently new scholarship, and especially David Sarasohn's *The Party of Reform*, has begun to revise this image of the Democrats. In Sarasohn's eyes the Democratic Party transformed itself during these years: from a conservative organization standing for states' rights and limited government, it became by 1912 an effective instrument for political, social, and economic reform.¹

This new interpretation of the Democratic Party is in its infancy and many questions remain unanswered. How exactly did this transformation of the party take place? What dynamics made it possible? This paper will explore the Democratic Party's evolution between 1896 and 1912, with a focus on the ways that the alliance between organized labor and Bryan contributed to the remaking of the Democratic Party. Beginning with his experience in the campaign of 1896, Bryan became convinced that only an alliance between farmers and workers could bring victory to his party. A careful wooing of American labor leaders resulted, an effort that grew particularly

strong between 1906 and 1908. Organized labor grew more receptive to political activity for its own reasons during this period. The high point of this alliance came in 1908, when the American Federation of Labor and the Democratic Party shared financial and strategic decisionmaking as they shaped together Bryan's third and last campaign for the U.S. Presidency.

Bryan, the Democrats, and Party Politics

In 1888 James Bryce wrote in *The American Commonwealth* about the dominant role parties played in American political life, especially as compared to their counterparts in Europe. In the U.S., he wrote, "party association and organization are to the organs of government almost what the motor nerves are to the muscles, sinews, and bones of the human body. They transmit the motive power, they determine the directions in which the organs act."² Fifteen years after Bryce, the parties faced a more complex political environment. The nineteenth-century world of partisan politics faded after 1896 as closely contested elections, unwavering party loyalties, and campaign politics based upon mass entertainment all declined. Meanwhile, the parties faced challenges from new sectors as the presidency and independent state bureaucracies grew more influential and as organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) emerged to contest the parties' power. As the major parties began losing many of their traditional supporters during these years, they scrambled

to reinvent themselves and adapt to changing political circumstances. Elites in both parties cast an eye across American society, searching for allies, and both groups trained their sights carefully on the American working class.

Historically the Democratic Party stood for local autonomy, a weak central government, and a commitment to individual liberty. Yet from 1896 onwards the party remade itself into the major representative of reform in America, rejected its old affection for laissez-faire policies, and accepted the need for governmental activism.³ In 1896 the Democratic Party split apart as conservative Cleveland Democrats and businessmen jumped ship while William Jennings Bryan built a reformist campaign around the issue of free silver. Party leaders spent the next decade locked in a struggle for control. In 1904 eastern conservatives briefly regained dominance over the party, but failed to elect their presidential candidate Alton Parker. Although Roosevelt campaigned in that year as the enemy of the trusts, the Democrats' conservative gold standard candidate still could not win significant business support. After the 1904 returns came in, Bryan and his supporters returned to power within the party. By 1906 Democratic unity was increasing around a program that firmly embraced reform and governmental activism.

Bryan himself was a complex personality. A charismatic demigod to thousands of adoring Americans, to his many opponents (particularly easterners) he was no more than a prairie buffoon, a hick lacking proper manners. One Lincoln woman described

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Bryan shared the platform with Democratic Party Chairman Norman E. Mack, center, and vice-presidential nominee John W. Kern, right, during notification ceremonies at the Nebraska state capitol on August 12, 1908. NSHS-B915-350

him decades later to her daughter as "simply the most handsome man I ever saw. He was spellbinding." Theodore Roosevelt, on the other hand, felt that although Bryan was "a kindly, well-meaning man, he is both shallow and a demagog."⁴ Yet whatever his personal strengths or weaknesses, Bryan dominated the Democracy in the period after 1896, shaping it into a reform organization capable of winning the White House. The turning point in the Democrats' long struggle towards political success appears now to have been the years around 1906 and 1908. Despite continued defeats in those years, the Democrats began to gain in popularity and momentum, gradually building up a wave of support that would finally bring victory in 1912.⁵

Historians have often portrayed Bryan as indifferent to political victory, stressing that to him principles mattered more than success. Yet while he certainly opposed the crude opportunism resorted to by many politicians, some contemporaries saw another side of Bryan. Teaching Sunday school in Normal, Nebraska, in 1907, Bryan announced one day that the topic of discussion would be "Success." One clever student, "thinking of Mr. Bryan's having twice run in vain for the presidency of the United States," proposed that "one's success should be judged by the effort put forth." But Bryan sharply corrected the boy, declaring that the only measure of success lay in achieving one's goal.⁶ Although Bryan never occupied the White House, he did win his larger ambition: he defeated the conservatives in his party and remade the Democratic Party into a vehicle for reform.

Bryan's political philosophy evolved during the early Progressive era to embrace a broad range of reforms. Immediately after the 1904 campaign Bryan wrote that Democrats must abandon their laissez-faire philosophy and accept the need for a stronger, more activist, federal government. A year and a half later, returning from an extended trip abroad that enhanced his reputation at

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home, Bryan spelled out his intentions in a riveting speech: "Plutocracy is abhorrent to a republic. . . . The time is ripe for the overthrow of this giant wrong." Stressing the "Jeffersonian doctrine of equal rights to all and special privileges to none" Bryan called for the elimination of monopolies, direct election of senators, an income tax, injunction reform, and most provocatively, government ownership of all railroads. Here was a program that could generate enthusiasm among American workers, one bearing great similarity to the proposals made by William Randolph Hearst's Independence League at this time.⁷

Yet upon hearing of this program moderate Democrats throughout the country excoriated Bryan for what they considered his bow towards Socialism. One New York publisher wrote in dismay, "I have been flattering Bryan—to help shut off the Hearst boom—and I have indulged in hopes that he would develop into a real leader. But that railroad program simply stuns me. I believe it will land Bryan again in the ditch, and it should land him there before our convention." Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, a leading voice among Democrats, expressed its disgust more openly: "Within six hours after he had landed at the Battery he had split his party wide open again. That was indeed peerless leadership."⁸ Although Bryan dropped government ownership from his program to soothe the worries of moderate Democrats, which undoubtedly weakened his appeal among workers, many easterners remained hostile towards him and conservative party papers like the *New York Times* refused to support his nomination. Thus while the Democrats demonstrated unusual unity as the 1908 campaign approached, some critics refused to climb on Bryan's wagon. Not until Woodrow Wilson emerged four years later did a complete reconciliation between the Cleveland and Bryan wings take place.⁹

Under Bryan's leadership the Democratic Party shaped itself, as Sarasohn has noted, into a coalition of outsiders:

Southerners, Westerners, farmers, immigrants, and, hopefully, workers. Having alienated most businessmen, the Democrats had no choice but to build a program of reform that would appeal to working Americans on the farms and in the factories. And that is precisely what they did. The South, where the legacy of populism and the absence of powerful corporations produced strong support for reform, provided the party's greatest strength. Yet Southern Democratic progressivism was limited to whites: regional leaders like Josephus Daniels, the influential publisher of the *Raleigh (North Carolina) News and Observer*, combined a reform spirit with fierce racism. The "Jim Crow Progressivism" practiced by Southern Democrats alienated many Northerners, but the approach was certainly not limited to the South. William Jennings Bryan's racial outlook, according to historian William Smith, would have been acceptable to any Southern segregationist; as party leader the views of The Peerless One reinforced and propagated the Democracy's racism.¹⁰

If the party's current strength lay with farmers and southerners, its future potential rested in the votes of American workers. Since the debacle of 1896 Bryan had become enamored of a singular dream: Democratic victory would be achieved through a political marriage of workers and farmers. That year the party won farmers' support but failed to convince northern workers of its virtues. Without strong support from the working class, Democrats would possess little foothold in the country's industrial centers since business so firmly opposed them.¹¹ Bryan dutifully supported labor's goals beginning with his first race against McKinley, but his own penchant to build single-issue campaigns limited his appeal among workers. In 1896, for example, he preached for silver incessantly—even though the Democratic platform included other issues that might appeal more successfully to working-class voters nervous about inflation. In 1900 Bryan's campaign focused on imperialism: again, an

issue that at best failed to address workers' problems, while at worst it alienated workingmen influenced by the nationalism and jingoism of the day.

Other barriers also loomed over the Democracy's project to recruit workers behind the party's banner. Workers' race, ethnicity, and religion, and the region or city in which they lived all shaped their political preferences. Since the 1896 contest between Bryan and McKinley, the Republican Party had strengthened its hold over the industrialized sections of the North and Middle West, while the Democrats gained in the South. Non-Southern urban workers had provided the Republicans with important gains. Yet in many northern cities Democratic machines continued to claim workers' loyalties, and throughout the region many workers, particularly recent immigrants and workers of German or Irish descent, remained tied to the Democrats. Protestant workers born to native-born parents were most likely to vote Republican.¹²

Even for those workers inclined to favor the Democrats, the party's history included several troubling episodes. The worst depression in history up to that time began in 1893 under Democratic President Cleveland, and voters possess exceptionally long memories when it comes to an economic crisis. In 1894 Cleveland deployed an injunction and federal troops to break the Pullman boycott. Furthermore, the rural and Southern roots of the Democratic Party repelled many workers. Although the populist movement appealed to some industrial workers, aspects of the farmers' movement—such as the cry for silver—failed to excite many others. Building unity between farmers and workers would require gradual change and work at the grassroots level. Some workers likewise resented the visible role Southerners played within the Democratic Party because of the region's harsh treatment of workers and unions, and in some cases, because of its racist caste structure.¹³

Furthermore, workers inhabited a

complex political universe by 1908, one in which diverse groups competed for their support. Many trade unionists, following decades of advice from pure and simple leaders, disdained party politics altogether. Left-wing syndicalists argued that workers should reject politics, and after 1905 this position found new strength in the Industrial Workers of the World, most of whose leaders embraced an antipolitical syndicalism.¹⁴ The Socialist Party of America, on the other hand, embraced political struggle as an important route to power for the working class. Once again in 1908 Socialists would make a mighty appeal for working-class support, running Eugene Debs for the presidency as well as innumerable candidates at the state and municipal levels.¹⁵ Because of all these factors, an alliance between workers and Democrats at the grassroots level would not emerge easily.

The Emerging Alliance: Labor and the Democrats

The Democrats' best hope for building an alliance with workingmen turned out to be the American Federation of Labor, the dominant working-class organization in the United States between 1896 and 1917. In these years numerous pressures operated on the AFL, pushing its conservative leaders hesitantly towards political engagement. During the Gilded Age the AFL's skilled craftsmen divided between four main approaches to politics: socialism, populism, a rejection of any political activity in favor of economic strategies, and "antipartyism," a strategy that rejected the party system and relied on nonpartisan tactics like lobbying to win specific labor demands. By the end of the nineteenth century the latter political strategy had won a narrow triumph and rose to dominance in the federation. Favored by Sam Gompers and his allies, antipartyism constituted the AFL's first serious effort to break workers' ties to both the mainstream and the minor, oppositional parties. It became an essential tool in Gompers's struggle to control the future of the AFL, uniting a broad



The AFL Executive Council in 1900. Front row, left to right: Thomas I. Kidd (Wood Workers), President Samuel Gompers (Cigar Makers), Secretary Frank Morrison (Typographical Union), James Duncan, (Granite Cutters). Back row: Treasurer John B. Lennon (Tailors), Max Morris (Retail Clerks), James O'Connell (Machinists), John Mitchell (Mine Workers). Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHI(X3)34946 5-6611

coalition of members behind him and pushing Socialists to the margins of the organization.¹⁶

However useful they might be for consolidating Gompers's power within the labor movement, by the early twentieth century antipartyism and nonpartisan tactics were proving to be ineffective tools for achieving labor's demands. In these years a more interventionist state and employers' political activism together halted the expansion of America's labor movement. The employers' antilabor social movement, commonly known as the open shop drive, fought unions on the shop floor, in the courts, and in the halls of Congress. Forming an effective alliance with conservatives in the Republican Party, employers organized into the National Association of Manufacturers halted the limited lobbying success enjoyed by AFL leaders. The NAM leaders' friendly relationship with conservative Republicans such as Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon demonstrated vividly to the AFL that independence from political parties made effective political ma-

neuvering impossible. Thus increasingly after 1903, the AFL leaders grew more interested in exploring an alliance with the Democratic Party. At the same time, the AFL launched an unprecedented mobilization effort, seeking to convince trade unionists to get out and vote for pro-labor candidates.

This strategy reached its peak in the elections of 1906 and 1908, and thanks to efforts made by William Jennings Bryan and other Democratic leaders, their party benefitted greatly from labor's new political engagement. In 1906 the AFL focused its resources on congressional campaigns, and in most cases trade unionists supported Democratic candidates rather than Republican ones. Four trade unionists won election to Congress that year, and three of them belonged to the Democratic Party.

The friendly relations between labor and the Democrats remained informal, though, until William Jennings Bryan began planning for the 1908 presidential campaign. Over the course of 1908 Bryan began a regular correspondence with Sam Gompers that laid the ground-

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work for their alliance. In February of that year the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the case of the Danbury hatters, holding that workers and their unions could be prosecuted under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. This decision constituted an exceedingly grave blow to organized labor. Almost immediately, Bryan wrote Gompers and enclosed an editorial he had written that demonstrated how labor organizations differed from trusts. Through their correspondence Gompers ultimately influenced the Democratic platform for the state of Nebraska, which in turn provided the basis for the 1908 national party platform. That summer, when Bryan began writing the platforms regarding antitrust and injunction reforms in preparation for the national convention, he and Gompers again discussed their formulation.¹⁷

That summer, AFL leaders visited both the Republican and Democratic conventions to request support for labor's chief demands: reforms in laws regarding antitrust prosecution and injunctions. The reception they met with in each case intensified their growing affections for the Democratic Party. At their July convention, Republican Party leaders treated the Federation derisively, their platform committee refusing to meet with the AFL and offering instead only a ten-minute meeting with a subcommittee. As they walked into the meeting, the AFL officials were shocked to see Republican Party leaders flanked by James Emery, James Van Cleave, and Martin Mulhall of the National Association of Manufacturers. The platform passed by the Republicans provided no support for labor's demands.¹⁸

Weeks later the Democrats graciously welcomed labor to their Denver convention as friends and allies. AFL leaders met with the entire platform committee, of which Alton Parker (who had recently served as an AFL attorney in a critical legal case) was the chairman. After a lengthy discussion the Democrats included most of the AFL's requests in its platform, and Gompers

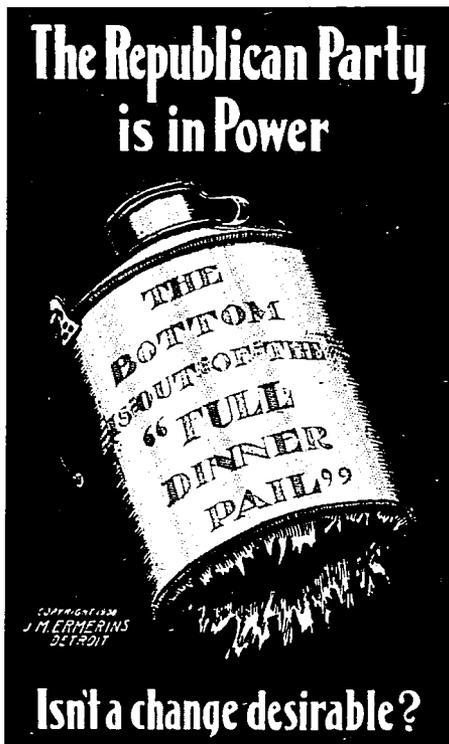
declared himself well satisfied with the planks on the Sherman Act and the injunction. After the party conventions, Gompers publicly and emphatically endorsed the Democratic Party platform and its presidential candidate. And he condemned the Republicans in harsh terms: "The Republican party . . . lines up with the corporate interests of the country and defies the people to help themselves." The Democrats, on the other hand, endorsed the principles Gompers and his colleagues had struggled towards for years. The masses of workers, Gompers declared, "will rise in sympathy to the Democratic party in the coming elections."¹⁹

In the following weeks the AFL and the Democratic Party transformed their relationship to create an unprecedented and far-reaching alliance. Headed by William Jennings Bryan and his brother, Charles, Democratic leaders initiated the idea of a partnership, seeking to involve AFL leaders in campaign strategizing at every level.²⁰ Their plan revolved around placing a "first class labor man at headquarters" in Chicago to run the Democrats' Labor Bureau. It took a couple of weeks to win over Gompers, but by August 25 the labor chief had agreed the AFL should enter a formal political relationship with the Democratic Party. Accompanied by James O'Connell, Frank Morrison, and organizer Grant Hamilton, Gompers met with Norman Mack, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Together they wrote a formal agreement establishing the basis for cooperation between the Democratic Party and the AFL. This involved, for example, an agreement that the Democratic Party would print and distribute whatever literature the AFL's Labor Representation Committee deemed necessary for communicating its political goals to working people. Furthermore, the agreement stipulated that AFL organizers would personally represent the labor movement within the bowels of Democratic Party bureaucracy. The AFL appointed its top labor men to party headquarters

around the country, focusing especially on New York City, Indianapolis, and Chicago, and instructed them to work closely with Democratic Party officials in planning campaign strategy. In addition the AFL suggested several other labor men whom the DNC could send around the country on campaign assignments. Most important, the agreement noted that all organizers would be supervised by Gompers, not by the Democrats.²¹

William Jennings Bryan centered his 1908 campaign around one question: "Whether the government shall remain a mere business asset of favor-seeking corporations, or be an instrument in the hands of the people for the advancement of the common weal."²² Capping their campaign with the slogan "Shall the People Rule?", Democrats hoped to evoke a Jeffersonian program of political and economic reform. More specifically, they targeted the corrupt use of money in politics, and especially politicians' reliance on money from special interests for winning elections, the indirect election of U.S. Senators as a limitation on democracy, the rules in the U.S. House of Representatives which allowed the Speaker to dominate the House agenda and thus prevent reform, the need for regulation of the trusts, and the rights of labor.

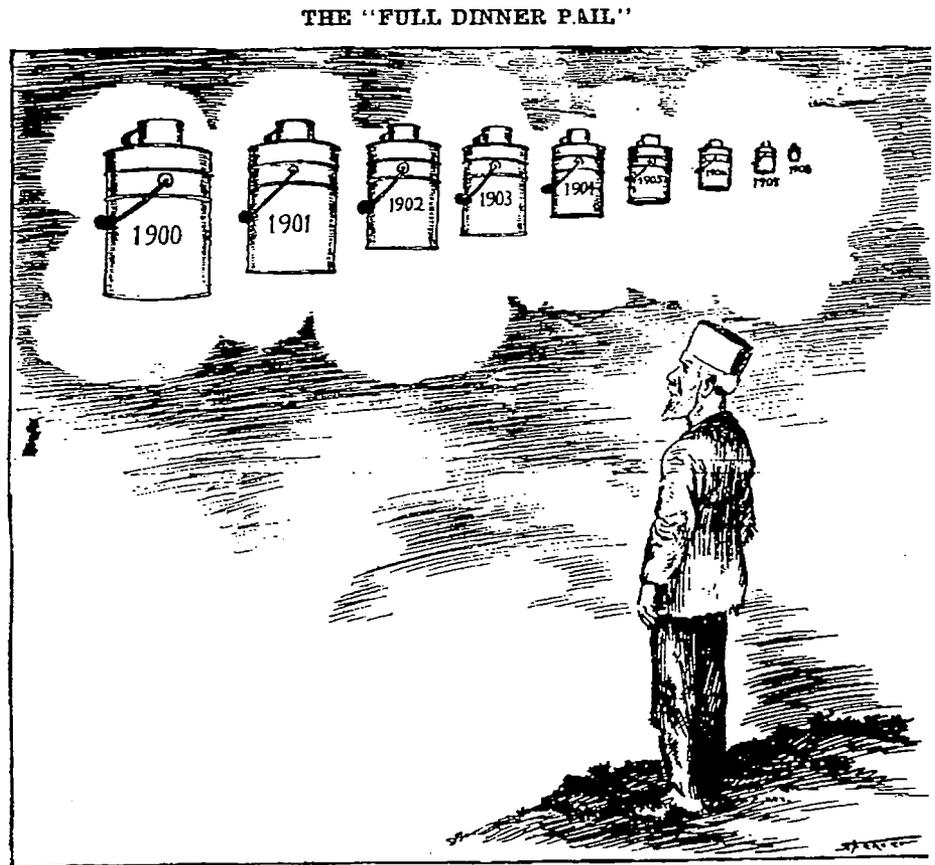
The Democrats' support for workers' rights anchored their new image as the party of reform. Their labor campaign focused almost entirely on two issues: labor's legal rights (the need for an anti-injunction law and an amendment to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act), and the hostility shown labor by Congress and in particular by Speaker Joseph Cannon. A letter to American workers written by Gompers stated well the central concerns of the AFL-Democratic campaign: "The facts are that the Judiciary, induced by corporations and trusts and protected by the Republican party, is, step by step, destroying government by law and substituting therefor a government by Judges. . . . It is sought to make of the judges irresponsible despots, and by controlling them using this despotism



Democratic postcards and cartoons appealed to labor by suggesting that prosperity and a "Full Dinner Pail" could no longer be expected under the Republicans. Above: NSHS Museum Collections-4491-1 (postcard); Right: *The Commoner*, July 3, 1908 (cartoon)

in the interest of corporate power."²³ Bryan also took pains to support other AFL demands, such as a Department of Labor with full cabinet powers.²⁴

Its alliance with the Democratic Party allowed the AFL to launch a much more ambitious campaign than in 1906. Based upon explicit references to campaign literature made by labor and party leaders, we can estimate that they distributed at least five million pieces.²⁵ At the center of labor's campaign stood imagery of the American Revolution. Hamilton sent postcards to individual workers, asking them to enlist as "Minute Men of Labor." Interested trade unionists filled in their names and addresses and answered questions regarding how many pieces of campaign literature they could use (either foreign or English-language), then mailed the



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card back to Hamilton. He would then respond with a package of literature and a personal letter thanking the worker for his or her loyalty to the AFL program.

Within half a week of mailing the first postcards Hamilton had collected responses from 100,000 individual workers and from 13,000 secretaries of local unions. A week later the returns remained impressive, as some 200 responses flowed into headquarters each day.²⁶ The Democrats and the AFL relied on other tactics as well—sending campaign literature and cartoons to labor newspapers, and mailing out 21,000 copies of the *American Federationist* to barber shops in eleven crucial states, for example—but the "Minute Man" campaign represented their most aggressive attempt to reach local workers through literature.²⁷

Thanks to financial assistance from the Democratic Party, the AFL was able to assign over one hundred organizers to the campaign, and they quickly fanned out across the country. Labor's campaign targeted twenty-two states across the country, but AFL Secretary Frank Morrison wrote in late October that "we have massed our forces" in New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, with "a few detachments also in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Maryland, and West Virginia." The New York City bureau, in charge of seven eastern states, placed almost all its resources into winning New York state for Bryan. The national headquarters of the Democratic Labor Bureau in Chicago coordinated activities for the entire country, but it focused its resources on Illinois and Ohio in particular.²⁸

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The Nature and Meaning of the 1908 Campaign

At the height of the 1908 campaign *Pearson's Magazine* noted the unusual prominence accorded labor by politicians: "How the orators of all parties praise the workman in this year of political humility and expectation! How they thunder against his enemies and promise vague redress! How the presidential candidates and the myriad seekers for office smile and smirk, aye, and sometimes grovel in the dust, before the toiler who has a vote!"²⁹ The Democrats and the AFL leaders wanted to make labor a dominant theme in the 1908 elections, and they succeeded. But their strategy took place amidst a competitive world of national politics. Republicans, Socialists, and rival interest groups like the NAM all jockeyed to influence toilers' votes. In this context the Democrats lost control over the meaning of "labor" as political discourse increasingly revolved around the AFL leaders' activity and their unprecedented relationship to the Democratic Party. What began as a crusade for the rights of labor turned sour as politicians challenged organized labor's right to speak for American workers.

Organized labor's new political prominence and its blossoming partnership with the Democratic Party deeply worried Republican leaders. As Joseph Cannon later described the situation, "None of us knew exactly how powerful Gompers and his crowd might prove."³⁰ Thus party officials carefully created machinery of their own to recruit working-class votes, forming a labor bureau and organizing Republican clubs among various working-class constituencies. Railroad workers and miners provided important support for the Republican Party. Party officials reached beyond those groups, however, seeking endorsements from any prominent labor official in order to demonstrate the limits of Gompers's authority.³¹

Republicans relied upon two main issues for appealing to workers in 1908. First, they vowed to bring greater economic prosperity and a "full dinner pail"

to American workers. The politics of prosperity allowed Republicans to stress their concern for workers at a time when they had rejected organized labor's demands for legal and other reforms. While Democrats attacked plutocracy and the privileges accruing to special interests, Republicans spoke more consolingly of Americans' common interest in economic growth. This theme, premised on class harmony, assumed that workers and their employers shared a common political outlook: both groups asked only that factories run at full production. Thus while Taft charged that Bryan's "election would mean a paralysis of business and . . . a recurrence of disastrous conditions of the last Democratic administration," Roosevelt added that it would bring calamity in particular to wageworkers.³²

Gradually, however, Republicans focused their campaign strategy on the AFL, attacking its political role and its relationship with the Democratic Party. In the eyes of Republicans, Gompers had promised "to deliver the labor vote" to the Democratic Party. Gompers quickly labelled the charge absurd: "We recognize the absolute right of every citizen to cast his vote for any candidate and with any party that he pleases. Far be it from us to attempt to coerce the votes of the workers, nor are we so asinine as to promise to 'deliver the labor vote.'"³³

But in the next weeks Republican speakers and newspapers tirelessly repeated this theme, charging Gompers and the AFL with "dictating" to workers, seeking to control their votes, and giving them no voice in deciding labor's political strategy. The accusation also allowed Republicans to taint the Democrats with the scandal of links to special interests. The *Denver Post*, for example, reprinted an article by open shop activist C. W. Post that declared: "The only trust having the impudence to openly assert that it is going to elect its own trust representatives to public office is the Labor Trust. The election, therefore, will determine whether the Common

Citizens retain control of public affairs, or allow the Labor Trust magnates to govern." Even an avowedly Democratic newspaper, the *New York Times*, picked up this charge. According to its editor, "Popular wrath might well be kindled by the complacent announcement of Mr. Gompers that he has saddled the Democratic donkey, and that it will do his will at the polls as it did at the convention when it adopted his plank."³⁴

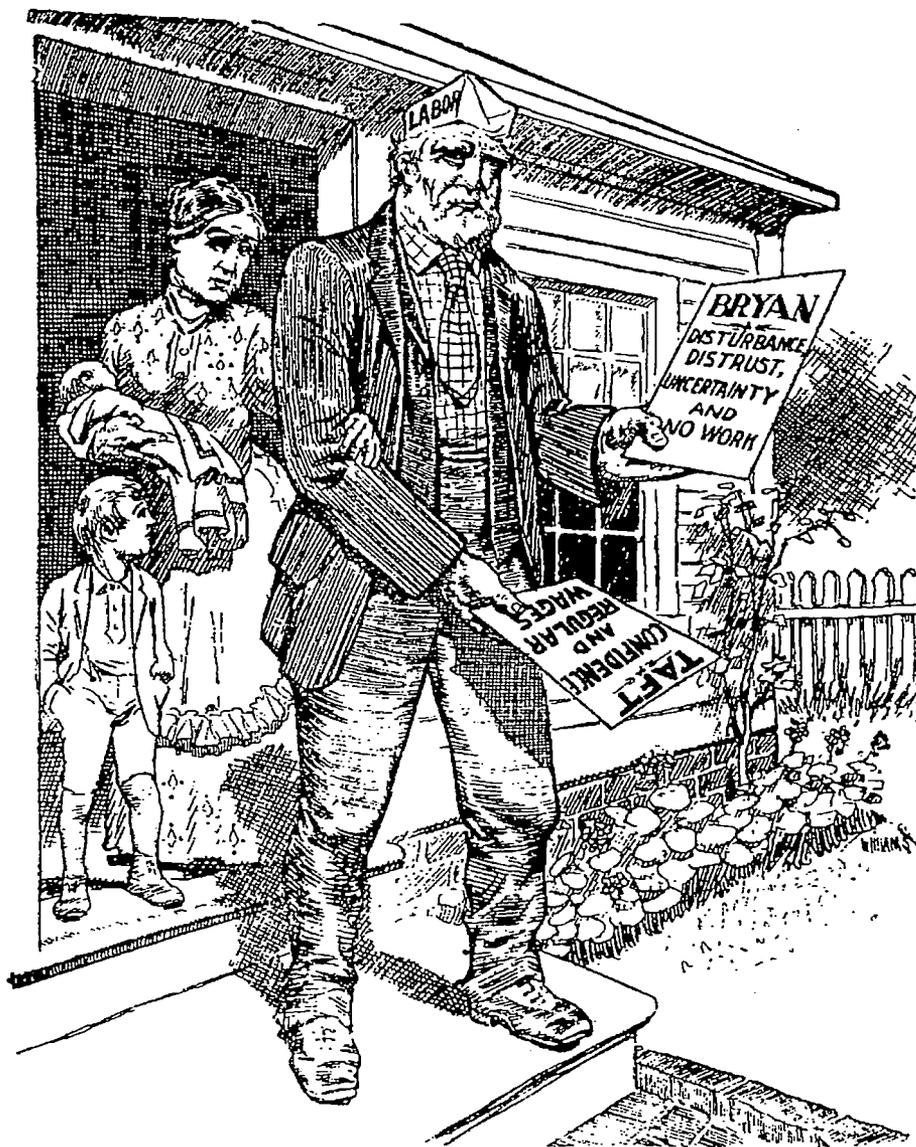
The AFL leaders found this charge of "delivering the labor vote" significantly damaged their campaign. Organizers repeatedly alerted AFL headquarters that local workers felt troubled by the accusations. As the AFL leaders braced themselves for a "vicious" last two weeks to the campaign, Morrison assessed the problems they faced: "The great effort of the Taft supporters will be . . . to impress upon the minds of the wage workers that their vote is being delivered and to try and create a resentment in their mind against the idea that they are not free agents."³⁵

AFL spokesmen, from the highest officials to the organizers in the field, finally found that responding to this charge could be a full-time job. Watching employers and Republican politicians attempt to manipulate workers' voting behavior in their interest, Gompers could barely contain his anger and frustration. Newspapers have criticized the AFL, he wrote, because its president "presumed to advise the workers as to how their interests could be best protected in this campaign. It now becomes clear that this was mostly a howl of rage on the part of those who had always arrogated to themselves the task of advising the toilers how to vote."³⁶

Conclusion

Focusing a presidential campaign on workers and their problems thus proved a more challenging task than the Democrats expected. Their very success created complex dynamics that neither Democratic nor AFL leaders could control. Republicans exploited labor's political participation for their own ends,

The Labor Question



Republicans countered with cartoons playing on old fears that a Bryan victory would paralyze business and disrupt the economy. *Omaha Daily Bee*, October 30, 1908

turning it into a liability more than a benefit for the Democratic campaign. These factors helped William Howard Taft defeat Bryan in 1908. The northeastern states went solidly for Taft, and in this region the AFL possessed the great bulk of its members. Furthermore, voting records suggest that trade unionists in several northeastern and middle-

western states—above all in New York, Ohio, and Indiana—did not overwhelmingly support Bryan. In Rhode Island and Connecticut, which possessed a greater proportion of wage earners than any other non-Southern states, Bryan captured a smaller percentage of the vote than had Alton Parker in 1904.³⁷

There were many lessons to be

gleaned from the 1908 campaign. In the future, both the Democrats and the AFL shied away from the public partnership they'd attempted that year. While their relationship continued, and with time grew stronger, it would never again be manifested in the sort of visible mobilization effort that had dominated the 1908 campaign. Instead the alliance evolved through more elite and private channels, one in which Democratic and AFL leaders consulted on major decisions but without directly involving their grassroots members.

Yet the remarkable innovations of 1908 pointed to the future in important ways. Labor's unprecedented partnership with the Democratic Party in 1908 had created a campaign centered around workingmen and their problems. By supporting and bolstering the most progressive wing of the Democratic Party, the American Federation of Labor helped the party's leader, William Jennings Bryan, to win control over the Democracy's future. Moreover, support for labor's rights served to bring the conservative and reform wings of the party closer together; given the limited political demands of the AFL, even conservatives like Alton Parker could support them. This allowed the Democrats to embrace an image of reform without alienating more traditional members. In these ways labor played an essential role in transforming the Democrats from the party of states' rights to the party of reform. In the following years the Democratic Party's alliance with organized labor anchored its claim to represent the forces of progressivism. Ironically, the conservative and antistatist AFL had carved a sphere of influence within the party soon to become the architect of progressive statecraft.

The defeat of 1908 also provided one last lesson for Democrats, one which Woodrow Wilson, who in 1912 succeeded Bryan as the party's reigning leader, learned well. When party leaders began courting American workers in the years after 1904, they had to choose whether they would appeal to workers

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en masse, or, working through the leaders of organized labor, limit their program to American trade unionists. In the early days of that partnership, under Bryan's leadership, the party focused upon allying with the dominant organizational representative of the working class, the AFL. This linked the Democrats to the most cautious and conservative wing of the labor movement. Following the lead of the AFL, Democrats focused their campaign on relatively limited demands for injunction and anti-trust reforms. In contrast, the Republican Party developed an effective campaign by focusing on economic prosperity, a theme of interest to all workers, and by assassinating the character of AFL leaders.

By 1916 the Democratic Party followed the lead of Republican strategists, reaching beyond the AFL leaders to connect with the desires and needs of the broader working class. Facing a difficult re-election campaign in 1916, President Wilson looked closely at strategies employed by Republicans eight years earlier. He continued to rely heavily on the alliance between his party and the AFL, but he knew Democrats could no longer allow union leaders to set the party's labor agenda. The AFL strongly supported Wilson in 1916, but Gompers eschewed the mass mobilization strategy of earlier years. Meanwhile the Democrats transcended the narrow political vision of the AFL, embracing positive governmental intervention in the form of laws like the Adamson Act, which gave the eight-hour day to railroad workers, and the Keating-Owen Act, which finally regulated child labor. In shaping this broader labor campaign Wilson listened not to Gompers for advice, but to independent reformers like labor lawyer Frank Walsh. While these events lie outside the scope of this paper, preliminary research suggests that Wilson's approach in 1916 recruited more working-class voters to the Democrats' campaign than had Bryan's earlier efforts.³⁸

Yet even as Woodrow Wilson modi-

fied his party's alliance with labor, thereby making it more effective, he built upon and learned from a strategy initiated by Bryan in the early years of the twentieth century. By the 1930s this strategy would help take Democrats to the pinnacle of political influence, reshaping and recasting American politics along the way.

Notes

I would like to thank Robert Cherny, Melvyn Dubofsky, Joseph McCartin, James Potter, and Robert Sittig for their advice and suggestions on this essay.

¹ David Sarasohn, *The Party of Reform: Democrats in the Progressive Era* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1989). Also important in this reinterpretation of the Democratic Party has been Robert W. Cherny, "The Democratic Party in the Era of William Jennings Bryan," in Peter B. Kovler, ed., *Democrats and the American Idea: A Bicentennial Appraisal* (Washington D.C.: Center for National Policy Press, 1992), 171-201. For additional information on Bryan and the Democrats see Robert W. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985); Paolo Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, 3 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964-69); and J. Rogers Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics: The Democracy of Cleveland and Bryan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

² James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1920, originally 1888), vols. 2, 3.

³ Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*; Cherny, "Democratic Party."

⁴ Helen K. Greene, Lincoln, Nebraska, recalling her mother's descriptions of Bryan, interview with author, Feb. 22, 1994; Theodore Roosevelt to Elihu Root, Sept. 4, 1906, in Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).

⁵ On 1906 as a turning point in the Democracy's fortunes see Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 26-27; and Samuel P. Hays, "The Social Analysis of American Political History," *Political Science Quarterly* 80 (Sept. 1965): 386.

⁶ Theodore A. Kiesselbach, "What's in a Life?," unpublished autobiographical manuscript in author's possession. The view that Bryan cared little for success originally came from the memoirs of Arthur W. Dunn, *From Harrison to Harding: A Personal Narrative, Covering a Third of a Century, 1888-1921* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 2, 47-49. Dunn quotes the Nebraskan as responding, when a politician criticized him for choosing "impossible" issues that would meet with defeat: "Win! Win! That's it! You want to win! You would

sacrifice principle for success. I would not."

⁷ Bryan's 1904 statement supporting a more active central government is discussed in Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, vol. 1, *Political Evangelist, 1860-1908* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 353; Bryan's 1906 speech is published in *The Commoner* 6 (Sept. 7, 1906).

⁸ G. H. Benedict to Alton B. Parker, Sept. 1, 1906, Alton B. Parker Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress; the *World* is quoted in Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 23.

⁹ Unlike the *Times*, many newspapers that had previously opposed Bryan now supported his candidacy. These included, for example, the *New York Staats Zeitung*, the *Buffalo Courier*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Charleston News and Courier*. See *The Commoner*, July 24, 1908. Yet reformist magazines like *The World's Work*, which had been boosting Bryan, soured on him after this speech and ultimately supported Taft for the presidency in 1908. Compare the magazine's position immediately before and after Bryan's speech by consulting "The March of Events" in the Aug. 1906 and Oct. 1906 issues.

¹⁰ See Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 20 and passim; William H. Smith, "William Jennings Bryan and Racism," *Journal of Negro History* 54 (Apr. 1969): 127-49; Jack T. Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1972); Arthur S. Link, "The Progressive Movement in the South, 1870-1914," *North Carolina Historical Review* 23 (Oct. 1946): 483-94; Dewey Grantham, *The Democratic South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965); and idem, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983). Similarly to Sarasohn's image of Democrats as "outsiders," some scholars see the party as representing America's "periphery" in opposition to the Republican-dominated "metropole." See e.g., Paul Kleppner, *Continuity and Change in Electoral Politics, 1893-1928* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987).

The links between the Democratic Party and Populism extended well beyond the South. In 1904, for example, Bryan received reports that he should not visit New York to campaign for Parker because all the Bryan men were supporting the Populist ticket instead of the Democratic. See Durbin Van Vleck to Bryan, Aug. 25, 1904, William Jennings Bryan Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

¹¹ Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*; also on the Democratic Party's evolution during this period see Hollingsworth, *Whirligig of Politics*. On business support for the Republicans see Herbert Croly, *Marcus Alonzo Hanna: His Life and Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1912).

¹² See Walter Dean Burnham, "The 'System of 1896' and the American Electorate," in *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970).

¹³ On labor and Populism see Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism, 1865-1900* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966). On labor and the Democratic Party see Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986); on Cleveland's administration and the Pullman boycott consult Hollingsworth, *Whirligig of Politics*, and Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

¹⁴ See Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 138-41.

¹⁵ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 224. See also Charles Lapworth, "The Tour of the Red Special," *International Socialist Review* 9 (Dec. 1908): 401-15.

¹⁶ On the AFL's evolving political policy and the triumph of "antipartyism," see Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The Making of the American Federation of Labor, 1881 to 1917*, forthcoming, Cambridge University Press, chap. 2.

¹⁷ In the next months Bryan and Gompers met at least twice more to plan the Democratic campaign's strategy for appealing to workers. See the correspondence between Bryan and Gompers on these dates in 1908: Jan. 21, Feb. 2, 27, Mar. 11, June 27, 30, July 24, Aug. 1, 6, 14, 28, reels 65 and 66, American Federation of Labor Records, The Samuel Gompers Era (microfilm edition, Microfilming Corporation of America, 1979), hereafter cited as AFL records.

Coletta, in *William Jennings Bryan*, notes that the platform Bryan submitted to the Democratic convention—and which was, for the most part, approved—was a combination of the Nebraska state party platform, the AFL program, and the Oklahoma constitution. Labor had also exerted great influence on Oklahoma's constitution. See Coletta, *Bryan*, 1:405; and Keith Bryant, "Labor in Politics: The Oklahoma State Federation of Labor during the Age of Reform," *Labor History* 10 (Summer 1970): 259-84.

¹⁸ This account relies primarily on Gompers's autobiography, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925), v. 2, 260-63. See also Gompers, "Both Parties Have Spoken—Choose Between Them," *American*

Federationist 15 (Aug. 1908): 598-606.

¹⁹ Gompers, "Both Parties Have Spoken," 598-606.

²⁰ M. J. Wall, chair, labor committee, Democratic National Committee, to Gompers, Aug. 10, 1908; Gompers to Norman Mack, Aug. 17, 1908; Mack to Gompers, Aug. 17, 1908, all AFL Records, reel 66.

²¹ Gompers to Mack, Aug. 28, 1908, AFL Records, reel 66. See also Gompers, "Congressional Responsibility and Labor's Duty," *American Federationist* 15 (Oct. 1908): 864-68.

²² Quoted in Coletta, *Bryan*, 1:416.

²³ See for example, Hamilton to Gompers, Sept. 18, 1908, AFL Records, reel 67; and "How Speaker Cannon has Abused Labor," campaign leaflet, Joseph G. Cannon Papers, Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield, Illinois. Gompers's quote comes from his letter to "Men of Labor, Lovers of Human Liberty," Oct. 12, 1908, AFL Records, reel 68.

²⁴ See for example, "Democracy's Appeal to the Country," *The Commoner* 8 (Nov. 6, 1908).

²⁵ This figure contrasts dramatically with the AFL's output of literature in 1906, when running a campaign on its own. Then the AFL distributed at most only 100,000 pieces of literature. This is a highly conservative estimate of the number of labor-related leaflets; the actual number may have been much greater than five million. Hamilton to Gompers, Sept. 10, 1908; Frank Morrison to T. T. O'Malley, Sept. 16, 1908, Frank Morrison Letterbooks, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina; Hamilton to Gompers, Sept. 18, 1908; John Morrison to Gompers, Sept. 19, 1908; Hamilton to Thomas Tracy, Sept. 19, 1908; Gompers to Frank Morrison, Sept. 19, 1908; Frank Morrison to Gompers, Sept. 21, 1908; Hamilton to Gompers, Sept. 22, 26, 1908; James Duncan to Gompers, Sept. 29, 1908; Frank Morrison to Gompers, Oct. 2, 1908; Hamilton to R. Lee Guard, Oct. 3, 1908; Hamilton to Gompers, Oct. 3, 1908; Harry Eichelberger to Gompers, Oct. 9, 1908; Frank Morrison to James Noecker, Oct. 7, 1908; Hamilton to Gompers, Oct. 24, 1908. Except where noted otherwise, all are from the AFL Records, reels 67-69.

²⁶ John Morrison to Gompers, Sept. 19, 1908; Hamilton to T. Tracy, Sept. 19, 1908; Hamilton to Gompers, Sept. 22, 26, 30, 1908, all AFL Records, reels 67 and 68.

²⁷ Hamilton to *The Labor Journal*, Zanesville, Ohio, Sept. 21, 1908, AFL Records, reel 67. Mack asked Gompers to send 21,000 copies of the *American Federationist* to barbershops in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Ohio, Indiana, West Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, Colorado, and Nebraska. John Morrison to Gompers, Sept. 21, 1908, AFL Records, reel 67.

²⁸ The campaign targeted these twenty-two states: Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Kansas, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, Colorado, California, Washington, and Oregon. See Frank Morrison to Max Morris, Sept. 15, 1908 and Frank Morrison to E. M. Howard, Oct. 28, 1908, Frank Morrison Letterbooks.

²⁹ James Creelman, "Mr. Gompers and His Two Million Men," *Pearson's Magazine* 20 (Sept. 1908): 240.

³⁰ Joseph Cannon, autobiographical fragment, Joseph G. Cannon Papers.

³¹ John Callahan of New Castle, Pennsylvania, to Gompers, July 24, 1908, AFL Records, reel 66; Frank Morrison to Jere L. Sullivan, Oct. 1, 1908, Frank Morrison Letterbooks. See also Julie Greene, "The Strike at the Ballot Box: Politics and Partisanship in the American Federation of Labor, 1881 to 1916," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990, chap. 5.

³² Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, 420, 422. For general information on Republican strategy in 1908 see Horace Merrill and Marion Merrill, *The Republican Command, 1897-1913* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 243-98; and George Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt, 1900-1912* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 226-43.

³³ Gompers, "Both Parties Have Spoken," 603-04.

³⁴ C. W. Post, "A Dangerous Trust," *Denver Post*, Oct. 1, 1908; *New York Times* editorial, n.d. [July 1908], AFL Records, reel 66.

³⁵ Frank Morrison to Frank Kennedy, Omaha, Oct. 2, 1908, Frank Morrison Letterbooks.

³⁶ Gompers, "Congressional Responsibility," 866.

³⁷ See Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, chap. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, chap. 8.